

Experiences of Socialism in Romanian Exhibitions: Ethical Implications of Display, Invisibility, and Engagement

Maria Cristache

Justus Liebig University, Germany

mariacristache@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The representation of tangible and intangible heritage from the socialist period in Romania has increased and diversified since the House of the People opened for visitors in 1994. Permanent and temporary exhibitions focused on various aspects of life under socialism—from food, housing, and entertainment to the lifestyle of the Ceaușescu couple—have flourished especially in the 2010s. In this article, I examine the different ways in which exhibitions represent the socialist past by displaying objects linked to consumption, leisure, and domesticity and by organizing interactive experiences around the material culture and spaces associated with socialism. The main questions addressed are: Whose perspectives and experiences of the socialist period do these exhibitions represent? What are the direct and indirect ways in which these exhibitions make political commentaries? What are the ethical issues raised by the strong interactive component of some of these experiences?

In order to answer these questions, I will look at four exhibitions opened after 2010: *Casa Ceaușescu* (Ceaușescu Mansion) and *80east* in Bucharest, *Muzeul Consumatorului Comunist* (Museum of the Communist Consumer) in Timișoara, and *Muzeul Traiului în Comunism* (Museum of Living in Communism) in Brașov. My analysis is informed by research on the representation of socialism in museums since 1989, by reflections on the ethical responsibility of museums and on the political commentary they generate. Based on the analysis of the exhibitions and on interviews with the founders of these initiatives, I discuss the dimension of space and issues of representation, the interactive component as a source of authenticity and its relation with trust, and the political relevance and position of these exhibitions.

KEYWORDS

Museums; socialism; consumption; material culture; everyday life.



Introduction

In 1999 I visited the House of the People for the first time while on a school trip. Not quite a museum of socialism, the building was still one of the first instances of “museumification” of the recent past that I encountered. As a teenager from a small town—whose world consisted mostly of the neighborhood I grew up in with its “communist” apartment buildings, the school, and some shops—the large rooms,

crystal chandeliers, marble pillars, and other similar material aspects impressed me. While revisiting the place in 2014, I couldn’t help but notice the strong emphasis on quantitative information about the size and scale, value of materials, and the guide’s insistence that we don’t stray from the group and don’t take pictures. At the same time, I wondered why there was no mention of the socioeconomic context of the House of the People’s construction, such as the scarcity of goods in the 1980s or the demolitions done to clear the space for this building.¹

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The representation of tangible and intangible heritage from the socialist period in Romania has increased and diversified since then. Especially since the early 2010s, numerous and more diverse exhibitions have become available for the public. Both public and private actors have organized permanent and temporary exhibitions focused on a wide range of topics: from consumption, housing, and entertainment to the lifestyle of the Ceaușescu family. In addition to offering insights into less known aspects of life during socialism, some of these initiatives also create interactive experiences for the public. Visitors can browse through almanacs, magazines, and newspapers, listen to vinyl records, feel the texture of a couch upholstery from the 1970s, eat *pufuleți*² and *parizer*,³ and drink a cup of *nechezol*.⁴ Outside these very specific changes in content and practices, how do these initiatives shape the process of remembering socialism in Romania? Do they contribute to a representation of the past that is more nuanced than that found in the sporadic exhibitions of the 1990s?

In this article, I examine the representation of socialism⁵ in four Romanian exhibitions or experiences: *80east* and *Casa Ceaușescu* (Ceaușescu Mansion) in Bucharest, *Muzeul Trailui în Comunism* (Museum of Living in Communism) in Brașov, and *Muzeul Consumatorului Communist* (Museum of the Communist Consumer) in Timișoara. By focusing on items linked to consumption, domesticity, and leisure, these cases shed light on particularities of everyday life during socialism. The questions that I address in the following pages are: Whose perspectives and experiences of the socialist period do these exhibitions represent? What are the direct and indirect ways in which these exhibitions make political commentaries? What are the ethical issues raised by the strong interactive component of some of these experiences?

The four cases discussed in this article also shed light on a more general debate in

museum studies concerning the definition of museums. According to Macdonald, several motivations and concerns—such as the fear of forgetting, the search for authenticity, wanting to deal with the fragmentation of identity and to educate oneself—lead to a complex situation when attempting to define what a museum is (2006: 5). For instance, can temporary, corporate or virtual collections be considered museums?

While each initiative discussed here presents some characteristics of a museum, none of them meets all the criteria for what ICOM (The International Council of Museums) defines as being a museum.⁶ They are open to the public and provide education and entertainment, but, for the most part, the artefacts exhibited are not professionally conserved and researched in order to be better contextualized. The founders of the Museum of the Communist Consumer and the Museum of Living in Communism stated clearly during our conversations that they are not professional curators. *80east* benefited from the support of some consultants, but ultimately it was not the work of curators either. I could not find any official information about who organized the exhibition at the Ceaușescu Mansion, but based on my visit and some critical opinions expressed in online magazines,⁷ I would argue that this exhibition was not prepared by curators either.

Of course, museums—as institutions and concepts—are constantly changing and do not exist in a vacuum. For example, museological practices—such as collecting, assembling heritage, and performing identity—are no longer limited to the museum space (Macdonald 2006: 6). However, questions concerning the definition of museums are beyond the scope of this article. That is why, for the sake of conceptual clarity, I will refer to the four Romanian cases as exhibitions or experiences.

I visited the Ceaușescu Mansion in 2017 and the Museum of the Communist Consumer in 2018, and I was able to take a virtual tour

of the apartment from the 80east project through their website.⁸ I also conducted interviews with the founder of the Museum of the Communist Consumer and the owner⁹ of the Museum of Living in Communism, as well as with the person in charge of the 80east project. In addition, I analyzed pictures, different types of videos,¹⁰ and online articles and blog posts about these initiatives.

I chose to look at these specific cases mainly because the exhibitions addressed aspects pertaining to various types of domestic and private spaces. Domesticity is a widely discussed topic in anthropological and historical studies focused on the Soviet and socialist period in Russia and Eastern Europe (Drazin 2001; Buchli 2002; Zarecor 2009; Fehervary 2011; Kelly 2011). Research underlines that the home was a site in which public and private actors interacted in complex ways. While the state tried to reconfigure, regulate, and standardize the domestic sphere, people responded to these interventions in subtly challenging ways. For example, they personalized their homes with small decorative objects (Kelly 2011: 64) and used their kitchens as places for small public gatherings in which they shared life stories, political views, and strategies for procuring goods (Kelly 2011: 80).

The cases examined here use the domestic space to represent quite different topics—the precarious living conditions of the working class, the violation of rights, the peculiarities of consumption, and the luxuries enjoyed by the political elites—and they do not always do this in explicit ways. Some integrate this space in a clearly defined script, while others seem to let the visitors explore it on their own terms. However, in all of these cases the domestic space becomes an arena where ideologies, values, aspirations, and inequalities become subjects of conversation.

The socioeconomic context of the 1980s in Romania inspired, to different degrees, the content and organization of

the exhibitions. 80east is, as the name says, exclusively dealing with this decade. The Museum of Living in Communism does not have an explicit focus on the 1980s, but the audio-visual material shown to the visitors and some of the furniture and ornaments are from that time period. There is no clear emphasis on the 1980s at the Ceaușescu Mansion, since this was the residence of the Ceaușescus from 1965 to 1989. However, the tour includes many references to the 1989 Revolution. Finally, the Museum of the Communist Consumer includes almost no specific temporal reference, other than “the communist period.” As a visitor, I could recognize many of the objects exhibited and place them in the broadly defined period of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

I start with an overview of the representation of socialism in museums since 1989 as discussed by researchers working on Romania, East Germany, Bulgaria, and Poland. I then discuss the link between museums and politics, approached through the ethics of representation. I continue with a short description of the four cases examined in this paper. The remainder of the article focuses on several topics identified during my analysis of the exhibitions and the interviews conducted with the founders/amateur curators: the dimension of space and issues of representation; the interactive component as a source of authenticity and its relation with trust; and the political relevance and positioning of these projects.

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Changes in the museum representation of socialism

Since the fall of the regime, the representation of socialism in Romanian museums has changed, but only gradually and not in a unidirectional way. These changes are visible in the frequency and overall organization of exhibitions, but also—more specifically—



in how objects from that time period are “treated” by museums. What is displayed and what is kept away from view? What happened to the “politically charged” artifacts found in museums before 1989? What about the seemingly banal everyday objects? How are these objects recontextualized in museums? These are some of the questions generated by the rise of a new museum scene.

The first thing that happened in the 1990s was the removal of any reference to the socialist decades from exhibitions as a way for museums to reinvent themselves (Bădică 2014: 276). For a while, museums almost completely avoided engaging with this time period. Nicolescu discusses the example of “The Time Room” at Museum of the Romanian Peasant that includes a detailed timeline of Romanian history handwritten on the walls, but only the start and end years of socialism and no mention of collectivization or peasant revolts (2017: 12).¹¹ This connects to Bădică’s argument that the representation of communism in Romanian museums has been shaped by the “black hole” paradigm that views those forty-two years as a time when Romania was “out of history” (2010: 81).

Vukov describes a similar situation in Bulgaria where, after the dissolution of the socialist state, a large proportion of the museums exhibits created during socialism were closed and the collections put in storage permanently (2008: 320). After that, museums focused on ethnographic representations of local cultural traditions and on the pre-socialist times at the expense of critical historiographic reflections (Vukov 2008: 321–323). At the time of his research, the only museum of socialism in Bulgaria was in Pravets, and it was dedicated to the former socialist leader Todor Zhivkov (Vukov 2008: 307–308).

In Romania, the Romanian Peasant Museum and the Sighet Memorial Museum were the first to break this silence in 1997 with curatorial commentaries about socialism. The former opened “The

Plague–Political Installation” as part of the permanent exhibition, while the latter was established in a former political prison from the 1950s. In both cases, the exhibitions were built around what came to be the dominant narrative about the socialist past: that of a totalitarian and illegitimate regime that can be understood only in light of the opposition between oppression and resistance (Bădică 2010: 91; Pohrib 2015: 3–4). Overall, by focusing on communist crimes from an anti-communist perspective, these museums have described that whole era as a criminal one (Bădică 2010: 82).

In time, the initiatives to represent and preserve the memory of socialism in Eastern Europe have multiplied and diversified and researchers have taken note of this. The former GDR has been a particularly rich research site, with several amateur private museums of everyday life under socialism shaping the production of cultural memory through their practices of display (Bach 2017: 8–9). Berdahl (2005) also discussed a local collection and exhibition, the *Zeitzeugen Ostalgie* project (Ostalgie Witnesses to History), as well as a fashion show of East German clothing held at the Leipzig Forum of Contemporary History. The practices and narratives found in these initiatives point to multiple, fluid, shifting, complex, and contradictory forms and domains of memory production and consumption (Berdahl 2005: 167).

In her research on Poland, Main (2008) constructs a detailed and critical analysis of the representation, display, and discussion of objects related to communism in exhibitions. She looks at the case of the Proletaryat Café in Poznań that shows a simplified version of communism, mixing artifacts from different time periods and countries, without any contextualization. She also examines an online collection of images, sounds, and texts illustrating daily life in communism, arguing that it doesn’t have a narrative aspect and is a mere clustering of separate entities (Main



2008: 376–379). Analyzing the activity of an independent NGO focused on the experience of dissidents, she argues that the initiative still manages to show everyday life in communism at the intersection between state control and individual choices and behaviors (Main 2008: 390).

In the Romanian context, private efforts to represent and preserve the recent past have also been examined by social scientists. Petrescu analyzed how the online sharing of private memories about communism shapes collective memory and generational identity, and how it provides alternatives and complementary perspectives to the hegemonic representation of communism (2014: 596–597). Pohrib advanced a similar argument, looking at the online organization and distribution of images and texts about communism as an indicator of a different form of generational identity, separated from trauma (2015: 8). Private initiatives of museums focused on consumption and everyday life have also been described as advancing nostalgic and personal memories, presenting “the ‘normality’ of life under a dictatorial regime where most citizens suffered from economic deprivations more than political persecution” (Preda 2017: 171).

Private museums have been the subject of much criticism from historians and curators for being too affirmative of life during socialism, trivializing dictatorship, emotionally manipulating the audience, lack of critical distance, and inadequate preservation of objects (Bach 2017: 62). In his critical discussion of the tactile, interactive, and informal means of representing the past and claiming authenticity by these museums, Bach pointed also to some of the positive effects of these initiatives (2017: 48). They contribute, even unintentionally, to a more nuanced understanding of daily life as a site of transformation and adaptation in the past.¹² The value of these museums rests less in their representation of “how it really was” and more in that they help “overcome rather than reinforce the worn but persistent

binary of totalitarianism and everyday life as antagonistic frameworks for understanding the socialist past” (Bach 2017: 79–80).



Ethics and politics in museums

As already hinted in the previous section, a common feature of these private museums is their positioning outside and sometimes even against politics. The founders/ amateur curators claim they have no intention of glorifying the past, but that they want to show life “as it really was” by treating objects as witnesses and dignifying people’s lived experiences (Berdahl 2005: 164; Bach 2017: 10, 63–64).

A strand of research that has focused on the public engagement with these museums proves the contrary: these exhibitions are actually political because they portray a regime that failed to supply consumer goods. Visitors’ comments in guest books indicate “a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption” (Berdahl 2005: 165). Comments exchanged online about visual and textual recollections of communism also point to the negotiated nature of the biography of objects, the sensorial component of materiality, and to political associations (Pohrib 2015: 8).

In this article, however, I focus on two other aspects stemming from this apolitical and anti-political positioning of museums: the ultimately political effects of their practices and discourses and their ethical responsibility, both in the context of a changing society. The first one is based on studies about museums and art in Eastern Europe that point to the political questions and topics that artists and curators raise in their work. For example, Bach interprets the activity of amateur private museums



as a response to Western narratives about life in the socialist past as either a lie or a crime. This is a political topic in itself, but the museum founders, which in many of these cases are also curators, don't frame it as such because they react to what they perceive as an overly politicized environment (2017: 65).

When looking at post-1989 changes in the Romanian Peasant Museum led by Horia Bernea, Nicolescu (2017) explains that these were influenced by the ideas of many thinkers, including nihilist philosopher Emil Cioran and historian of religions Mircea Eliade. These thinkers argued that art can be detached from politics, and that it can be done without ethical implications—even if they had both supported far-right regimes in late 1930s Romania only to embrace more democratic ideas after their immigration to France and America respectively in the 1950s. However, as Nicolescu argues, the display at the Romanian Peasant Museum can only be political since it aimed to change Romanian society by cleansing it from communism (2017: 14–17).

In the early 1990s, this cleansing happened on metaphorical and visual levels, for example through displays that emphasized the material and physical characteristics of clay, mortar, and wood instead of the white, grey, flat museum surfaces from the communist times and by getting rid of most of the items connected to communist propaganda (Nicolescu 2017: 2–3). At the same time, the “new” approach to display in the museum “subtly integrated the ‘communist’ past into the new aesthetics by incorporating bits and pieces retrieved from that past” (Nicolescu 2017: 4). Ultimately, by objectifying and reifying communism, the curators incorporated some parts of this past into the museum (Nicolescu 2017: 4; 19).

The second point, namely the ethical responsibility of museums in a changing society, links a general topic in museums studies to the social, cultural, and political context of postsocialist Romania. It raises questions of representation and perspective,

balance, access, and assumptions that are at the basis of ideas expressed in the museum space (Besterman 2006: 440–441). To what extent are the curators responsible to show to the public that what they see inside the museum is the product of opinions, assumptions, and conjecture rather than something inherently true (Edson 1997: 195)? How can the recontextualization of objects in the museums manipulate public values and opinions (Dean 1997: 198)?

Inspired by research on the mutually constitutive visual and material components of society and the ethical issues of difference, identity, and power raised by these, I do not approach these museums as spaces where materiality has a fixed meaning (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 3–5). Instead, I ask questions about what is seen and what is invisible, what is allowed to enter public memory, and what happens when certain visualities and materialities are excluded (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 7–8).

Bădică (2010) argues that starting from the 2000s the representation of the communist period in Romanian museums improved in terms of nuance and documentation, but that the “black hole” paradigm remains dominant. In the remainder of this article I examine the four cases of new museums in light of some common issues raised by the representation of socialism in museums: the reluctance to engage with the recent past, criticism of nostalgia, balanced and nuanced representations, and apolitical or anti-political approaches.



Remembering socialism in Romania: four examples

The Museum of the Communist Consumer opened in 2015 in Timișoara in the basement of the pub *Scârț Loc Lejer*. Ovidiu Mihăiță, who is also an actor and co-founder of the



independent theater group *Auăleu*, initiated this project and runs it in collaboration with various volunteers, such as touristic guides and other colleagues. Designed to look like a “typical communist” apartment, it includes furniture, books, ornaments, toys, board games, kitchen utensils, appliances, food and drinks labels, and many other things distributed between the living room, bedroom, kitchen, and children’s room. However, since people continue to donate objects, the collection keeps growing, so the place looks less like an inhabited apartment and more like a storage space.

The Ceaușescu Mansion is the former residence of the Ceaușescu family, located in Primăverii, a residential neighborhood in Bucharest. It was built in the mid-1960s and extended in the 1970–1972 period. In March 2016, it opened for visitors as a permanent exhibition¹³ administered by Regia Autonomă Administrația Patrimoniului Protocolului de Stat¹⁴ (“Rețeaua Memoriei. Expoziția permanentă ‘Casa Ceaușescu’ – București,” n.d.). The guided tours of approximately one hour take the visitors through Ceaușescu’s office, the private apartment of each family member, the living and dining rooms, evening and day lounges, the dressing, the wine cellar, the cinema, the winter and summer gardens, the spa, and the indoor pool room. According to the exhibition website, visitors have a chance to see how the former president lived privately and to admire several paintings, tapestries, porcelain, crystal, and wood items, as well as mosaics (“Casa Ceaușescu. About,” n.d.).

80east is a project run by Funky Citizens, a Romanian NGO. It was the recipient of a one-year grant from the US Department of State and later funded by the NGO until the end of March 2020. Private companies, logistics, administrative, and communications teams, architects, and consultants also supported the project. In addition, people donated objects and materials and money (through an online campaign).¹⁵ The space was organized like a family

apartment from the 1980s with a living room, bedroom, children’s room, kitchen, and bathroom. It was also furnished and decorated with things from that decade. Launched in February 2019, the main goal of the project was to help high school students¹⁶ understand the (lack of) rights and freedom for citizens during communism (“80east. Despre proiect,” n.d.). During their visits the students explored the four active rooms and had to complete three to four small tasks in each of them. At the end of the visit they would have a debriefing session in which they discussed what they had learned about the topic. In addition to their goal of providing civic education, the project team also aims to give insight into the realities of life in the 1980s by encouraging visitors to engage with the objects and technologies of the past and with the domestic space overall (“80east. Apartamentul,” n.d.).

Raluca Feher, former journalist who currently writes and works in advertising, opened the Museum of Living in Communism in Brașov in 2019. She bought a three room apartment that used to belong to a family of factory workers and set it up mostly on her own, with some help from friends who donated objects. The apartment has furniture, ornaments, and appliances from the 1970s and 1980s. Visitors can choose between a three-hour guided tour and an overnight stay. In both cases they learn about the urbanization and industrialization of Brașov, they watch videos about the 1989 Revolution, listen to Radio Free Europe, or try food and drinks typical of the socialist period, and so on. Raluca decided to organize this experience in response to a perceived increase in nostalgia for communism. She wants to make sure that people don’t forget what it was like and to educate younger generations about the recent past (Adrian Jătăreanu, “Muzeul Traiului în Comunism/ Museum of living in communism e celebru,” Facebook video, 2:31, September 19, 2019, <https://fb.watch/4bsC8Vn9c9/>).



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Is there a “communist apartment”? Space and issues of representation

I started this project by asking questions about the experiences and perspectives represented in these new initiatives and thinking that I will find most of the answers in the objects displayed. Objects are indeed important, but their values and meanings only make sense in the social, cultural, and political context of (post)socialist Romania. Questions pertaining to the space in which these exhibitions are set up turned out to be essential for understanding this context and the issues of representation.

The topic of space was apparent both in the visiting experience and in the discourses of the founders or amateur curators. Typically museums create a narrative environment that has an inherently spatial character and the potential to connect with people’s perceptions and imagination (Hanks Hourston, Hale, and MacLeod 2012: xix–xxi). For instance, the experience of going through the numerous bedrooms, lounges, and leisure spaces of the Ceaușescu Mansion provides a powerful contrast with seeing a forty-nine square meter apartment that used to be shared by a family of five like the one from the Museum of Living in Communism.

The generally low quality of housing in socialist Romania was—and sometimes still is—visible in the standardized small apartments characterized by lack of comfort and privacy, poorly done electrical installations, plumbing, and isolation (Voicu and Voicu 2006: 56–57). In light of people’s memories from and experiences of the past and the images of “gray,” uniform apartment buildings circulated on social media and in movies, the “extravagant” and luxurious interiors of the Ceaușescu Mansion are met with disapproval, contempt, and even revulsion by some visitors.

Furthermore, how the founders and/or amateur curators talk about and use the



Photograph 1 - Kitchen from the Museum of Living in Communism.
Photo credits: Raluca Feher

space within each case mirrors both past and current topics, such as quality of life, socioeconomic inequalities, and consumer aspirations. Space becomes overcrowded with objects, like in the Timișoara museum that, ironically, gathers a large collection of consumer goods to illustrate a time when there wasn’t actually that much to consume.

In Brașov the visitors also get to experience space as a scarce resource in two ways: as part of the guided tour that can include maximum six people due to space constraints and by spending the night in the apartment and getting “to feel what a worker felt in 1987”¹⁷ (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020). The lack of space is actually one of the main things that the public notices and comments on when visiting the apartment: “People notice the size (note: for example the small kitchen, see Photograph 1), I mean the fact that it is so cramped. They ask themselves how in God’s

name did five people—meaning a family with three daughters—live there and how did they raise their children there?” (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020).

As previously discussed, one of the main reasons for choosing to look at these particular cases was their focus on the domestic space, the site of the everyday and the private life of individuals. While in the case of the Ceaușescu Mansion it is clear that the visitors get to see the residence of the former presidential family, things are not so clear-cut in the other cases. Whose experiences did these “recreated apartments” represent? Are they representative of certain socioeconomic categories? Is there such a thing as a “communist apartment”?

One point that generated quite a lot of discussion, among Romanian historians, social scientists, journalists, as well as members of the general public, was the architectural style and year of construction for the buildings that host these exhibitions. The buildings of the Museum of the

Communist Consumer and of the 80east project originate both in the 1930s and look quite different from what people commonly associate with the socialist-era apartments with small rooms located in ten-story buildings. The reasons for this are mostly practical. Ovidiu only had access to the semi-basement of the building where he used to live. And the team of 80east needed enough space to organize the tours for groups of approximately thirty students as this was a condition of their funding.

Of course, these interwar buildings were also part of the Romanian urban landscape during socialism, providing nationalized housing for people living and working in cities. In the words of Cosmin, when talking about the building that hosted the 80east project: “It is true that communism existed in that house too, meaning that it didn’t keep away from it” (Cosmin, personal communication, September 11, 2020). The point is that acknowledging the existence of a variety of spaces and experiences is

Photograph 2 - Living room of the 80east apartment. Photo credits: Ion Mateș, 2019



important in order to avoid reducing the socialist past to stereotypical images of uniformity and the discourse of grayness (Fehervary 2009).

That does not mean that people's criticism towards the choice of space is unfounded or irrational. For example, there is indeed something bourgeois about the apartment used in the 80east project, with its high ceilings, large windows, and big rooms (Photograph 2)—especially considering that it is a vehicle for teaching students about the economic shortages, the restrictions, and the violation of rights of the 1980s. Comments posted by viewers on the social media page of the project emphasize sometimes the contrast between what is shown and what others experienced. An analysis of the public engagement is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth mentioning that these reactions illustrate people's expectation to see displayed what they perceive as the experience of the majority. A parallel practice exists in the display of objects in the museums of everyday life in GDR, where the inclusion of a certain object is not the result of its uniqueness, but because it indexes all other objects of its type. The exhibits thus convey a concentrated version of the everyday, where objects—disconnected from owners—are still seen as authentic, even if there is no systematic way of verifying their provenance (Bach 2017: 69).

Throughout my conversations with the people in charge of the exhibitions, they seemed to understand that the information they conveyed through the “reconstructed apartments” represented one side of life in the recent past rather than an absolute truth. When asked if the apartment hosting the Museum of Living in Communism is a typical apartment for that time period, Raluca answered that she considers it typical for a working-class family. She gave a more nuanced account of housing conditions during socialism, by comparing it with the apartment where she grew up: “... there were some apartment buildings much more

dignified and decent. I mean still three rooms, three big rooms, hallway, two bathrooms. We had a balcony so it doesn't compare, and we were on the first floor so, again, we could hold on and go through the winter easier” (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020).

Cosmin, the main person in charge of the 80east project, also agrees that the space used in their project is not that of a typical “communist apartment” since it has a garden, two exits, and access through a spiral staircase. Right after that, he mentions his family home in the south of Bucharest where four people had to share two rooms. However, this nuance and awareness of the diversity of experiences communicated during our conversation is not necessarily conveyed through the exhibition space or on the project website. For instance, the place is described as an *apartament optzecist*,¹⁸ that is not only communist or *ceausist*,¹⁹ but also realist, that is inspired by actual life in the 1980s (“80east. Despre proiect.” n.d.).

While this is still a balanced approach, which does not claim to represent *all* the realities of the time, the description from “The Apartment” section of the website focuses almost exclusively on topics such as propaganda, repression, and scarcity as exemplified by this sarcastic description:

Welcome to the golden age of the Romanian society! The time when productivity reached the sky, when the Romanian citizen was well fed and satisfied, and when factories and plants bustled with happy comrades. When newspapers talked about “Economic tasks exemplarily fulfilled” and about “Inspiring workers relations” with an enthusiasm that almost made one shed a tear. (“80east. Apartamentul,” n.d.)

In this context the apartment becomes an instrument for conveying civic education and not so much for critically engaging with the daily, domestic life of people living in a socialist state.



Interactive experiences: authenticity and trust

The first time I saw a recreation of a “communist living room” was in 2011, in the temporary exhibition *‘70/ ‘80. Our Youth* at the National Museum of Romanian History. Back then visitors were not even allowed to take pictures, let alone touch any of the objects displayed. By contrast, three of the four experiences analyzed here have a strong interactive component meant to confer authenticity to the visiting experience.

Ovidiu describes this type of authentic experience that he aimed to create by allowing people to engage directly with the objects:

I wanted it to be very— Since it is about toys, small objects, it is nice to touch them, some of them you can see how they work. You can look through the drawers. You know, I didn’t want it to be an uptight thing, you know, that you look at from three meters distance and you are not allowed to take pictures of. On the contrary, you can touch them. (Ovidiu, personal communication, August 28, 2020)

Raluca told me about the efforts she made to gather a collection of books, magazines, and newspapers from that time that visitors and guests could browse through. They can also play board games, watch videos from the 1989 Revolution and movies from socialism, and listen to Radio Free Europe. She also replaced the more modern sinks, toilet, appliances, and electronics with older models and kept (a restored version of) the furniture from the 1970s and 1980s, to reflect the quality of life of those decades. This whole complex and rather expensive process of reconstruction was meant to create an authentic experience and not a mere improvisation.

The interactive component also serves an educational purpose, as in the 80east project where the students get to complete

a series of tasks that require the use of several objects from the house. Some of the more light-hearted tasks entail taking a selfie with a film camera and preparing your backpack for going to school on Saturday, the way a student would do back then. Other tasks are more politically charged. While they vacuum the floor in the bedroom, the power goes off, and they have to use a broom. This is a specific reference to the austerity measures of the 1980s, when in order to speed up the payment of the foreign debt, Ceaușescu imposed restrictions on goods and utilities (Verdery 1996: 41–42). Cosmin explained to me that he wanted to organize this experience in an apartment because it allows a “learning by doing” approach in which interaction and the senses play an important role: “I show you pictures, sure pictures are nice too, but it is different when you enter a space that also smells in a way from that old furniture” (Cosmin, personal communication, September 11, 2020).

On a continuum from active to passive visiting experiences, the Ceaușescu Mansion is closer to the passive end. During my visit in 2017 the tour guide took me through all the rooms open to the public and gave me a lot of information about the origin of the objects, type of craftsmanship, gifts displayed, but also some mundane details about the habits of the Ceaușescu family and the rumors about the house that had been in circulation. The exhibition was organized in a “classic” way, with lanes for visitors delineated with retractable belts and signs indicating the name of each room and the furniture style.

While it makes sense not to allow the visitors to touch the objects because of their material value and—sometimes—uniqueness, the attempts to construct a realistic image of the lifestyle of the Ceaușescu family are more ambiguous. The curators tried to make the space look like an inhabited one with various degrees of success. For example, the dressing room displays some of the clothes that Elena and Nicoale Ceaușescu usually wore



Photograph 3 -
Suit displayed
in the dressing
room of Elena and
Nicoale Ceaușescu.
Photo credits:
Maria Cristache.



(Photograph 3), and their bedroom has been left unchanged since December 22, 1989 when the couple ran away from Bucharest (Photograph 4). The dressing room offers quite a “staged” image, with suits displayed on mannequins and on hangers, but seeing their original pajamas and bed sheets in the shared bedroom is more effective in constructing a realistic image of their life in the past.

Besides being a tool for showing “life as it really was,” the interactive component also sheds light on relationships based on trust between the founders/ amateur curators and visitors. When I asked Ovidiu if he was comfortable leaving the visitors alone with the objects and to explore the space on their own, he said: “A person who comes to the museum is not a danger. I prefer to leave it like this because, if let’s say out of 100 people one is stupid, I would rather

Photograph 4 - Shared bedroom of Elena and Nicoale Ceaușescu. Photo credits: Maria Cristache.



that the stupid one breaks something than the other 99 suffer because of him and can't touch, search, and so on" (Ovidiu, personal communication, August 28, 2020). There were even a few theft incidents, but since people keep donating objects it has been easy to replace them so far.

At the same time, this points to the paradoxical value of objects that seem to be both scarce and abundant. Ovidiu set out to "rescue" things in danger of being discarded in order to preserve some memories of people's lived experiences under the socialist regime. The strong positive response received from people who keep donating things shows that, perhaps, it is not the objects that are in danger of disappearing, but the shared sense of cultural intimacy and of ownership over the recent past (Pohrib 2015: 9–10).

Trust plays an important role also in Raluca's approach at the Museum of Living in Communism. People who choose to spend the night in the apartment have to acknowledge, when communicating with her prior to their visit, that they understand that this is not a hotel with modern comforts, like Internet and new furniture, but a way of experiencing the life of a working-class family during socialism. Furthermore, the quite expensive collection of books, magazines, and newspapers—that have become rare items—adds a heritage value to the space. The seemingly mundane apartment thus becomes a museum that needs to be treated with respect.



Apolitical representations and political commentaries

Gille claims that the phenomenon of postcommunist nostalgia "symbolizes the evasion of talking about the past in the public sphere and in political terms" (2010: 284). This approach moves the focus

from the political content of nostalgia to more abstract reflections on how people, groups, and organizations talk publicly about the socialist past. I would argue that examining the explicit and implicit political stances taken by the exhibitions discussed in this article is still a necessary first step for understanding how these initiatives shape the ways in which the socialist past is remembered.

The Museum of the Communist Consumer and the Ceaușescu Mansion claim to offer an apolitical representation of socialism. Ovidiu says that he got the idea to open a museum of communism after hearing some of his friends complain that people wanted to get rid of objects from that period. However, he didn't want to represent communism from a political point of view, but as a lived experience of others and of himself.

Still the space has the potential to "speak" about several politically relevant topics. Some of the more unusual items from the collection at the Museum of the Communist Consumer are different toys—train cars, trucks, and pistols—built informally by the workers in Timișoara factories. Besides being examples of the production and circulation of goods in the secondary economy during socialism, these toys also elicit an emotional reaction—at least from Ovidiu, the founder, who describes them as "the most moving" in connection to the image of a child playing with these crude, unpolished objects.

There are also several imitations of products from the West, like the board game *Privatizare* (Photograph 5), the "communist" version of Monopoly. These imitations shed light on the complicated engagement with the real and imagined West through consumer goods (Bren and Neuburger 2012: 5). However, inside the exhibition there is no emphasis on the political relevance of these topics. It is up to the visitors to make these associations, based on their knowledge and experience of socialism.

The emphasis on the style of decoration,





Photograph 5 – *Privatizare*, Monopoly-type of board game displayed at the Museum of the Communist Consumer. Photo credits: Maria Cristache.

the origin, and value of objects and materials, as well as on the habits, routines, and interests of the former president indicate that the curators at the Ceaușescu Mansion tried to avoid politicizing things. Still the guided tour is sprinkled with information about the politics of consumption during socialism, although it does not articulate a message about it. A well-known rumor is that the master bedroom's en-suite bathroom has faucets, sinks, and mosaics made of gold when in fact these are only gold plated. The guide also gives details about what happened with the house during the 1989 Revolution, when people broke in and stole mostly food and electronics. These details point not only to the general economic scarcity of the 1980s, but also to how people related to the material environment around them through values and aspirations.

By contrast, the Museum of Living in Communism takes an explicit anti-nostalgic stand. This is how Raluca describes her motivation for starting this project:

Practically we very much forget what has happened to us, you know. Meaning that we end up in a nostalgia, embracing nostalgia for the communist times. Because some grandparent, parent comes and tells you,

"But in communism it was clean," or "In communism it was I don't know how," and "Come on, in communism we ate well. You had everything. You could get a hold of things." And like this, in this zone where nostalgia replaces truth, and we risk considering that this period was something else than it was, namely a terrible tragedy for the Romanian people. (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020)

In the Introduction to her book *Post-communist Nostalgia*, Todorova points to similar tendencies of the media to treat postcommunist nostalgia as a malady (2010: 2) and to look down on positive attitudes towards socialism (5). In the "Postscript" to the same book, Gille continues this discussion by underlining that postcommunist nostalgia is "social critique, however confused, hidden, subtle or cautious" (2010: 283).

At the same time, the exhibition includes a large print collection containing the children's and teenager's magazine *Cutezătorii*,²⁰ the newspaper *Scântea*,²¹ and different almanacs, as well as board games and movies from that period. This audio and visual material, together with the snacks and drinks associated with the socialist period appeal to people's bittersweet memories and to feelings of nostalgia.

During our conversation, Raluca often mentioned the lack of interest in and knowledge about the recent past in Romanian society as a gap that she wants to fill. She thinks that the older generation, who experienced socialism, wants to forget the past humiliations, while the younger one did not get to learn about this in school or to talk about it at home. By reconstructing the domestic space of a working-class family from socialism and opening it to the public, she comments on the (in)visible in the public memory. She also frames the everyday practices of looking, remembering, and living as a collective responsibility (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 8)

While this initiative succeeds in starting

a more accessible discussion about socialism at the level of quotidian practices, it does not leave much room for discussing the diversity of people's lived experiences. Todorova underlines the importance of taking seriously the memories of those who experienced communism and respecting "their claims of having lived a full and dignified life, in contrast to claims that all that is remaining from communism is a collection of exotic memories or that people had at best lived halfway normal lives" (2014: 5).

In this case, what the exhibition presents as communism seems to be equated with the last decade of the regime. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to think of the Museum of Living in Communism as a representation of the 1980s or of working-class life in the specific context of industrialization, urbanization, and labor's rebellion in Braşov.

Out of the four cases analyzed in this article, 80east is the most complex in terms of political commentary and positioning. As a civic education project, it sets out to teach students about democratic rights and freedom in contrast with their absence in the 1980s. Obviously, this is reflected in the types of tasks that the students have to complete. For example, they first listen to Ceauşescu's speech in which he blames hooligans for the protests in Timișoara and then to news from Radio Free Europe about how the army is shooting and killing protesters. After that, they have to write a letter to a friend from West Germany, using a coded language, in order to find out what is actually happening.

The project has been criticized in left-leaning circles for the accuracy of its representation of socialism, especially in relation to the space and the architectural style of the building.²² According to Cosmin, it has also been criticized for focusing too much on condemning communism in the same vein as anticommunist discourses do.

However, by integrating everyday practices, spaces, and objects in this educational experience, the project contributes

to a more nuanced discussion about the past. Here there is much more dialogue and input from the public than in "traditional" museums where visitors are presented with a unique narrative that leaves no room for interpretation (Bădică 2014: 97). What people expect to find in such a space strongly depends on their past experiences, current socioeconomic status, and political orientation. The fact that 80east provides the space for voicing diverging opinions is a good start.

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Conclusion

This article examines recent initiatives of remembering socialism in Romania by focusing on four exhibitions and/ or experiences launched in the 2010s. It engages with issues of representation through spaces and objects that have been part of the everyday life of several actors. It also examines the role of interactive experiences and how these exhibitions relate to politics.

While my analysis points to a few shortcomings of these exhibitions—such as the difficulty of building a nuanced account of socialism and the sometimes uncritical engagement with materiality—I would not dismiss them as removed from the sociopolitical context or as mere nostalgic representations. Behind each exhibition or experience there is a voice, collective or individual, reflected in practices of display, the selection and use of space, and the overall discourse of the founders and amateur curators.

I agree with Bădică's (2010) claim that things have improved in terms of nuance and accuracy of exhibitions, but that these new exhibitions are not completely divorced from early representations of communism as a "black hole." As Knell, MacLeod, and Watson argue, modern museums are not always the product of linear developments



“from cabinets of curiosity, through the disciplinary museum, to modern conceptions of the living, eco-, digital or post-museum” (2007: xix). The cases discussed here challenge the practices of display, (lack of) interaction with the public, or over-reliance on text found in “traditional” museums, but they also fall in some of the old traps, such as lack of reflection on their own positionality or assuming that material culture has a fixed meaning.

The representation and remembering of

socialism in Romania is shaping up to be quite a diverse field in terms of the experiences and perspectives covered. There is diversity within the field, but not so much within each specific experience or exhibition. Perhaps this is not surprising given the nature of the topic which is still fresh in the memory of many social actors. That is why collaboration between curators (professional *and* amateur) and critical engagement with the public are essential for understanding the complexity of the recent past.



NOTES

1. Light (2000) points to similar characteristics of the guided tours: the emphasis on physical dimension and scale, on (Romanian) materials and craftsmanship, and the fact that it is still a working political building. He criticizes the lack of information about the context, the history of the building, and about Ceaușescu's involvement in the project (171).

2. Corn puffs, made with cornmeal, salt, and oil.

3. Similar to sliced bologna.

4. Coffee substitute consumed especially in the 1980s.

5. Throughout this article, I use the term communism when quoting from or paraphrasing the interviews conducted with the museum founders/amateur curators who used this term exclusively and when quoting from or paraphrasing studies that use this term. When I refer to my own arguments I use the term socialism based on the distinction between communism (promised) and socialism (provided). Communism as a perfectly egalitarian society was never achieved in Romania, and it was continually postponed (Vais 2016: 24). Furthermore, the museum collections discussed here and my analysis of them are not focused exclusively on the totalitarian character of the regime in Romania through topics such as surveillance and scarcity. The cases discussed here shed light also on consumption practices, leisure, the design of goods, media products. Thus I consider the term socialism more appropriate for capturing the nuance of my argument.

6. In 2007 ICOM defined a museum as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves,

researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (“ICOM,” n.d.). A new definition has been discussed at the 2019 conference. It adds emphasis on inclusion, participation, transparency, multiple perspectives, and critical dialogue. However, voting to adopt or not this definition has been postponed. (For more information, see: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>)

7. For example, the article “Despre Ceaușescu numai de bine – la 30 de ani de la Revoluție” [Only good things about Ceaușescu – thirty years after the Revolution] by Cristina Modreanu; available at: <https://revistascena.ro/arte/despre-ceausescu-numai-de-bine-la-30-de-ani-de-la-revolutie/> (in Romanian).

8. Since the funding for the project ended and, with the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the curatorial team decided to stop renting the apartment in which the exhibition was organized and to put the objects in storage for now.

9. I use the term owner because the apartment that hosts the museum, as well as the furniture and objects found in it, belong to Raluca Feher. In the case of the Museum of the Communist Consumer, the space is private property of the founder, but the objects displayed are mostly acquired through donations.

10. Reports about Ceaușescu Mansion, the Museum of Living in Communism, and the Museums of the Communist Consumer and a video from the launching of the 80east project.

11. Nicolescu's discussion is based on fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2011 in the museum. Since then, the year 1962, when collectivization ended, has been added to the timeline, as well as the names of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu.

12. For example, by representing less explicit practices of resistance, embedded in everyday life, such as creative responses to scarcity or writing letters of complaint to institutions (Bach 2017: 79).

13. The exhibition is done in collaboration with The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism (<https://totalitarianism.ro/?lang=en>), under the authority of the Romanian Academy and The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICMER). (<https://www.iicmer.ro/en/home/>), a governmental structure that aims to analyze the communist regime and its consequences.

14. In English: Autonomous Direction for the Administration of State Protocol Assets. The Autonomous Direction is a legal entity functioning based on economic management and financial autonomy. Its purpose is to administer, preserve the integrity of and protect the assets that belong to the public

domain of the state ("Despre R.A.-A.P.P.S." n.d.).

15. For a complete list of collaborators and financing sources, see: <https://80east.ro/despre/>; <https://www.sprijina.ro/cauze/educatie-civica-intr-un-apartament-comunist> (in Romanian).

16. Upon request the museum could also be visited by adults. It was also used for different types of events and as a film set.

17. The 1987 revolt of factory workers from Brașov is one of the topics covered by Raluca during the guided tours at the museum.

18. 1980s apartment.

19. Related to Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime.

20. The Daring Ones.

21. The Sparkle.

22. In discussions on the Facebook pages of 80east and of Funky Citizens. For example, in the comments section of the video posted when 80east was launched (<https://fb.watch/4gvyLrhJZE/>).



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