When the 'Red Army' goes Pink: Remodelling Bulgarian Public Monuments in Times of Civic Unrest

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Graffiti text: Bulgaria is apologizing!!! In Czech and Bulgarian languages, referring to offering an apology on behalf of Bulgarian armed forces’ participation in Prague’s 1968 occupation,


Abstract:

In the past few years the Bulgarian capital city saw massive social unrest becoming a scene of different types of continuous protests. All of them attempted to conquer and remodel the "sacred" urban power landscape and its monuments. In this paper I will argue that graffiti as an alternative “low –tech” political communication stream and specifically its function, as a mechanism for revival and return of “forgotten” issues back into the mainstream public discourse, served as powerful „antidote” to the mainstream public and private mass media “selective blindness” due its opaque ownership structure, concentration and constant deterioration of media pluralism and freedom. In addition the paper will attempt to demonstrate the stages of evolution of simple urban political graffiti and stencils to complex rearrangement of urban landscape in synchrony with the increasing complexity of local political confrontation and its transformation from purely internal to foreign policy scandals provoking sharp diplomatic reactions.
Introduction:
In 2014 Bulgaria has entered into its 25th year after the fall of state socialism and gradual exit from the orbit of the ex-Soviet bloc dominated by the USSR. This twenty-five year period has been dubbed as “dual post-socialist transformation /transition” (or “преко̀д” in Bulgarian, literally „transition”) towards liberal democracy and free market and consolidation and maturation of the complementary institutions that match such political system. The early expectations in the nineties of the past century of political scientists¹, political economists and sociologists² and economists³ alike were tuned to suggest that political liberalization after the fall of communism will be accompanied by a short – so-called „J curved” economic adjustment (post-socialist economic recession) that will put automatically the ex-communist countries on the track of political and economic consolidation provided that liberal democracy and it’s institutions will foster environment for economic growth, thus it was reasonable to expect that transitions will produce „democratic triumph” and „economic boom” that will coexist in an infinitive „honeymoon”. However, instead of the expected results of these early models, the post-socialist states have exhibited their heterogeneity in terms of development trajectories mainly due to the effects of the so-called „path-dependency”⁴ stemming from the types of communism⁵ practiced across Eastern Europe and its lasting legacies in terms of institutions, political party systems, civic society maturation and activity and stage of economic development pre-1989. Some of the Central and Eastern European states like Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary have opted for different paths of post-socialist development in terms of democratic consolidation and privatization of public property („rupture with the past”), while others such as Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia have chosen to gradually „dismantle” the old system and slowly move forward. The speed and type of transition process selected has produced very different results in these respective states. While in Poland the „shock therapy” coupled with existing traditions of active civil society and active

alternative political, cultural and eventually economic „counter-elite” has produced one type of social results. In Bulgaria with its „patrimonial communism” legacy coupled with gradual transition and slower „laggard” type of democratic consolidation without real alternative „counter-elite” and relatively anaemic civil society has produced what is known as „partial reform equilibrium” and eventually a socio-political condition termed as „state capture”\(^6\) where the early „winners” of the „bloodless” transition (i.e. the implosion of the socialist state) were the ex-communist party nomenklatura and elites who were able to convert their former political capital into economic one, thus producing new type of „red bourgeoisie” that raided the former state property converting it into new private business empires that fed back into the newly created oligarchic order in terms of financial and media support for the new political status-quo dominated by the ex-communist, turned into Socialist party at the onset of transition. The „losers” from the transition (i.e. the non-elites) were left to cope with the results of this eroding phenomenon and had to seek resort into mass political mobilization where the lack of ready, sound, prepared and genuine „counter-elites” (unlike Poland, for instance), almost eradicated political opposition traditions and lack of vision for clear political identity, has put them at the „mercy of the mechanics” of the Olsonian „effect of mobilization of small and big groups”\(^7\). Despite the fact that the „losers” were able to back the opposition that briefly came to power and formed a government in 1991-92 and later to form the so-called „reformist majority” (much more stable than the first attempt) under the leadership of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) in 1997 to 2001, the effects of the „state capture” were much deeper and stronger than expected and have produced multitude of negative social effects during the transition. Instead of stable progress towards deep and irreversible reforms, especially after country’s accession to NATO and the European Union (EU), led by predictable political elites, the society witnessed and experienced a steady „parade of captors” of different „party colors” that moved from the state of initial „partial reform equilibrium” to state of „competitive state capture”\(^8\) that bore bitter fruits for the majority of the Bulgarian citizens and deeply poisoned the political, economic and social climate for years to come (2001-2014) creating fertile soil for the sweeping waves of soft and hard populism and political opportunism that have swept the Bulgarian social landscape. These bitter fruits


included „capturing” the officially sanctioned communication channels between the elites and non-elites, where the elites would communicate „top-down” style and „jam” the official mass-media (broadcast and print) with „loaded” messages according to the actual political concocture of the day. Thus the post-communist elites were able to „capture” the vital component of the social communication via the creation of powerful media empires that were used to supress and blackmail political opponents and carefully „mute” the voices of dissent, as „noise in the system”. Preparation for such media domination and expansion were traceable to the pre-89’ practices but gained traction in the nineties of XX century and certainly peaked at the end of the so-called „reformist” majority in 2001, only to „blossom” during the subsequent Bulgarian governments of the ex-monarch – turned PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (2001-2005); Socialist led „Stanishev” cabinet (2005-2009), known also as the „Triple coalition” of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the liberal National Movement Simeon the Second (NMSS) and the liberal but ethnically-dominated Turkish minority party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF); right-centrist GERB cabined led by Boyko Borissov (2009-2013) that was brought down by the widespread social unrest known as the „second winter of discontent” in January to March 2013 and continued with the „expert” cabinet of PM Plamen Oresharski (actually backed by the BSP, MRF and the national-populist „Ataka”) that was besieged by public protest throughout all of its short life, namely a bit over one year (May 2013-August 2014).

Public Discourse Context: “Official” media’s selective blindness

The processes of „partial reforms equilibrium” and further „competitive state capture” did not leave the public discourse unaffected. Parallel to these processes, the Bulgarian public has witnessed an unprecedented consolidation of ownership of the so-called "traditional” channels of communication - mass media, print and later web sources of relevant political, economic and cultural information. Ever since the beginning of the new century Bulgaria has entered a downward trend\(^9\) in terms of media freedom and pluralism. Notable “lows” in terms of independent media were recorded in 2012 to present (when the country hit the record-low 100\(^{th}\) place in terms of media freedom, being the lowest-ranking EU country)\(^10\) when the so-


called “media wars”¹¹ between private media groups led by dubious public figures, such as the infamous tandem Delyan Peevski – Tzvetan Vassilev (bitterly shattered business “marriage of convenience” between an ex-MRF MP, media and industrial mogul and “a shadow holder” of capital for the now-retired leader of the MRF Ahmed Dogan, also proposed from the failed Oresharski’s cabinet as a Chairman of the State Agency for National Security (SANS) (i.e. the Bulgarian counter-intelligence service) that sparked the massive civic year-long unrest in 2013 and a former banker who is expected to be extradited, possibly arrested and prosecuted back in Bulgaria for the bankruptcy¹² of the Bulgarian Corporate Commercial Bank AD – the bank with the highest concentration of state enterprises funds, dubbed as “the bank of all governments”, since for the past at least ten years the bank and its opaque ownership cobweb of Bulgarian oligarchs, political figures, and the Russian state-owned VTB Bank (Vneshtorgbank), registered in Saint Petersburg and close to Russian President’s Vladimir Putin’s “circle of power”¹³ have begun. These so-called “media wars” were an actual conquest of the public discourse in attempt to divide it between “two and a half” warring oligarchic fractions in order to control the public flow of information. They have actually exposed to the wide public the “intermarriage” and “mechanics” of political power, financial interest and media influence exercised over the years by the accusations of the warring factions of each other of tax fraud, corruption and the mechanism of “winning” public procurements from the incumbents in power in exchange of favorable coverage in the mainstream media (very close resemblance to patterns visible in countries on the path of illiberal democracy today, such as Russia and Hungary). In other words, the national mass media outlets have become a political “weapon” of the oligarchic political elite for dealing with competition. The independent observers dubbed this type of communication between elites and non-elites, as “media clubs” (“медийни бухалки” in Bulgarian) where independent journalism and impartial analysis have stepped back to open the door for the so-called “rent-a-journalism”. Provided that the economic crisis that hit Bulgaria in 2009 has complicated the situation even more, as media profits drastically fell and the dependence on government supported (direct or indirect) advertising and favors has increased, the concerns about media


ownership concentration and structure of opaque ownership strengthened. This type of mass media dependence was critical factor in media criticism towards governments in power during this period and provision of tribune for independent, investigative or other critical “voices” of dissent and has proven that “officially sanctioned” channels of mass media communication are “selectively blind” when dealing with issues such as grand corruption, crime and power excesses. The saturation of these channels with the agenda of the elites has provided strong assumptions about the demand for "alternative" channels of all those who do not have access to "sanctioned" national tribune – from representatives of “generic” civic protest to the representatives of extremist or “marginal” ideologies. These alternative channels could be grouped in terms of their “mechanics” into two general groups – traditional “low-tech” ones such as graffiti and political pop-art physically appearing on the city walls, monuments and other highly visible “sacred spaces of power” or national remembrance and history and “high-tech” ones, such as personal or collective blogs, web pages or social networks that consist of innumerable personal or collective “virtual” walls that allow for independent expression of political beliefs.

Political graffiti – “low-tech” instrument for “alternative” communication

Graffiti, as an urban phenomenon and in particular political graffiti boldly provoke and draw attention of the public through its appearance in "unauthorized" places and "desecration" of certain "sacred" areas of the urban landscape. They inform, question, comment, promote, consolidate and provoke those to whom the message is directed from the wall. They also "rearrange" the urban environment and "color" public spaces, giving them a new meaning and symbolism. In a sense we can say that almost all types of graffiti bear political element, as they spring from the social “underground” and are "unsanctioned" communication, which deviates from the imposed institutional frameworks of conventional communication mediated through the mass media. In addition, graffiti play the role of a "litmus test" for political mood of certain subcultures and age communities without significant access to the means of mass communication available to the already established political parties. In other words, we can assume that political graffiti because of their specificity, relatively low cost and wide availability, could be classified as an attempt to "break" the media monopoly of social interaction imposed by the commercial media. Besides attempted street "competition" to the media monopoly, political graffiti have a number of communication features that make them a kind of political "barometer", an expression of dissent and protest, advertising, political
humor, social commentary and even an instrument of psychological warfare. Given the polyvalence of the “media” capability of graffiti and their ability to provoke the interest of the “traditional” mass media (broadcast and print) simultaneously allowing their authors to preserve anonymity, if put attractively enough to “rearrange” the urban landscape architecture, as a reflection of power constellation and collective memory building and preservation, we can assume that graffiti execute “multiple media functions”. Schematically speaking, ”media functions” would look as follows:

![Media Functions Diagram]

These features can best be conditionally divided into several distinct aspects, namely: informative, provocative and dialogic (in terms of information exchange and "debate”

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provocation). In turn the "informative" aspect of the "media" contains the functionality of political graffiti, as a warning; manifestation of ideology; “anonymous” declaration of political affiliation or preferences; comment on current personalities, events, trends, policies; political protest, advertising and humor. The provocative nature of the "media" is contained in the possibility of certain political graffiti induce or verify responses from the recipients of the message, and be used as a kind of "litmus test" for possible future consequences, and as an element of psychological war against certain minorities, ethnic groups and political organizations.

In the sense of non-simultaneous information exchange, graffiti allow for the formation of an open dialogue between certain individuals or groups to "publish" their opinions, views and goals on certain policies that directly or indirectly affect them. In this regard, it is particularly interesting specifics of the for revival and return of “forgotten” issues back into the mainstream public discourse serving, as powerful „antidote” to the mainstream public and private mass media “selective blindness” and in asynchrony with the agenda and political consensus of the governing elites. *Observations of this function enables to justify the thesis that political graffiti represent an additional alternative communication channel between the masses and the political elite, especially in periods of low "audibility" by the elite, social unrest, internal and foreign policy crises and serious alienation of certain social groups making important decisions affecting the overall public interest.*

In addition to these aspects of the political graffiti as an alternative communication stream and a tool for remodeling urban context, we could claim that graffiti also could be classified in terms of stages of evolution of simple urban political graffiti and stencils to complex rearrangement of urban landscape in synchrony with the increasing complexity of local political confrontation and its transformation from purely internal to foreign policy scandals provoking sharp diplomatic reactions. At the very early stages of the post-socialist transition the simple and unsophisticated political graffiti dominated the urban landscape, as they require only basic artistic and other skills to produce. Thus manifestation of opposing ideologies and their symbols and slogans were commonplace in post-socialist capital of Bulgaria.
Graffiti symbols: Red star that equals a swastika. Downtown Sofia.

Image source: own photography.


Image Source: own photography.
Graffiti text: “Enough Communism! Enough Robbery! (Oldest graffiti in black color) “We want... sickle and hammer symbol” (Newer “addition” in red color), (In Bulgarian).
Downtown Sofia.
Image Source: own photography.


Graffiti text: I love the country, I hate the state (In Bulgarian). Downtown Sofia. Image Source: own photography.
Image Source: own photography.

Graffiti text: Down with the NMSS, Up Bulgaria (Note: NMSS stands for National Movement Simeon the Second, the political party led by the ex-monarch Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha who returned in the country in 2001 after almost fifty-year long exile and “broke down” the bi-polar party model (BSP vs. UDF)). (In Bulgarian). Downtown Sofia.
Image Source: own photography.
As early post-socialist transition period advances towards consolidation (post 1992 and before the first “winter of discontent” in 1996) of the political system and party politics becomes more fragmented (post 2001) and moves away from the classic bi-polar model and Bulgaria is confronted with so-called “strategic” choices in terms of geo-political orientation and foreign policy challenges (i.e. accession to NATO in 2002-2004 and to the EU in 2007), political graffiti becomes more sophisticated in terms of content and making. From relatively simple slogans and symbols (i.e. manifestation of ideology), the authors opt for relatively more complicated pre-fabricated stencils.

Graffiti image: Early nineties UDF stencil: „СДС”. (In Bulgarian). An abbreviation of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) anti-communist umbrella organization, later to become a single party.

Image Source: own photography.
Graffiti image: symbol and web-page address of the ultra-nationalist, far-right Bulgarian National Union (BNU) movement. Note that the IYI symbol is “borrowed” from its historic background, as it was used as a probable coat of arms of the Dulo ruling clan of the early Bulgarian khaganate. Downtown Sofia.
Image Source: own photography.

Graffiti image: stencil – “replica” of the campaign billboard photograph of the populist leader of right-centrist party GERB, Mr. Boyko Borissov (PM of Bulgaria 2009-2013). Downtown Sofia.
Image Source: own photography.

Image Source: own photography.

Graffiti text: ACTA = 1984 (Where ACTA stands for the global multilateral Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement against intellectual piracy and 1984 makes allusion to the dystopian novel by George Orwell.), as the stencil signifies the Sofia anti-ACTA protests in February 2012. Downtown Sofia.

Image Source: own photography.

In terms of graffiti evolution and complex political pop art inclusion (art interventions) aimed towards marking and remodeling the “topography” of collective memory and the monuments
of political power during periods of heightened political tensions, mass civic protests and unrest, the “simple” identity based politics for “internal consummation” gives way to complex “rearrangement of meaning” of public monuments and urban spaces of social importance. Such art interventions became focal point for general public and “conventional” local and foreign mass media (television broadcast, print and social networks) after 2011.

Graffiti image and text: Stencil and leaflet on the backside of the architectural composition behind the Monument of the Soviet Army near the “absolute center” of Sofia. Stencil text: “Freedom” (In Bulgarian). Leaflet: “Who Suggested Peevski?” (i.e. rephrasing the popular slogan and chant of the almost year-long protest against oligarchy in 2013 directed against the government of PM Plamen Oresharski, who came to power with the support of the BSP, MRF and Ataka. The rhetoric question is directed towards the lack of response on behalf of the governing majority at the National Assembly concerning the scandalous proposition of the highly controversial candidature of MRF’s MP and media mogul Mr. Delyan Peevski to become head of SANS (Bulgarian counter-intelligence services) who was unable to ascend to the post due to heavy public pressure garnished with stoic civic demonstrations and street unrest).

Image Source: own photography.
Graffiti image and text: “Graffiti leaflet” that reads “Zone free of Communists” glued high upon a street lights pole, opposite to the central (Rector’s) Building of the University of Sofia, next to the Parliament at the height of the summer protests in 2013.

Image Source: own photography.
Graffiti text: “Resignation” (In Bulgarian) painted in huge size on the pavement of the section of “Tzarigradsko chausee” at the section after the iconic for Sofia “Eagle’s Bridge” leading towards the square where the National Assembly (Parliament) is located. “Eagle’s Bridge” intersection of the city became symbolic for protest marches and traffic closure all along 2013 by the mass civic protests.

Image Source: own photography.
Graffiti text: Stencil with the question “Who?” (In Bulgarian) painted on the pavement of the section of “Tzarigradsko chausee” at the section after the iconic for Sofia “Eagle’s Bridge” leading towards the square where the National Assembly (Parliament) is located. The stencil became symbolic for shorthand of “Who suggested Peevski?” (for Head of SANS).

Image Source: own photography.
Graffiti image and text: Graffiti action in early November 2013 at the Partisans monument located at “Positano” #20 street in downtown Sofia where the Bulgarian Socialist Party’s Headquarters are located. Text: “Who? BCP – SHAME! *Who!” (i.e. where BCP – stands for the old abbreviation of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the question refers to the designation of Peevski for Head of SANS by the members of Parliament that formally has triggered the nationwide “protests against oligarchy” in 2013). The graffiti action has lead to the detention of one of the highest profile civic activists and protesters, the blogger Assen Genov and five other members of “Protest network” by the police.

Image Source: www.novanews.bg

Graffiti image: Stencils of clenched fist and #2 in front of the monument of the probably one of the most notorious dissidents during state socialist era – the poet and satirist Radoy Ralin
whose sharp political humor was a “breather of fresh air” for multitude of Bulgarians. The clenched fist was used by the so-called “Early riser students” („Ранобудните студенти” in Bulgarian – student protest and occupation movement against Oresharski’s cabinet in 2013 that succeeded to occupy and close the main auditoriums of the oldest Bulgarian university – University of Sofia for almost 3 months). The number 2 stencil signifies the so-called “countdown” of days (“3-2-1-protest day action), (i.e. protest action supported by non-governmental organizations like “Protest network” outside of the occupied University) to the largest national protest gathering countrywide in the summer of 2013.

Image Source: own photography.

Given these functional characteristics of graffiti and their relevance to the political culture, socialization and the ability to identify the ideological affiliation of the author, it is worth analyzing the specifics of the Bulgarian political graffiti and comparability in a broader context.

**Political Graffiti – the much desired “forbidden” media**

The wider context, in which the political graffiti are placed, requires us to note that in most of the political organizations, movements and political parties formed after the fall of communism in the region are affected by the so-called “national communist heritages” which determine the nature of the emerging political systems that face serious deficit of own identity and thus face serious issues of public trust due to the totalitarian party rule lasted more than forty years, as in the case of Bulgaria and its heavy legacy of lasting over forty-five years “patrimonial communism”. In terms of the lack of multi-party competition and freedom of expression of alternative opinion under threat of repression, combined with significant and conscious effort to erase the past and "rewrite" the history of the ruling Communist Party, the "new" post-socialist parties (including the so-called "heir parties" and organizations) badly need to create and / or redefine their own identity\(^\text{15}\). This need arises from the need to create reform and rebuild relations with social groups whose interests should these parties and organizations are within the newly established democratic order. They also badly need restoration or creation of new models for communication between political elites and party sub-elites, non-elites, supporters and the general public. In this context it is useful to

distinguish between several types of source identity deficit of post-socialist political parties and organizations in accordance with the "input" condition to 1989 (i.e. the year in which one-party rule of the Communist Party ceased to exist). We could divide the deficit of sources in three meta-categories, namely:

(1) Lack of established historical roots of the newly formed political parties struggling for power;

(2) Change and transformation of the old identity of the communist parties and their successor parties and auxiliary organizations;

(3) The need for a comprehensive legitimacy to represent the whole social segments / strata in their march to power.

These sources of identity deficiency are fully consistent with the situation of the national political scene after the collapse of the state socialist system, which in the case of Bulgaria is populated by the former Communist Party, which later became a socialist and became her heir and successor on one side. On the other side of the "fence" there are the newly formed opposition formations with highly fragmented and diverse character and ideology claiming to be "historic successor parties" and organizations - heirs obsessively seeking "real" and "continuous" links with organizations existed before 1945, as well as ethnic organizations seeking political representation of specific minorities remained "invisible" or co-opted under the organizational umbrella of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). In addition to the sub-party level, there are many formal and informal groups and movements without serious political representation, and the overall trend of a serious decline in the membership of the formal party organizations, regardless of their massive in Bulgaria, further increasing the number of people formally do not identify with any of the registered political parties and constitute the vast majority of a "silent majority". It is for these reasons listed, and the peculiar features of the consolidation of the Bulgarian political parties and movements in transition - the lack of legitimacy of the party elite and the approach of forming the "top-down" (i.e. the political elite recruits members and supporters, instead of the non-elite to "propel to the top" the natural leaders to represent their interests), "transition fatigue" and widespread frustration with the results of unfinished reforms of transition, the elites, regardless of their party "color" took decisive action and release huge resources designed to literally occupy all available communication channels with the non-elite. As a result, the "official" mass media has been converted into an oligopoly through a series of opaque manipulations of their property in order to "seal" the presence of the post-socialist elite of television screens and front pages of the print media. The idea is relatively simple - the
occupation of all channels of mass of the information and plenty of "exposure" to the audience with constant "correct" messages and images to enhance the legitimacy of the elite. This rationality on the part of the ruling elite entails a series of specific non-public and definitely unethical behavior strategies against the owners and representatives of the mass media - from advertisement control and distribution networks up to downright intimidation or bribery of journalists and reporters. An interesting fact is that independently of the different “power constellations” ever since 1990, almost all political party leaderships employ almost identical strategies to control public discourse in the media, being convinced that putting them in dependency and "ward" ensure their safe support from the electorate and steady "flow of legitimacy" as a result of manipulation. It is a fact that the populist phenomenon Borisov (leader of right-centrist Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and PM of the country in 2009-2013 period before resigning after massive social unrest, known as “the second winter of discontent”, where the first “winter of discontent” in 1996 has deposed from power the Socialist cabinet of Jean Videnov amidst hyperinflation, state bankruptcy and street riots) is largely a product of such a media environment, and control the media played a key role in the formation of links between party elites seeking legitimacy "from the bottom" and rallying the hardcore party membership rank-and-file, as well as entrainment of the "soft periphery" of supporters. Not in vain, another "media" phenomenon in the face of Volen Siderov, the leader of the populist radical right (PRR) “Ataka” party (literally “Attack) has focused its energy at the beginning of his political career on the "saturation" with an almost daily presence on the TV screen as a host and activist, and later on the successful establishment, control and development of own TV channel, as a tool for party propaganda. In other words, the "media clubs" discipline the distributors of "correct" political and party agenda and prevent unwanted information competition from alternative sources of information and communication. They also represent a powerful tool for public altercation with ideological opponents and business, as well as intra competitors or dissidents. Media control is considered the most effective method of "immunization" of the general public concerning issues related to the legitimacy of decisions by the power elite, but also the "eclipse" of the dynamics of "alternative" political and social communities depriving them of access to the 'traditional' national media. For this reason precisely, what we call "ideological alternative" communities or “counter-publics” choose to instead use alternative distribution channels and communication of their messages outside their communities. This choice

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determines the "alternative media" that they use – the "low-tech" graffiti and the "high-tech" social networks. In both cases, "alternative" use the strategy of asymmetric opposition - low-cost methods to spread their "alternative story" of social reality and their suggestions on how it can be changed. This asymmetry forces established political "mastodons" increase input in "traditional" channels of mass communication on the one hand and on the other forces them to "enter" into the territory of "alternative" channels - from graffiti to social networks, where they can benefit from opportunity to advertise their ideological and party identities but also to push public "unacceptable" those who serve their own interest, but should not be promoted by the "traditional" media nationally. Meanwhile, the elites both of traditional and "alternative" players on the political scene use the opportunity to enhance the cohesion and engagement of the membership and sympathizers via encouraging “middle level” activists or the so-called "party sub-elite" to be personally involved and participate actively in the creation and writing of real and virtual graffiti. In this regard we would like to make a reasonable assumption regarding the identity of the "anonymous" authors, i.e. relationship between graffiti and their creators. It is based on analogy with the theory developed by the Australian scientist John D. May, known as the "curvilinear law of disparity"\(^{17}\), which indicates that ordinary members of political parties and communities (the 'party sub-elite ') tend to be much more radical and ideological in their views and actions in comparison with the party and organizational elites and "soft" periphery of sympathizers and unbiased supporters of particular cause. In other words, our guess is that the authors of the real and virtual graffiti are connected or alone come precisely from these organizational sub-elites that seek radical and aggressive ways to advance their political agenda. In support of this assumption is the fact that most authors, at least in real graffiti fall into the age group that causes generation still has not reached the status of a party or community elite. Of course, these authors enjoy logistical support of the elite and may meet approval of their "works" non-elite periphery of supporters. This "binary" connection creates a winning situation for the whole ideologically motivated community - party or organizational elites have an "alibi" in the minds of the general public appear to be relatively moderate and apparently "unrelated" to the "radicals" while "authors" remain anonymous but firmly supported by its own elites. Thus, "the authors" win the sympathies of "soft" supporters of the periphery, while "advertising" certain politically-motivated agenda, provoking and attracting the attention of the entire public. In other words, everybody wins - from party elites that are eager to increase their visibility and legitimacy, while seeking to

unite their respective communities, to ordinary supporters of the respective causes that are not formally members of these communities, but get a sense of visual massiveness and "support" stemming from the ideological markers placed on urban and virtual walls. This is particularly true in terms of ideological communities that seek to resist the hegemonic political paradigm at the moment, cause or alter the existing political system and mode of governance – from non-affiliated but discontent civic protesters to anarchists, neo-Nazis, anti-globalists and representatives of the radical far left.

**Political Graffiti & Art Interventions’ Power to Transform Urban Landscape and Convey Controversial Messages – the case of the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia**

Like most of the former Eastern and Central European member countries of the ex-Soviet Block Bulgaria since the fall of the Berlin Wall has experienced gradual removal or replacement of Soviet era commemorative monuments. Most notable events in the capital city in that regards were the removal of Lenin’s statue that used to overlook the so-called “triangle of power” (i.e. the space between the buildings of the Council of Ministers (seat of the central government), the Presidential building and the massive ex-Party House, now-turned into National Assembly’s members’ building at the absolute center of the city) and the demolition of the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov. However, despite the high level of polarization of public opinion regarding the monuments especially the ones dedicated to the “liberator” Red Army and their historic and aesthetic value, Bulgaria did not reach escalation levels comparable to that of say Estonia during its “monuments war”[^18]. Despite the gradual “disappearance” of these types of monuments, the one that stirs the largest controversy in Bulgarian public life since 1989 is the towering composition titled “Monument of the Soviet Army” located at the heart of Sofia and dominating its central part skyline. The initial works on the memorial complex that consists of main piece – a 37 meter - high column with a central statue of a Soviet soldier, surrounded by a male and a female figures behind, personifying the working proletariat and peasantry, respectively and other smaller surrounding components have begun in 1952 and in 1954 it is officially opened with a state ceremony featuring soviet military top brass. It is important to note that the monument has been planned by entirely Bulgarian team of architects and sculptors and its initial idea was to honor the role of the Red Army in the process of “liberation” of Bulgaria. Despite that the

The monument has been a center of public controversy immediately after the implosion of state socialism in 1989. It was only in 1993 when the Sofia’s then anti-communist UDF dominated Municipal Council has decided to dismantle the monumental complex in the center of the city but does not receive wide civic support thus delays and later abandons the actual execution of its own decision. Interestingly enough that during the “first winter of discontent” in 1996/97 when the mass civic unrest against the Socialist government, the protesters and rioting students and subsequently the UDF government under Ivan Kostov (1997-2001) did not take any actual steps to dismantle it either. If during the massive street unrest participants were preoccupied with toppling the Socialists in power – that could be easily explained, however the incoming-then reformist government and its inaction – not so logical, as of why nobody has taken any decisive steps. It was not until 2010-2012 when newly formed civic initiatives and pressure groups “reopened” the issue of monument removal with annual happenings dedicated to collective memory preservation and “re-building”. In January 2011 the monument debate gets into a new “boiling point” when Sofia’s Municipal Council (dominated by the right-centrist GERB) is pressured to execute the decision from 1993 but fails to garnish support again (just as in the case with the UDF) and creates a situation where two opposing pressure groups pro and against (led by the most vocal far left “Che Guevara” movement”) the dismantling of the monument are protesting simultaneously and are kept apart by the city police.

Image: The Soviet Army Monument as of the seventies of the XX century

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20 [http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=735715](http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=735715), (In Bulgarian), last access August 2014.
Image: Civic pressure group’s 2010 action to dismantle the Soviet Army Monument. The candles form a text in Bulgarian spelling “66 years shame”.


Probably due to the political elites long time inaction and “selective blindness” (i.e. lack of former decision) about the fate of the monument and constant hide-and-seek game between the Sofia municipality and the executive power since 1993 and the complexity stemming from the geopolitical re-orientation of Bulgaria (NATO, etc) this “sacred” space of political contest in urban environment became the virtual “center” of all protest activity against what non-elite participants in civic unrest saw as the local oligarchy’s “clinging to the past” practices formed and influenced by the former USSR and later Russian Federation. Thus political elites from different configurations of power from Socialists to right wing Christian Democrats have provided a public “niche” with exact physical location to become a focal point for alternative media (in terms of political graffiti and art intervention) to concentrate its messages and to boldly provoke those in power in Bulgaria and abroad especially in times when there is a “silent” general discontent with political class at large. Thus a single political graffiti action towards the Monument automatically rearranges the meaning and its initial idea to turn it into a highly visible “display board” for dissent that creates not only local political confrontation but transforms it from purely internal to foreign policy scandals provoking sharp diplomatic
reactions that immediately capture the attention of mainstream television broadcast, print and social media in Bulgaria and abroad. Thus on June 17th 2011 the monument becomes stage of a spectacular art intervention titled „Abreast with the time”/“В крак с времето” (in Bulgarian) where the Soviet soldier sculptures located at the sides of the main architectural piece receive a spectacular makeover to become the well-known comic heroes – Superman, the Joker, Wolverine, the X-Man, Santa Claus and Captain America21 by anonymous authors that later in time indicate that they are a group of artists united under the umbrella of “Destructive Creation”22 art collective23 that are able to polarize Bulgarians and draw attention of the foreign media almost instantly.

Image source: "Паметник на Съветската армия 18.06.2011" by Ignat Ignev - Собствена творба. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D0%9F%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B1%D8A%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B1%80%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B1%8F_18.06.2011.jpg#mediaviewer/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB;%D0%9F%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%A1%D1%8A%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B1%80%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B1%8F_18.06.2011.jpg

22 http://edno.bg/blog/koy-e-v-krak-s-vremeto?page=5
23 http://destructivecreation.com/?p=152#comments
In the winter of 2012 the same soldier sculptures receive Guy Fawkes masks as a symbolic anti-ACTA protest action in Bulgaria and in August the same year few of the figures receive colored hoods over their heads, same as the ones used by the members of the Russian punk rock band “Pussy Riot” in order to support the members that became subject of prosecution by Kremlin. Next year on the Day of remembrance of the victims of communism (1st of February) three of the heads of the sculptures are painted in white, green and red – the colors of the Bulgarian flag, while on the 21st of August 2013 “The Red Army goes Pink”24 in an art installation titled “Prague ‘68” to commemorate anniversary of the crush of Prague Spring in 1968 by the collective forces of the Warsaw Pact led by the Red Army. Easily spotted was the text of the graffiti – “Bulgaria is apologizing!!!” in Czech and Bulgarian languages referring to offering an apology on behalf of Bulgarian armed forces’ participation in Prague’s 1968 occupation and „Excuse yourselves” (only in Bulgarian) towards the supposed Russian recipients. The international reaction is almost instant, as the major news agencies25 spread the news of the Bulgarian „apology” around the globe and show how the Red Army has gone „pink”. On the very next day – 22nd of August the Russian authorities (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation) react very sharply via official diplomatic channels demanding from the Bulgarian executive and local power to formally punish the authors for „profanation of monuments of Soviet soldiers” in Bulgaria, as they deem that the cases are multiplying and no official reaction beyond the mandatory cleaning of the monument after such actions is carried out. As a result of the art intervention the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Kristian Vigenin calls for calm and pleas for abstaining of „overreaction” on the Russian side, meanwhile Sofia’s Regional Prosecutor’s Offices launches pre-trial proceedings against unknown author for vandalism26.

However these developments did not prevent or discourage civic activists and creative authors to continue to use the monument complex for further bold politically motivated art interventions, as in the summer of 2013 the monument sees another action – this time dubbed „Monument of Gazprom”.

25 http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-bulgaria-monument-czech-idUSBRE97K0G520130821
26 http://www.novinite.com/articles/153091/Bulgaria's+FM%3A+Don't+Dramatize+Memorial+Desecrations
Image source: "PSA 21 08 2013" by Ignat Ignev - Собствена творба. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PSA_21_08_2013.JPG#mediaviewer/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:PSA_21_08_2013.JPG

Image and graffiti text: Monument of Gazprom (In Bulgarian).

Image Source: Own photography.
In 2014 the monument sees three more spectacular interventions in February, March and April, as the first one is dedicated to the support and solidarity with the Ukrainian protesters at the Maidan, titled „Слава Україні“ / “Glory to Ukraine” (in Ukrainian).


Whereas the March graffiti action was dedicated to the protest against the Russian invasion of Crimean peninsula – large graffito at the bottom of the central piece read “Hands off Ukraine”, the April interaction was a commemorative piece titled “KATYN 5.III'40“ containing a makeover of one of the soldier sculptures in white and red colors (as are the colors of the Polish flag) waving the Bulgarian tricolor and a second figure in blue and yellow (as in the Ukrainian one) side by side. The central piece sported graffito „PUTIN GO HOME”!

**Conclusion**

This paper presents a very brief attempt to provide an insight into the potency of political graffiti as an alternative “low –tech”political communication stream and specifically its function, as a mechanism for revival and return of “forgotten” issues back into the mainstream public discourse, served as powerful „antidote” to the mainstream public and private mass media “selective blindness” due its opaque ownership structure, concentration and constant deterioration of media pluralism and freedom, especially in terms of hotly contested internal
and external political agenda. It also tried to demonstrate the logic behind the stages of evolution of simple urban political graffiti and stencils to complex rearrangement of urban landscape in synchrony with the increasing complexity of local political confrontation in time placed in Bulgarian post-socialist context and its transformation from purely internal to foreign policy scandals. Most importantly it is an attempt to gain an insight into the motivation and “mechanics” of interplay between “alternative” and “mainstream” media channels of communication between political elites and non-elites in time periods of “low audibility” on behalf of the elites while having “high political turbulence”. In conclusion we can state that in periods of “dysfunctional” communication between different social strata and in situation described best as “competitive state capture” it is very probable that the potency of political graffiti to serve as a “trigger” to catch media attention inside and outside the country and go viral on the social networks is high. As probably the political graffiti “bombing” and art interactions to remodel public monuments in Sofia will continue at least until the responsible elites bring back the issues “swept under the carpet” that concern collective memory, open and public debate about the nature of historic heritage and its architectural and urban reflection that will engage all of the stakeholders included (bottom-up approach preferred), we will continue to monitor the evolution of these methods and techniques of communication and interaction.