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Postmemory sits in places: the relationship of young Romanians to the communist past

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ABSTRACT
Geographers have studied memory for decades, but there is currently a renewed interest in places of postmemory: sites to which memories of a past are connected, that engage those who have no living memory of the past in question. By combining a process-tracing approach to several post-communist surveys with in-depth interviews with members of the younger generation about their postmemories of the communist past, this paper explores places associated with postmemories of communism amongst young people in contemporary Romania, focusing on two types of place: (1) mega-constructions, prisons and deportation sites; and (2) sites connected to everyday life (home, shops, hospitals). The findings suggest that “postmemories in places” are reproduced and co-produced by younger people in a nuanced and complex way. Spatial postmemories of communism are not simply formed by parental or grandparental experiences of communism itself, but are also shaped by experiences of the initial post-communist period. Younger people’s complex range of “postmemories in places” toward the communist past are politically multivalent: postmemory of specific sites related to the cultural welfare of the communist past did not necessarily indicate a political commitment to its restoration amongst interviewees; and postmemories of political violence associated with particular sites did not preclude unilateral pride in national achievements prior to 1989. Furthermore, “postmemory in place” is not a passive process, but one that is shaped by both a critical attitude to the responses of older generations toward particular places, and the challenges of the capitalist present.

Introduction

Memory has long been a subject of interest in the social sciences (Nora 1989; Halbwachs 1992), with a broad and diverse body of literature on geographies of memory specifically (Alderman and Dwyer 2004; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Tolia-Kelly 2004; Legg 2004; Till 2005; Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Legg 2007; Till 2012; Drozdzewski, De Nardi, and Waterton 2016). More recently,
postmemory has emerged as a domain of investigation, as researchers have become more aware of the collective, cultural persistence of memory across generations, including by younger people who have no direct recollection of the events in question. The spatial aspects of postmemory encompass younger people’s recollections of a wide variety of particular places, from those related to infrastructural mega-constructions to those of ordinary, everyday life. Additionally, spatial postmemory is shaped by many different influences, one of which is interaction with older generations (Vâran and Creţan 2017).

The relationship of postmemories to particular places is under-researched in the social sciences (including human geography). This paper contributes to debates about the geographies of memory (Derek and Dwyer 2004; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Till 2005; Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Legg 2007; Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012; Drozdzewski, De Sarah, and Waterton 2016) by developing knowledge about the importance of place to postmemory formation. The paper highlights how both single sites (Vâran and Creţan 2018) and a wider range of spaces of memory (see Creţan et al. 2018; Light, Creţan, and Dunca 2019; Light, Creţan, and Dunca 2021) contribute to “postmemory in place” formation. Our findings also have relevance to post-communist memory in Central and Eastern Europe (Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002; Light 2004; Forest, Johnson, and Till 2004; Light and Young 2010, 2015; Young and Light 2016), a field in which most existing studies focus on the notion of “the nation” and the role of nationalism in communism. However, this literature does not emphasize the importance of place to postmemory. By contrast, we advance the existing literature by highlighting that postmemories of communism involve a complex combination of received narratives, especially from the family, that are inflected by the very different social, economic and political realities of the present. Therefore, our aim is to discover how particular places convey individual and collective memories of nostalgia, becoming postmemories.

As Marianne Hirsch (1996) argues, “postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its objects or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation”, meaning that postmemory is “shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created” (662). Hirsch limits postmemory to memories of cultural trauma, with no role for non-traumatic postmemories, a move that much current literature follows. Our study, by contrast, considers a broader range of postmemories than Hirsch. However, as the current younger generation did not directly experience the communist past, their memories are not straightforwardly nostalgic as they cannot be nostalgic for a historical period that they did not witness. Additionally, our research revealed that place plays an important role in postmemories of “the generation after communism”, which we refer to as postmemory in place.
By combining a process-tracing approach to several post-communist surveys with in-depth interviews with members of the younger generation about their postmemories of the communist past, our analysis focuses on postmemories of two different types of places. Firstly, we explore postmemories of what we might describe as “high-profile” communist places in Romania, sites that are linked to the political regime and sometimes associated by the older generation with a sense of idealization of the past (Boym 2001; Ekman and Linde 2005; Bartmanski 2011; Todorova and Gille 2012). Secondly, we are interested in places of everyday life under communism, such as shops and home, and the affective responses that these elicit from younger people. Our research seeks to answer the following questions:

(a) What postmemories do younger people have, and how are they constructed in relation to particular places associated with the Communist era?

(b) By what major mechanism/s are the postmemories of the younger generation shaped, and what are the main environments (home, school, media/internet) influencing their formation?

Post-communist “postmemory in place” and nostalgia for the communist past

Geographies of postmemory cross the borders of individual experience, knitting together families and wider information in a shared understanding of history and place. By nature, postmemory is fluid and malleable, with new configurations of affect emerging in response to shifting social, economic, and political circumstances. As Steven Hoelscher and Derek Alderman (2004) argue, the production of space intersects with the shared dimension of memory, but also with the production of contested identities: “Together, memory and place conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities” (348) – and the often-rigorous contestation of those identities. In this paper, we will explore the responses of younger people to two types of space associated with communism. The first type consists of geographical sites associated with the official spatial and architectural exertion of power by the communist regime and include key buildings in Bucharest, and infrastructure projects, for example prisons that were used to detain dissidents, and the Bărăgan area (the south-eastern part of Romania, to which large cohorts of people were deported in the early 1950s). The second type is associated with ordinary spaces of everyday life under communism: shops, home and hospitals.

Many of the places that we selected are associated with political violence. For the purpose of this paper, we define political violence as force that is exerted in order to achieve political goals, in particular the seizure or maintenance of political power (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020). Such violence runs on
a continuum from physical acts to more quotidian aspects of life under communism, such as the long queues that became a “way of life” and “mode of survival” for many (Petrescu 2017, 205). This broad definition means that the term can be used to describe the strategic use of coercive or oppressive power in support of ideological aims, which can stretch into the domain of everyday life (Valentino 2014). Importantly for our argument, such violence can take direct spatial form: for instance, the effort to impose communist agricultural policies on unwilling peasant populations via the collectivization of agriculture as a form of radical land redistribution (Valentino 2004). In the same vein but in a different context, recent work in cultural geography has shown that memory and postmemory can be grounded in the “wounded places” of cities (Till 2012), defined as densely populated areas that have been structured by particular histories of displacement, physical destruction, and social trauma resulting from state violence.

Some of these spaces have particular symbolic resonance, in the form of architectures, monuments, and memorials associated with dominant power. Under communism, national identity and top-down public planning were entwined, with the result that “public involvement in the re-making of places of memory is especially important in post-totalitarian societies” (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 351; see also Benjamin, Johnson, and Till 2004). However, it is not always easy or straightforward to leave the past behind, and memory continues to play an important role in the construction and maintenance of identities in post-conflict and postwar arenas, and the ways in which such identities are inflected by and articulated through place (Drozdzewski, De Sarah, and Waterton 2016). We consider that such memories are more memories in places than memories of places because memories in places may be constituted by physical locations as well as emotions, events, and the body. Our ontological position on the terminology of postmemory in place is influenced by Edward Casey, Doreen Massey, and Arturo Escobar. In his “Public memory in place and time’, Edward Casey (2004) affirms that places are “the ground and resource, the location and scene of the remembering we do in common” (36). Places “harbor and hold memories of many kinds” (Casey 2004, 39) and public memory “needs a place of enactment, a scene of instantiation” and is always “subject to revision” (Casey 2004, 38). On the other hand, Doreen Massey (1995) considers that places are “constructed out of articulations of social relations (trading connections, the unequal links of colonialism, thoughts of home) which are not only internal to that locale” (Massey 1995, 183). She also argues that public memory in and of place is always in competition with other types of memory: place is not only a subject of struggle, but also a site of struggle. In the same vein but in the specific context of the social movement of black communities of the Pacific rainforest region of Colombia, Arturo Escobar (2001) reveals that place has become an important site of struggle for black communities. Therefore, paraphrasing his idea that culture sits in places and Keith Basso’s
(1996) notion that *wisdom sits in places*, the empirical data of our study suggests that *postmemory sits in places* too. This does not mean that postmemory is restricted to places, however. As Arturo Escobar (2001) puts it:

This means recognizing that place, body, and environment integrate with each other; that places gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations. (143)

Furthermore, Massey (1995) suggests that the past of a place is open to multiple forms of reading. Memory does not only enact on landscapes, on different sites, but is itself embedded and shaped by landscapes and the environment. This dynamic understanding allows for a more fluid process of interactions between memory and place. Therefore, memories signal the dynamic nature of the social acts and processes (Opp and Walsh 2000). As Henri Lefebvre (1991) postulated, a history of social space “must account for both representational spaces and representations of space, but above all for their interrelationships and their links with social practice” (116).

Postmemories in place move beyond straightforward recall to encompass imaginative investment and creation. By taking place as a major category of our analysis we need to engage with the empirical richness which delves into layers of context and detail in acknowledging how younger people’s postmemory exposes today the lived experiences of those who inhabited and remembered those places. Cresswell and Hoskins (2008) engage with the idea that “places are a complicated mixture of fixity and flow, stability and change.” (395) In this respect, we can move forward and state that postmemories in place are not simply locations. In Edward Casey’s terms (1997), places are “eventmental, something in process” (337), a view similar to Escobar’s (2001) articulation that “place, more an event that a thing, is characterized by openness rather than by a unitary self-identity.” (143) Places and (post)memories are always in a state of becoming, of being worked on, struggled over. Some bear repeating, others are forgotten or ignored.

The broader humanities and social science literature on postmemory and nostalgia has usually ignored the space/place relationship. As Marianne Hirsch defines it, postmemory is a form of memory because its connection to its source is mediated through an imaginative creation and not through recollection, meaning that postmemory is formed and shaped by traumatic events that cannot be fully understood and re-created by “the generation after” (Hirsch 1996, 662). However, this definition and her later reshaped definition (Hirsch 2012) focus exclusively on traumatic aspects of memory and tend to ignore non-traumatic recollections of the past and the role of space/place. Our definition of “postmemory in place” designates the relationship of the younger generation toward both culturally traumatic and non-traumatic memories of past spaces of which they have no direct recollection. Stories, behaviors, images and artifacts can all be important stimuli for post-communist post-memory in place.
As Svetlana Boym (2001) has argued, nostalgia constitutes an equally important affective response. It is a multi-faceted concept across multiple dimensions: it can express a desire for the restoration of an older order (and its most redolent spaces) as the embodiment of a perfect society, but it can also take a more reflective form, that sees the past as unrepeatable, yet affectively laden with significance. For Boym, the former of these is often linked to wider projects of nationalism, while the latter is a more individual and cultural phenomenon, often connected to projects of self-discovery. On the other hand, Todorova and Gille (2012) also note an ambivalence to nostalgia, arguing that it can comprise a longing for order and the security of guaranteed jobs and housing, and a specific form of sociability or “togetherness” but also a disagreement on actions of state violence (see also Ekman and Jonas 2005; Bartmansky 2011). They agree that while nostalgia can take the form of a protest against the present and a genuine desire for a return to the past, it can also be compatible with, and even supportive of, the transition to democracy. Sometimes this is due to the specificity of the memory in question: for instance, members of the older generation sometimes recall their schooling in terms of “an intensive socialization inside and outside the school through sports, games and other leisure activities” that created strong bonds between individuals (Petrescu 2017, 201), without desiring any return to the communist era. Nostalgia can therefore be more ambivalent than it at first appears, indicating praise for certain aspects of a remembered past, while not precluding condemnation of others. A critical attitude toward communism can therefore accompany a link between democracy and memory toward the Romanian communist regime (Tismăneanu 2008).

In Central and Eastern Europe, therefore, space-related (post)memories are politically multivalent. For some, they can have a more overt political or ideological motivation, for example connecting to a deliberate resistance to “red nostalgia” on the part of the younger generation or to a continuing commitment to communist ideals. For others, they can be connected to simpler, more “ordinary” recollections of a past that was replete with austerity, shortages, and harassment (Czepżyński 2008). This latter perspective tends to be lost in studies that focus on post-communist memories exclusively in terms of the (communist) state and national communism (Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002; Light 2004; O’Neill 2009; Light and Young 2010). Such an emphasis is understandable: Romanian communist regimes highlighted the importance of national communism for the development of the country, inscribing symbolic state power into geographical spaces (e.g. street names, monuments, infrastructure projects). However, such a focus tends to ignore postmemories about places of mega-constructions and everyday experiences related to local places.

The question of conduits for postmemory is a complex one. Family, friendship networks and school education play a role, but, as Mihelj (2017) contends, post-communist nostalgia is also influenced by the way in which the media portrays communism, with internet and telecommunication technologies
enabling recollections to travel across large historical and geographical distances, enabling a modern form of sharing beyond “real life” experiential connections (see also Landsberg 2004). Questions about memory formation also raise questions of the form in which content is relayed. Stories form an important vehicle for memory work: Bruner (1990) states that the “typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form” (56), while Laanes and Meretoja (2021) go further, arguing that cultural memory requires forms of structured narrative. However, geographers also point to the significance of visual and material cultures in memory and postmemory. As Tolia-Kelly (2004) rightly showed, “through time these materials shift in meaning, ecologies become concentrated in iconic form, distorted, extended, enhanced through new contexts, and different moments” (326).

**Methodology**

We deployed a mixed methodology to investigate postmemories of communism amongst Romanian youth, combining the collection of new data via interviews with a process-tracing approach (Collier 2011) that reinterprets existing data on postmemory. As the role of process tracing is to establish whether, and how, a potential cause (or even potential causes) influenced a particular change or specific changes, we are interested in comparing our in-depth interview data with data from previous post-communist surveys, to see if the last decade(s) of the post-communist period could have influenced changes in the postmemory of younger Romanians.

During our research, we uncovered several sociological surveys, conducted mainly in the 2010s, studying the perception of the communist past among young Romanians (Bădescu et al. 2010; INSCOP 2013). Though none of these reflected on the spatial aspects of postmemory, they did consistently find that the younger generation were nostalgic for the job security and the housing politics of the communist period. We began by collating the results of these existing investigations to gain an outline picture against which we could compare our own data, while content analysis also determined areas where there were gaps in the existing knowledge. We selected two existing datasets as especially salient: from Open Democracy (INSCOP 2013; see also Beșliu 2014) and Deutsche Welle (Bădescu et al. 2010; see also Arun 2011). The Open Democracy’s article was based on an opinion poll conducted by INSCOP Barometer (INSCOP 2013), a Romanian research institute in Bucharest, in November 2013, entitled The truth about Romania. Bădescu et al.’s was grounded in a Soros Foundation Romania (SFR) study, Civic and political involvement of the youth, which took place in 2010 (Bădescu et al. 2010). We selected these datasets because both studies surveyed samples that were representative of the general population, with younger people well represented. INSCOP investigated 1,055 people from 37 Romanian counties (out of a total of 44)
and Bucharest. Three hundred of these participants were aged between 18 and 35. The Soros Foundation survey was conducted by a collective of political scientists lead by Gabriel Bădescu (for details see Bădescu et al. 2010). It focused on children, collecting the views of 5,861 pupils in their 8th to 12th year of study from 86 high schools across Romania. Participants were surveyed on their opinions and values, as well as on their civic and political behavior. Questions probed their views on both communist and post-communist Romania.

On the basis of this research, we developed our own interview questions, investigating attitudes to everyday life under communism. There were two aspects to our investigation. Firstly, we conducted a series of questions to assess understandings of the past among younger people, and particularly to determine whether participants approached collective memories with nostalgia. Secondly, we interrogated attitudes in two specific areas: recollections of major events and buildings; and understandings of everyday life under communism. Our methodology made use of semi-structured interviews with nine open-ended, four dichotomous, three multiple-choice and one ranking question. COVID-19 restrictions meant that these had to be conducted by e-mail, following an established methodology (Meho 2006).

Interviews took place between 15 July and 15 August 2021 and all participants were third year Geography students attending the West University of Timișoara. Forty-two students were invited to participate, of which 30 took part: 19 women and 11 men (Table 1). Respondents came from various places across western Romania (15 from urban, 15 from rural areas; of the urban students, seven were from Timișoara). All had some prior educational knowledge of Romanian communism, having studied the subject in an Economic Geography seminar during their first year. Three had grand-grandparents who lived in the Romania-Serbia border area where the deportations from Banat to Bărașgan happened in 1951. Five had forefathers whose lands were expropriated for the agricultural cooperatives. Twenty-one out of the 30 participants had parents and grandparents who worked in different industrial factories in communism, while another nine had parents working in the service sector (teachers, doctors). All participants were aged between 19 and 27, meaning that the oldest were born a decade after the change of political regime in Romania.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Residence (urban/rural)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 persons</td>
<td>&lt; 20 years 56.66%</td>
<td>Male 37%</td>
<td>Urban 50%</td>
<td>Romanians 90%</td>
<td>Orthodox 64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21–25 years 26.66%</td>
<td>Female 63%</td>
<td>Rural 50%</td>
<td>Hungarians 2%</td>
<td>Baptist 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25–30 years 16.66%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Serbian 2%</td>
<td>Pentecostal 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other ethnic groups 6%</td>
<td>Catholic 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.
Participants were sent three documents – the interview questions, an information sheet explaining the study and the intended use for the data, and an ethical consent sheet for the interview. Each participant understood that they could respond to whatever questions they wanted, and that they could end their participation at any time. All students were given the opportunity to ask questions via e-mail before the survey began. Interviews were returned between 1 day and 7 days after mailing. The overall response rate to interview questions was 92%.

Interview data was analyzed using a combination of Mullet’s (2018) discourse analysis and Bryman’s (2016) thematic analysis. Both authors of this paper read all of the data several times, before thematically coding key passages, and tabulating these. We aimed to determine a participant’s attitude toward communism, assessing reactions to specific aspects of communist history, and determining the degree of intergenerational solidarity and/or critique in youthful postmemory of the communist era.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data are from young people from a specific area of Romania. Second, Timișoara itself has a unique position within post-communist history, as the birthplace of the 1989 Revolution. The city has a strongly anti-communist history, which may have influenced young respondents’ memories of communism. Our findings were possibly influenced by the fact that none of our respondents came from Bucharest or from any of the key geographical sites that we used as prompts for discussion. However, since our research focuses on postmemory, not on direct experience, the data are useful and valid to study the ways in which memory is reproduced.

The nature of people’s experience of communism

The communist regime in Romania came to power in 1947, following the falsification of the results of the 1946 election and the forced abdication of King Michael I. Corrupt local officials established a “civil guard” to maintain law and order in the early years of the regime, a time of severe repression (Tismăneanu 2009). The Securitate incarcerated opponents, including prominent members of civil society and those who had been designated “class enemies”, in prisons or labor camps. The Securitate was the internal secret police of Romania, set up in 1948 and disbanded during the Revolution in 1989. It was a ruthless instrument of oppression which used fear as a weapon for controlling the population (Deletant 1993).

In the late 1940s and in early 1950s all private property was confiscated in Romania, and a propaganda campaign against democracy and capitalism attempted to conceal problems ranging from severe food shortages to human rights abuses, culminating in the notorious 1969 Decree of “support” for families, which outlawed contraception and abortion (Kligman 1998). Nationalization led
to loss of private housing, and agricultural collectivization dispossessed thousands of families from the land. In June 1951, more than 4,000 people (mainly ethnic Romanians, Serbians and Germans) were deported from 258 villages situated in the Banat region, in the south-west of the country at the Romania-Yugoslavia border. Considered a threat to the communist regime, they were forced at gunpoint to migrate to Bărăgan, and ordered to build a new community there from scratch. Left without shelter, many did not survive the harsh conditions, but those who did so built 18 new villages (Marineasa and Vighi 1994).

In 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu became leader of the Socialist Republic, and began to detach Romania from its ties to Moscow, forging a new Romanian nationalism, in which the communist state became the bearer of Romanian national identity and the guardian of national sovereignty (King 2007). Planned industrialization, a socialist housing program and full employment generated opportunities in cities, leading to migration away from poor, rural areas. On the other hand, rural mining settlements and planned industrial areas enjoyed a higher standard of living. For instance, miners had secure, well-paid jobs in communist times (Rîșteiu, Crețan and O’Brien 2021). Conditions began to deteriorate in the late 1970s and the 1980s, as attempts to make Romania self-sufficient led to severe food rationing and power shortages. Ceaușescu responded by endeavoring to establish himself at the center of a cult of personality, with spectacular visual events demonstrating his power and authority.

The communist period is recognized for several construction projects which remain important spatial loci for postmemory today. Their huge size and national significance have not been equaled by anything built after the 1989 Revolution. They are remembered as places of trauma, since they functioned as labor camps for political prisoners after the model of the Soviet gulags, and many innocent people were killed or died due to the harshness of conditions. For the purposes of this research, we focused on five: the Danube-Black Sea canal, the Palace of the Parliament, the Iron Gates dam, the Bicaz dam, and the Transfăgărășanul road.

The Danube-Black Sea Canal is one of the most important Communist-era mega-constructions in Romania. It was designed to play a pivotal role in the socio-economic development of the country by offering a shorter and more viable route to the sea. Construction of the canal was completed in several stages until 1984, the most challenging for the workers being the first, between 1949 and 1953. During its construction, thousands of political detainees died in several forced labor camps situated along a 65–70 km stretch, where they were held and put to work in inhumane conditions.

The Palace of the Parliament (known in communist times as the House of the People) is the second largest building in the world, famous for its ornate interior. It was envisioned by Nicolae Ceaușescu as a personal residence and constitutes one of the major “left-over” spaces of state socialism in Romania (Light and
Young 2010). It was built between 1984 and 1997 and its construction entailed the demolition of almost a quarter of the old city, including private homes, as well as monasteries, hospitals, and factories.

The Iron Gates dam on the Danube River is a navigation and hydroelectric power generation project conducted jointly by Romania and Yugoslavia between 1965 and 1972. It helped to navigate a formerly perilous sector of the Danube, as well as improving power generation capacity (Văran and Crețan 2017). The project was a major construction site which involved the relocation of a town and the submergence of an inhabited Island, Ada-Kaleh.

The dam on the Bicaz river (in the eastern Romanian Carpathians) was built between 1950 and 1960 using the forced labor of political prisoners held in three working camps. In terms of its dimensions and electricity production it is the ninth largest hydropower dam in Europe. Its construction involved the relocation of 15,000 people and the loss of 22 villages.

The Transfăgărășanul road is a 150 km highway crossing the Carpathians, built between 1970 and 1974. It was constructed after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union in 1968, to ease the potential passage of troops north-south through the Carpathians in case of a potential assault on Romania. It is therefore associated with Romanian national defense strategy under Ceaușescu, who was praised by the West for not participating in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Sadly, many workers and soldiers also died during its construction.

Nostalgia for communism: results from previous surveys

The survey data suggests that postmemory of Communism amongst Romanian youth is redolent with nostalgia. In particular, there is a common perception amongst young people that almost every family had secure work, affordable housing, and access to a high-quality education under communism. A 2010 survey by the Soros Foundation (see Bădescu et al. 2010) suggests that 38% of students thought the communist period superior to the present, though 28% admitted they had never studied it. On the other hand, the 2013 INSCOP survey (INSCOP 2013) reveals that 47.5% of respondents to a 2014 survey had a positive attitude toward Nicolae Ceaușescu.

As Raluca Beșliu (2014) argues, such results may be heavily colored by perceptions of current pressures, and by a disillusionment with modern life in Romania. Contemporary politicians are perceived to have failed to “ensure Romania’s internal and international development and improve living standards, in contrast to some of Ceaușescu’s internal and international achievements” (Beșliu 2014). However, Beșliu also shows that these high proportions of young people with nostalgic postmemory may reflect a tendency to emphasize basic material security (such as an emphasis on secure work, housing, decent living conditions, adequate wages, and the ability to afford a vacation) over political conditions (totalitarianism, repression).
Analyzing spatial themes in postmemory

Postmemories in places connected to major communist buildings, infrastructures and deportation sites

In our own interviews, we asked how spaces of communism are remembered by younger Romanians. Several participants expressed nostalgia for Ceaușescu and criticized contemporary Romanian political leaders. When questioned about their feelings toward central communist buildings and places, they gave positive responses. One female interviewee stated:

I heard that Ceaușescu used the money from the International Monetary Fund to create buildings that we enjoy even today, such as the Parliament Palace, the Transfăgărășan road, the Iron Gates hydropower plant (Ro12).

Another female respondent also remembered the mega-projects of the communist times:

I think that the projects of that period are unique in the contemporary history of Romania . . . for instance the electric power plants, the Transfăgărășan road, the Danube-Black Sea channel (Ro19).

This mixture of critique and nostalgia was noticeable where more grandiose communist infrastructure and building projects were concerned, with respondents both recognizing the oppressive use of forced labor and the propaganda value of the sites, while also responding with some slightly warmer feelings toward their perceived symbolic importance for the nation. Many male interviewees regarded large infrastructure projects as places for the projection of power: some saw this negatively, arguing that they were propaganda projects that relied on suffering and forced labor; others were more ambivalent, arguing their importance as national spaces, but acknowledging that they were built with great sacrifices. For both male and female interviewees, such projects were a stimulus for nationalist pride: “in those times Romania prospered and I believe that most buildings were built in that period, and we somehow ‘modernized’ and we became more known and more respected in Europe” (Ro29). The idea of pride in nationalist communism therefore inflects postmemory, in keeping with the findings of other studies related to the notions of nation and nationalist communism (Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002; Forest, Johnson, and Till 2004; Light 2004; O’Neill 2009; Light and Young 2010).

Respondents spoke appreciatively of the beauty of some communist architecture, though some contrasted this aesthetic achievement with the political and material conditions of its construction:

All the important buildings from Romania are a testimony for the extraordinary ambitions of some designers and builders of genius, but especially for some human sacrifices difficult to imagine. (Ro4).
Others opposed the spectacular architectural display of power to the harshness of everyday life. One female interviewee condemned the communist regime’s investment in visually impressive infrastructure as evidence of its neglectful attitude to ordinary people:

I believe they were more superficial displays of power than an absolute necessity for Romania. The leaders should have been more interested in the life of ordinary citizens who lived miserable lives, not in grand monuments. Plus, many of these projects were constructed by prisoners or deported workers, which transformed them into work camps. (Ro27)

Interestingly, very few of our respondents had visited any of the famous sites that were mentioned. Their reaction to them drew heavily on fragments or precipitates of memories from family, friends, the internet and other media, or their school education. Whereas previous survey data contained little reflection on the production and reproduction of space (Bădescu et al. 2010; INSCOP 2013), precipitates of memories connected to mega-construction sites drew forth more critical responses that showed an awareness of the labor conditions that made them possible, and the regime of political violence that sustained it. We noticed from the responses of our interviewees that the Transfăgărășan road, the Danube-Black Sea canal, and the Iron Gates hydropower dam were especially seen by the younger generation as spaces of state power. These spaces of postmemories carry all sorts of markers of its past, things that convey historical understandings. They reflect material evidence and that the scales of time are multiplied as more narratives of younger generation claim them as embedded traces in place. Younger people negotiate their importance – highlighting their values or contesting the meanings attached to those communist infrastructures and the places they represent. These are not only the physical environment that surrounds the mega-sites but are an imagined landscape that links those sites to a Romanian past identity.

Memories of communist prisons (Aiud, Gherla, Pitești, Jilava, Sighet and Periprava) provoked negative reactions, suggesting a strong strand of post-memory associated with these places, which participants understood as loci of torture, incarceration, and sometimes execution without fair trial:

I believe that they were rather veritable torture camps, where many innocent people who had been arrested for no reason were sent and held in totally inhuman conditions. I was personally very affected by some stories I heard about the prison in Pitesti and I believe that the entire personnel of this prison are comparable to war criminals. (Ro17)

I think in the communist prisons living conditions were unimaginable, everything was diabolically planned, the inmates were tortured to death, burned, put to work in camps until they passed out, they were starved. (Ro4)

In other words, participants associated communist prisons with oppression. Therefore, postmemories are attached to what the communist state did inside these sites/buildings.
Participants were also highly critical of the confiscation of property, and the deportation of opponents of the regime to forced labor camps, such as those used to build the mega-infrastructure project of the Black-Sea Canal:

Although it promoted equality, it was not fair that certain persons had their land, house, animals or other property taken away. For example, my grandmother was a victim of the deportation in Bărăgan, being removed by force from her home, when she was 7 ... and her father was sent away to Jilava prison. (Ro12)

The deportations to the Danube-Black Sea canal were harsh, because of the working camps, where political adversaries were sent to work in inhuman conditions (Ro21)

As the first of these quotations indicates, many young people had historical post-memory of places of trauma, despite having no direct personal experience of life under communism. Prisons such as Jilava, deportation sites (e.g. Bărăgan), and the Danube-Black Sea canal were perceived in terms of state violence and its disrespect for human rights. In conclusion, spaces where the political power of the communist regime was expressed, via infrastructure or architecture, are important spaces for postmemory amongst the younger generation. Yet even these precipitates of postmemory are nuanced: memories related to spaces of mega-constructions are shaped by the idea of a proud communist nationalist past, Romanian modernization, and collective sacrifice, but they are also seen as sites for the exertion of megalomaniac power, constructed with forced labor. Following our process-tracing approach by comparing these results with past surveys (Bădescu et al. 2010; INSCOP 2013), we noticed that the narratives of our interviewees reveal a more nuanced position on the cultural benefits of communism, which stand in opposition to those arguing that postmemory is more a site for the recollection of cultural welfare.

Approaching “the local”: Postmemories in places and politics of everyday life in communism

Following further our process-tracing approach we noticed that previous surveys have tended not to focus on local spatial aspects of postmemory. Where it is raised, it tends to be more everyday activities, rather than place-related projects, that are discussed.

Interviewee perceptions of social life in communism often centered on the mistrust generated by the communist political regime and in relation to certain sites (home, shops), but again with surprisingly divergent results. Employment, educational opportunities, and secure housing in new apartment blocks were ranked high among communism’s achievements, reflecting a combination of parental views and the precariousness of the transitional economy: “the educational system was very good, and people had secure work after graduation, young families were given an apartment in new blocks” (Ro19). Therefore,
housing (including new apartment blocks) and schools are spaces that are associated with certain kinds of postmemory. This echoes the findings of previous surveys (Bădescu et al. 2010; INSCOP 2013).

There was a divide in the relative weight that our participants gave to the role of political power and everyday life in their discussion. As we noticed on the previous section, male respondents tended to focus more on the role of political power, while female interviewees focused more on everyday life. However, there was no consistent critique or politics associated with this. For example, a female respondent contrasted the spectacular display of communist power with the materiality of everyday life: “on the outside we had parades and spectacular events where everybody seemed happy and satisfied with the regime, but on the inside people lived difficult lives, with many shortages” (Ro17). Another female interviewee explained that “People queued patiently at local shops, even if waiting periods were long, stores were supplied only with basic food, and the gatherings for the glorification of the president and others brought satisfaction only to those for which were organized” (Ro28).

Examples such as queuing at local shops are reiterated by many respondents. “The local” (shop) is not seen as a simple place but rather a crucial aspect of addressing the slippages and nuances between the politics of postmemory and the politics of place. The uncertainty and even the fluidity that characterize the remakings of places and postmemory span disruptions that are visible within localized contexts of communism. Therefore, such postmemories of neighborhood landscape offer different meanings when situated within local spaces and local memories.

Arturo Escobar (2001) stated that the production of culture and place can be analyzed not only “from the side of the global, but of the local; not from the perspective of its abandonment but of its critical affirmation; not only according to the flight from places, whether voluntary or forced, but of the attachment to them.” (147–148). Therefore, critical affirmation of places and place attachment are important issues when approaching the local.

Other postmemories concerned the harm associated with the actions of the Securitate on the local level, the lack of freedom, and the ban on contraception and abortion. For instance, one interviewee speculated: “I think it must have been very strange, as they could not trust anyone, and society was grounded on a continuous lack of trust and doubt … Home phones were under surveillance, one could feel uncomfortable in his own house being followed by securiști” (Ro7). Therefore, postmemories of home are defined by meanings, sentiments and stories. Some of these postmemories are related to the psychological pressures of the Securitate rather than by a set of memories about geographical coordinates of home. Additionally, postmemory not only acts on local places like home but is itself embedded, inscribed, and shaped by the environment of the past, by certain events. This dynamic understanding allows for a more fluid interactions between postmemory and place.
Furthermore, for some young people, the problem was the exertion of top-down state power: “In the communist era, I heard that social life was influenced by those who were in power, because people were not allowed to have freedom of opinion, and if they did something wrong the authorities took measures” (Ro29). For others, suspicion came from within the community itself: “there was always the fear that people could be heard and that the Securitate could harm them or their families. People also denounced their neighbors, friends or even family members” (Ro27).

Statements citing the infringement of civil and human rights were common across both genders. One male interviewee stated that:

Lack of freedom was the worst aspect of communism, because it breaks one of the most important human rights. People felt wronged, humiliated, as if they were living in a prison, and the Securitate was to blame for this (Ro18).

The Securitate was therefore depicted in the postmemory of the younger people as a state instrument of oppression usually associated with lack of freedom.

On the other hand, some interviewees also praised population growth under communism, although this was achieved at the expense of women’s rights, that “women were rewarded for having many children, being considered hero mothers” (Ro28). As Gail Kligman (1998) argues, a draconian pro-natalist policy was implemented in the late 1960s in Romania. Women were rewarded for having more children, but they were also banned from having abortions. Another female interviewee critiqued the effect of communist pro-natalist policy stating that “it was horrible that women died in hospitals trying to get rid of unwanted pregnancies as they could not get contraception and abortion was illegal, leaving many young children orphans” (Ro30). Therefore, hospitals came to the fore as an important site of remembering communist pro-natalist policy, as a space of postmemory affirmation for women who lived in communist times.

To sum up, besides postmemories related to spaces of infrastructural mega-constructions, the younger Romanian generation has postmemories of everyday life under communism which are stimulated by images of ordinary sites (home, shops, schools, hospitals). Many interviewees discussed the ways in which policy had impacted on the local places tightly connected to older relations’ lives, in particular the sites affected directly by actions of the Securitate, and by pro-natalist policies. The social production of postmemories is therefore produced in ambivalence: some younger people praised the communist regime for offering good education, housing stability, and pro-natalist communist laws, yet nonetheless criticized the Securitate, the long queues for food, and the ban on abortion. Additionally, local sites such as home, school, shops and hospitals became reiterated and co-produced as postmemories in places. Following our process-tracing approach we can notice that this
ambivalence is poorly captured by previous surveys. Those surveys highlighted more some postmemories of the good aspects of everyday life in communist times and less their connection to particular sites.

**Visual and material cultures as mechanisms for postmemory formation**

What were the sources of postmemories of Communism amongst young Romanians? How passively or critically has memory been relayed from generation to generation? We asked participants directly, and many reported that their knowledge was derived from a variety of sources: family, school, the mass media/the internet, but that family was the most significant.

This suggests that postmemory is heavily shaped by home environments and by the narratives of parents and grandparents, many of which contain elements of nostalgia (Todorova and Gille 2012; Wildschut, Sedikides, and Robertson 2018). Respondents mentioned material and cultural sources, especially family photographs of everyday life, as important, whether taken at home, for special occasions or celebrations, at work in the factories, or visiting friends, family, and tourist attractions across Romania:

I was shown by my parents some photos when they were young. I remember one picture with my mother as a pioneer and of the colleagues in uniform in school. They looked funny, all dressed up the same, but I found this aspect interesting. (Ro13)

Furthermore, a female respondent stated that: “My grandfather was a welder and worked in a big factory. He showed me many times pictures of him in the factory and when they had big celebrations for May 1st (i.e. the International Day of Work). (Ro16).

Besides photographs, respondents mentioned also other communist artifacts and “memorabilia” preserved in the home, such as old furniture, books, toys, megaphones, old TV sets and radios. Another female respondent stated that “my grandparents have all sorts of objects from their youth: a TV, radios, a heater, a telephone … They also have magazines and newspapers. My grandmother has a collection of nice postcards from 1960–1970” (Ro18). Several respondents presented the importance of communist newspapers that their forefathers still preserved, like Scinteia (the newspaper with the widest circulation in communist Romania), which presented mega-construction sites as great achievements of the regime. One male respondent (Ro22) specifically recalled the first page of a Scinteia issue highlighting the inauguration of the Black-Sea Canal in 1984, years before they were born.

As Tolia-Kelly (2004) rightly shows, home artifacts are important for postmemory formation, acting as “connective markers to geographical nodes of identification” (Tolia-Kelly 2004, 317). Such objects have symbolic value that shifts through time, reconstructing their past context as this occurs. The
activation of these symbols involves a process of remembering the wider space of the home, and its connections to social, political and economic structures of the past. In this way, the home is a locus of memory work.

Stories told by parents and grandparents constitute another important source of postmemory. Some include traumatic events, like queuing for hours to shop for food, land seizures, and oppression at the hands of the Securitate. Others are different, focusing on security, the consumption of different types of communist food, and going on vacation. In all those stories, we noticed narratives connected to the construction of spaces, such as Transfăgărășan, the Black-Sea Canal, and the Bărăgan deportations:

My grandmother told us stories about how her family was deported to Bărăgan, how difficult it was there and how they had nothing when they returned. (Ro18)

I live near the Iron Gates dam and I heard stories from my parents and neighbours about how it was built and I know that communists sank Ada-Kaleh and relocated Orșova to build the dam. (Ro15)

These quotes (selected from two female respondents) suggest that younger generation’s precipitates of memory related to spaces of mega-constructions and deportation sites were highly influenced by their parental/grandparental stories.

Other respondents highlighted the role of the media/internet and school as important lines for the relay of postmemory, as one male interviewee mentioned:

I was shocked to read on the internet and to learn from school that they built the Palace of the Parliament with political prisoners and that people died there just because they wanted to build an impressive Palace. (Ro14)

Furthermore, one female respondent stated that “My history teacher told me that political opponents to communism were sent to work at the Danube-Black-Sea Canal and the harsh conditions killed many of them . . . I read also some internet sites which mentioned that bodies are buried all along the canal and no one knows the exact number of deaths”. (Ro26)

Our participants to the interview did not consider that their memories of the communist past were much influenced by the internet and school, but there were respondents who highlighted the role of the media/internet and school as important lines of postmemory formation in relation to sites of communist mega-projects.

Our interview ended by asking participants to compare the era following 1989 with communist times. Younger people felt that their relatives experienced a “shock of the new”, and some were openly critical of what they perceived to be a certain rigidity of mentality in older generations. Some respondents stated that their parents’ life experience and attitudes had been
shaped by a constraining communist past, and that this meant that they were now out of step with modernity. Others emphasized an ethic of toughness, hard work, and sacrifice.

Moreover, some interviewees distinguished between several periods of transition, noting an improvement from the immediate post-1989 period toward the present, as one female interviewee stated:

I believe that the 90s were not better than the communist period, because the transition to a market economy was difficult. The majority of the factories went bankrupt, people lost their jobs, the young emigrated for western European countries, leaving behind the old, who did not know how to find a new balance and guide the state in a good direction. I believe that it is only in the contemporary period that we may talk about a greater economic, social, educational development (Ro27)

Another female respondent noted that people did not know how to react after the fall of the totalitarian regime and that the idea of freedom produced much disorientation among the citizens (Ro12). Interviewees therefore reflected on a sense of emotional crisis in the older generation’s responses to dramatic change as factories disappeared or were privatized. The transition was rather difficult. We therefore notice that the spatial postmemories of communism are also shaped by the experiences of their parents/grandparents of the initial post-communist period, which led them to develop certain memories of the past, which now shape postmemories in the younger generations.

Understanding the dialectical relationship between current socio-economic pressures and postmemory helps to understand how memories are shaped by attitudes to neoliberalism. The advent of liberal democracy after the 1989 Revolution was characterized by the collapse of large industrial factories, and the closure of inefficient mines. For instance, people living in mono-industrial settlements, especially those from rural mining areas, hardly faced the challenges of adapting to capitalism (Vesalon and Crețan 2013). The neoliberal state’s solution was to endeavor to attract foreign direct investment to regenerate the build environment (Crețan et al. 2005), but the foreign investments that resulted were concentrated in big cities. The generation born in the 1990s and 2000s has no direct experience of life under Communism, yet has lived through this slow but tectonic shift toward a democratic and capitalist regime. The pressures that they face are radically different from those of older generations: many have struggled with unemployment and have migrated to find work and affordable housing.

Summing up, young Romanians have postmemories of communist times, but these are often ambivalent. This is an already acknowledged in the current literature (Crețan et al. 2018; Light, Crețan, and Dunca 2019; Light, Crețan, and Dunca 2021) but the spatial dimensions of nuanced postmemory remain under-explored. Postmemory is shaped by intergenerational tensions, particularly the recognition that communist and post-communist generations have
experienced distinctively different social, cultural, and economic demands. In this regard, young people’s postmemories of major places of state power and of local places of everyday life are complex and nuanced too. Furthermore, they have formed their memories of the communist past via a range of conduits, from family to media and school.

Parental/grandparental nostalgia plays a major and multivalent role in the postmemory of young people of the communist past. The politics of Romanian postmemory are unstable and complicated: not all of the young people who express precipitates of nostalgia for communist spaces are supportive of communist political goals, while not all of those articulating a preference for the present are unequivocally neoliberal in their commitments. If some recent geography of memory studies highlight that postmemory is fragmented, multiple, contested, and shaped by different processes related to places of trauma (Till 2012; Drozdzewski, De Nardi and Waterton 2016), our research suggests that this extends to its spatial dimensions related not only to cultural trauma but also to non-traumatic events. The postmemory of the younger Romanian generation is deeply connected to place, from grandiose mega-constructions, prisons, and deportation zones to quotidian, everyday life spaces (shops, houses, apartment blocks, working places). Material cultures, in particular photographs and artifacts/memorabilia play an equally important role to narratives as stimuli for postmemory. It is interesting that although the younger generation is usually regarded as “the internet generation”, interviewees did not agree that IT was an important conduit for postmemory formation. Finally, we noted the importance of parental/grandparental contact in the formation of young people’s postmemories, because home was as a particularly significant locus of postmemory work.

**Conclusion**

Hirsch (1996) defined postmemory narrowly, focusing on cultural trauma. Our definition of postmemory in place is broader, including both cultural trauma and non-traumatic memories, and focusing strongly on its spatial dimension. Therefore, this paper contributes to broader debates about the geographies of memory (Derek and Dwyer 2004; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Till 2005; Legg 2004; Legg 2007; Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012; Till 2012; Drozdzewski, De Sarah, and Waterton 2016) by developing knowledge about the importance of place in postmemory formation. It also contributes to an ongoing debate in recent geographical literature about memories of cultural trauma, including wounded cities and the place-based ethics of care (Till 2012), as well as postwar memories (Drozdzewski, De Sarah, and Waterton 2016), suggesting that our study extends its spatial dimensions not only to cultural trauma but also to non-traumatic culture. Our work highlights that younger people’s memories of the
The communist past are not simply contested, shaped by different processes, nuanced and complex, but that the spatial dimension of communist postmemory is nuanced and complex too.

Past research on postcommunist memory emphasizes notions of nation and state, focusing on how historical representations legitimized the nation-state and communist political authority (Light, Nicolae, and Suditu 2002; Forest, Johnson, and Till 2004; Light 2004; O'Neill 2009; Light and Young 2010, 2015). Our study goes in a new direction and highlights the finer grained spatial politics of postmemory, investigating how communist places are negotiated by the younger generation. Furthermore, geographies of postmemory usually focus on single case studies, for example the Iron Gates displacements (Văran and Creţan 2018) or post-communist postmemories in relation to the Memorial Museum of Sighet (Creţan et al. 2018; Light, Creţan, and Dunca 2019; Light, Creţan, and Dunca 2021). Our methodology reveals how a multitude of spaces of postmemory come together, are contested, renegotiated, reproduced and co-produced. Moreover, we noticed that postmemories of communism are also shaped by the experiences of their (grand)parents of the initial post-communist period, which led them to develop certain memories of the past, which now shape postmemories in the younger generations. In this respect, our study also advances understandings of postmemories in post-communist Romania. As Romania had a recent history of conflict, and different human rights abuses, the findings of this study have a relevance for scholars and policy-makers engaged in processes of restorative justice and consolidate respect for human rights in Romania (Ciobanu 2011; Stan 2013).

Our research combined a process-tracing approach to post-communist surveys (Bădescu et al. 2010; INSCOP 2013) with in-depth interviews with members of the younger generation about their postmemories of the communist past. Past surveys revealed that postmemories of communism are fragmented, multiple, and shaped by different processes including the pressures of the present moment. In comparison to past post-communist surveys, we observe that while some degree of linking postmemories to communist nostalgia was present in many responses of our respondents, it could rarely be taken as an unequivocal indication of sympathy with communist politics. Instead, in many cases, nostalgia was as much a response to the pressures of the present as an affective reaction to the past. Politically speaking, postmemory in places of a communist past was polyvalent: it could coexist comfortably with considerable ambivalence about the political violence and cultural benefits of the communist regime. Follow-up research is therefore needed to expand our study via comparisons with spaces of postmemory in other Central and Eastern European contexts.

Postmemory is built from a wide repertoire of spatial signs and symbols, from spaces related to architectures and infrastructures to day-to-day material objects. Postmemories of both mega-construction sites and small
neighborhood sites remain connected to those places, as their meanings are renegotiated by the younger generation. Postmemory thus needs to be considered as remaking the meanings of space through iterative, repeated practices of memory enacted by younger people. As such, postmemory in place is never static, but emerges, varying across context. This dynamic understanding allows for more fluid interactions between place and postmemory, especially in cases when the production of culture and place is analyzed “from the side of the local”. Therefore, when approaching the politics of the everyday in the communist past and postmemories of “the local”, we notice that critical affirmation of places and even place attachment to different local sites (home, shops) remain important. Familial histories, the experiences of older generations, as well as the social background and individual opinions of younger people all act as shaping forces of postmemory. Home constitutes a major locus of memory work, but school and the internet also played a role, and home possessions acted as particular sites of memory formation. As Tolia-Kelly (2004) puts it, (home) possessions “presence the social memories, they constitute precipitates of narrated histories, and artefacts of heritage and tradition. These are . . . signifiers of ‘other’ narrations of the past not directly experienced” (317).

Postmemory in place is by no means a passive or uncritical process. Younger people had a series of memories of particular spaces and activities of the past, but they were also able to reflect on, and critique, the responses of older generations to historical change. Indeed, for some, this established their identity as young and “modern” Romanians, who were better able to adjust to capitalism than their elders.

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