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The memory of communism in Vukovar's memoryscape

The city of Vukovar went through several important transformations within the turbulent 20th century. Process of industrialisation, initiated by Tomas Bata establishing his shoe factory in 1931, accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s. Rural-to-urban migration that followed, reshaped the social world of this multicultural city. With its mixed ethnic composition, around 10% of citizens identifying themselves as Yugoslavs, strong industry and the common identity of a "red city" (meaning: in favour of the communist regime), it could very well represent a model "Yugoslav city" of its time.

However, the war in the 1990s brought yet another revolution in Vukovar. The socialist past and the multi-ethnic, industrial identity has been replaced by its modern "hero town" status. As Vukovar forms a crucial part of the creation myth built by the modern Croatian state, today's memoryscape of the city is almost entirely focused on the Croatian War of Independence and in accordance with one-dimensional state narrative on the past - even though the local memories of systemic change are more diverse and entangled. Different narratives challenging the official memory have been a subject of institutional forgetting, both in public discourse and public space.

Process of reconstruction of the city after the so-called "Peaceful Reintegration" was strongly ideological. It was decided to recreate the "authentic Vukovar", which stood for the restoration of pre-World War II buildings – mainly the baroque architecture - as a unique cultural heritage of the city. With properly planned and performed reconstruction, Vukovar was supposed to regain its "European character", which had been lost to "Eastern aesthetic influences" during the 45 years of Yugoslav period. In practical terms, it was understood as the need of elimination of "communist" or "Yugoslav" elements from the urban architecture.

Therefore, centrally located buildings representing "Yugoslav" style were either rearranged or demolished. Spatial intervention was followed by the process of decommunization of toponyms. Old sites of memory were given new meaning or were subjected to institutional forgetting.

However, it is still possible to find traces of the communist heritage within the current memoryscape. Most important example I will discuss during the workshop is Dudik memorial park. Built on the site of a mass grave of communist partisans executed by the Independent State of Croatia during World War II, with a massive monument by Bogdan Bogdanović erased between 1978-80, it was heavily damaged during the war in 1990s. Despite numerous calls for renovation, for years it was perishing, to eventually be transformed into a football pitch by Croatian war veterans' football club. This acquisition of symbolic space resulted with protests of Serbian community in Vukovar and has been perceived as yet another aspect of systemic

discrimination of Serbian minority in the city. After years of pressure, including the involvement of Croatian architect circles, in 2016 the monuments in park were reconstructed. However, it is still neglected as a communist heritage and still an object of conflict of different communities of memory, usually defined as Croatian and Serbian.

In the case of Vukovar, such conflicts are mostly framed into the category of “divided city” and the scheme of Serbo-Croatian memory wars. It does seem to be an explanatory and functional framework; however, I argue that such categories might be limiting if we are trying to understand the meanings and interpretations of social reality by people experiencing it every day. It is interesting to observe that within certain areas, the city is trying to overcome these dichotomic divisions. (For example, my analysis of the city’s tourist brand has demonstrated that Vukovar has been trying to build a new identity of a city of rich cultural heritage, authentic natural beauty and cultural diversity) Therefore, the future research on Vukovar and the local memory should try to derive interpretative categories from the local narratives and include in-depth analysis of life trajectories, everyday practices and individual identifications.