



Remembering Late Socialism in Autobiographical Novels and Autofictions from Central and Eastern Europe: Introduction

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Abstract

Since the fall of communism in 1989 and 1990/91 literature has dealt with this epochal societal change, trying to come to terms with the past and assessing its influence on the present. In the last years the focus has turned towards the era of late socialism, that is the 1970s and 1980s. Many writers who attempt to present and reevaluate these decades and their ongoing influence on biographies and societies today grew up or came of age in this era. Our main contention is that different forms of life-writing, especially autofictions and autobiographical novels, have become the dominant narrative device for addressing and narrating the socialist past. Accordingly, the contributions to this cluster explore the era of late socialism, examining its different and often contested meanings not only from the perspective of the past but also from the perspective of today. Thus, we explore the role of autobiographical writing in commemorating the past as well as in demonstrating the demise of socialism, as represented in contemporary literatures in Czech, Polish, Romanian, and Russian.

Keywords: autobiographical novel, autofiction, Central and Eastern Europe, late socialism

Representations of late socialism abound in the literatures of Central and Eastern Europe. During the last three decades, a host of texts have been written that deal with this era and try to recreate and grasp it aesthetically through memoirs, documentary fiction, and autofictions. The image of late socialism that is created in texts by Irena Dousková, Joanna Bator or Svetlana Aleksievich, to name only a few prominent examples, is cited in discussions of state socialism and is in itself infused by contemporary memorial culture and the attempt to come to terms with the recent socialist past. As recent research into late socialist cultures (Yurchak 2005; Kolář and Pullmann 2016) has shown, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of societal and cultural changes, as well as stagnation and political orthodoxy. After the protests and changes of the late 1960s many citizens of the Eastern Bloc retreated into the private sphere and engaged less in political debates. Similar mechanisms are described in late socialist literature and in postsocialist narratives depicting this time. Taking stock of the literature that tries to come to terms with late socialism we can see that personal recollections and life-writing have become an important part of societal discussions of the legacies of socialism today. These texts complement and add nuance to the ongoing public and scholarly assessment of the last two socialist decades in Central and Eastern Europe.

Specifics and conceptualizations of late socialism

The definition of the term ‘late socialism’ used to describe the 1970s and 1980s in Central Eastern and Southern Europe varies widely. Researchers argue about this concept and its meaning. Some simply use the term ‘communism’ to describe the entire post-WWII period in the history of this region, emphasizing its totalitarian—or at least authoritarian—character manifested in political repressions, censorship, limiting the rights of citizens, which were alternately loosened and tightened. Others use the term ‘real socialism’—taken from the dictionary of the epoch, popularized in the 1970s—to define the period ending the efforts to build a communist society (in accordance with the idea of Karl Marx) and recognizing these aspirations as completed to the extent that socio-economic conditions allowed (Roberts 2004; Chmielewska, Mrozik and Wołowiec 2021). ‘Real socialism’—or ‘state socialism’—was the ultimate rejection of the Soviet model in the process of building ‘people’s democracies’ and the adoption of the concept of the ‘national road to socialism’ (Mrozik and Holubec 2018).

Known as ‘goulash socialism,’ the Hungarian late socialism under János Kádár (1956–1989) was characterized by a relatively high standard of living and perceived as a period of stable if subdued atmosphere, following the suppression of the October

1956 uprising. In exchange for the state-guaranteed relaxation of repressions and a decent quality of life, ensured by vigorous trade with Eastern Bloc countries, Hungarians were to stay away from politics (Geró and Petó 1999). A similar model prevailed in Bulgaria, which under the rule of Todor Zhivkov (1956–1989) boasted low unemployment and extensive social policies, including guaranteeing stable employment for women and state care for children (Ghodsee 2019). Of all the countries of the Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria had the most stable relations with the Soviet Union. To date, the period of socialism is remembered in Bulgaria with a great amount of nostalgia (Gruev and Mishkova 2013).¹

In Poland, the 1970s ‘golden decade’ under Edward Gierek, characterized by improved relations with the West, stimulation of consumption and a boom in public investment, ended abruptly in 1980 with a huge economic crisis, workers’ protests, and the establishment of independent trade union ‘Solidarity’ (Rolicki 1990). Wojciech Jaruzelski, who replaced Gierek as the Party’s first secretary, failed to cope with the country’s debts, shortages of basic products, and subsequent strikes, and reacted by introducing martial law on 13 December 1981. Socialism came to an end in Poland with the round table talks and the elections won by the opposition in June 1989 (Paczkowski 2015).

Not wanting to risk the Polish scenario, Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965–1989) responded to the economic crisis of the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s with a policy of austerity, which combined with intensive exports of manufactured articles led to the impoverishment of many social groups. Under his rule, Romania limited the autonomy of national minorities (mainly Hungarians, who had been impeded already in the late 1950s to receive schooling in their mother tongue) and implemented a strict pro-natalist policy (prohibition of abortion and contraception, taxation of childless adults older than twenty-five years), which affected the lives of thousands of female citizens: they lived in a constant fear of forced examination, imprisonment and even death due to secret abortions (Massino 2019). The 1989 revolution ended bloody in Romania, with execution of Ceaușescu and his wife Elena (Siani-Davies 2005).

Czechoslovakia found itself at the antipodes of the Romanian model, terminating socialism peacefully during the so-called Velvet Revolution in November 1989. The late phase of socialism, known as ‘normalization,’ spanned the period from the suppression of the Prague Spring by the troops of the Warsaw Pact in summer 1968 to the Velvet Revolution (Kolář and Pullmann 2016). ‘Normalization’ under Gustav Husák (1969–1989) was characterized, especially in the initial phase, by repressions against opponents of the system, followed by a relative political calm, combined with

an increase in consumption, housing construction and stimulation of pro-family policy. Contemporary researchers argue that ‘normalization’ was characterized by the traditionalization of family life, stagnation in the cultural sphere and general apathy of the society (Lišková 2018; Heczková and Svatoňová 2020).

After taking power in the USSR in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev labelled the period of Leonid Brezhnev’s rule (1964–1982) as ‘the era of stagnation.’ Distancing himself from the politics of his predecessors, especially Brezhnev, in the framework of the perestroika he proclaimed, Gorbachev announced a policy of openness (*glasnost*) in relations between the Party and citizens (including the abolition of censorship), while in international politics he resigned from the arms race and withdrew troops from Afghanistan. The USSR collapsed in 1991, but today the Brezhnev era is assessed ambiguously. On the one hand, it is portrayed as a period of economic prosperity, modernization and stability (at least until the mid-1970s) and a strong position of the USSR in relations with the West. On the other hand, it is evaluated through the prism of armed invasions of states in the region, including Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979), corruption, economic stagnation and the general crisis of the socialist model as an alternative to Western capitalism (Hanson 2006; Fainberg and Kalinovsky 2016).

Obviously, these examples do not exhaust the catalogue of possible implementations of the concept of the ‘national road to socialism’ (for example, the Yugoslav model was far different). However, from the perspective of this cluster of articles on remembering late socialism, the change that occurred in the research on this period over the last three decades seems to be more interesting. Immediately after the transition, historical and political analyses focused primarily on diagnosing the causes of the crisis and the fall of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. They were identified as political (internal Party conflicts, pressure from the opposition) and economic (failure of the socialist economy). Drawing on official documents, such as resolutions of political bureaus, minutes of Party meetings, personal notes of the most important politicians, trade and arms treaties, etc., moral and rational evaluations were formulated, proving that socialism was doomed to failure in the competition with free market liberal democracy (e.g. Clark and Wildavsky 1991; Kaminski 1991; Chafetz 1992). It was most emphatically expressed by Francis Fukuyama (1989) in his famous thesis about the ‘end of history.’ From that perspective, ‘late socialism’ was simply the declining phase of the political and economic project that began and ended in the USSR, and whose different variants were (ineptly) implemented in individual countries of the Eastern Bloc. With regard to literary representations of late socialism

it has to be noted that these were often dominated by dissident writers with a critical agenda, stressing the negative effects.

This view of late socialism has clearly changed in recent years. The political perspective was replaced by an anthropological, sociological and cultural studies approach in which not parties and politicians, but diverse social groups became the focus of research. The latest works, dominated by gender, generational and memory studies approaches, examine such phenomena as childhood and adolescence in late socialism, everyday life, consumption models, lifestyles, attitudes and values of various professional and age groups (e.g. Yurchak 2005; Penn and Massino 2009; Bren 2010; Chernyshova 2013; Silova, Piattoeva and Millei 2018). The very modes of remembering late socialism as well as articulating memories about it are also analysed, including attempts to recall emotions about past family, neighbourhood or professional life (e.g. Todorova 2010; Todorova and Gille 2010; Todorova, Dimou and Troebst 2014). Nostalgic approaches, which feed on memories of childhood, family home, first friendships and love relations, are accompanied by demonizing, ridiculing or orientalising approaches, which frequently mirror official anti-communist narratives that have characterized post-socialist discourses since the 1990s (e.g. Dujisin 2020). An important source employed by contemporary scholars of late socialism are various types of personal documents and life-writing: autobiographies, memoirs, letters, diaries, photographs. These materials, which are indispensable for analysis of the specificity of the epoch, are also a tool of communication within and between various social and age groups. Particularly valuable in this regard are not only autobiographical texts, but also autofictional ones, which feed on stories of life under socialism and process them in various ways (e.g. Vassileva-Karagyozeva 2015; Tippner 2019; Mironescu and Mitroiu 2020). Literature and life-writing work through the era aesthetically and take part in the public debate about its assessment.

Autofiction as a traveling concept in Central Eastern Europe

Different forms of life-writing that encompass not only classic autobiographies or memoirs but also autobiographical novels, autofictions, and family sagas are the genre of choice when it comes to tackling the difficult era between the late 1960s and the late 1980s. The majority of scholarly studies have argued for life-writing as a memory form and means to recreate these complicated if not fraught times. Other scholars have discussed the extraordinary place of life-writing in the literary pantheon. Texts that explore the conditions of the socialist everyday make use of different forms of life-writing. In addition to classical autobiographies, we can see a preference for narratives

that make clear references to the author's life and biography while still maintain a claim as fiction (Missinne 2019, 464). These texts have not only broadened the genre's scope by incorporating different types of narratives such as the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel, but also less obvious genres such as the vampire novel or the thriller. Another transformation of the genre that has happened in transition and translation is the branching out into other media by integrating images, especially photographs but also other kinds of archival material.

It is noteworthy that with regard to the genre of autofictions (Doubrovsky 2008; Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013), texts verging on the threshold between autobiography and fiction, between the documentary and the imagined, are dominating the field of reconfiguring late socialism, together with autobiographical novels and memoirs. Although autofiction is a phenomenon with a long history in most Eastern European literatures, the term itself has only gained traction during the last years with regard to life-writing. While the 1980s and 1990s have seen a wave of memoirs, autobiographies, and diary writings, the 2000s and 2010s have propelled life-writing closer to autofiction. Isabel Grell's (2014) introduction to autofiction does not include any Central Eastern European authors, though she claims that 'it is obvious that in the countries of the so-called East, i.e. Serbia, Poland where truth is taken seriously, [...] political changes have freed a writing of the "I" that fights for the individual, for individuality, the freedom to be oneself and to manifest this "I" that has been oppressed too long in a collectivity imposed by politics.'²

A closer examination of Central European literature reveals a multitude of texts such as Dubravka Ugrešić's *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* (1996) [*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 1998], Libuše Moníková's *Treibeis* [*Drift Ice*] (1992), or Ludvík Vaculík's *Český snář* (1980) [*A Czech Dreambook*, 2019] that can be viewed as autobiographical novels or autofictions, even if the label was not a common currency when they were first published. The lack of literary criticism that reads these texts as autofictions is due to two factors: the scarcity of translation from Slavic languages in the wider European context and a critical terminology that only begins to make use of the term in the countries of origin. Thus, while autofiction can be regarded as a 'travelling concept' (Bal 2002, 24) par excellence, it has travelled East slowly and ingrained itself in critical discourse only recently. If the concept is used, then mostly as loan translation or calque, as 'autofikce' (Czech),³ 'autofikcja' (Polish),⁴ 'autofikšn' (Russian) or 'autoficțiune' (Romanian).⁵ In 2010, the literary critic Masha Levina-Parker introduced the term to Russian discourse, pointing the readers towards the French theory by Serge Doubrovsky, Philippe Lejeune, and Philippe Gasparini among others, but also applying the term to canonical text of Russian life-writing by Andrei

Belyi and Vladimir Nabokov. Nevertheless, she states that ‘it may still be too early to tell whether or not autofiction will be a phenomenon outside France’ (Levina-Parker 2010).⁶ The past decade has proven autofiction to be a productive form of life-writing in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe. While traveling from France the genre of autofiction has undergone transformations and has been influenced by other writing styles and the specific demands of post-transformation societies. The same holds true for autobiographical novels which ‘presume a certain identity between the protagonist and the author of the text on the basis of resemblances’ (Missinne 2019, 464) but without ever stating it explicitly.

Autobiographical novels and autofictions prove to be especially popular as a memorial form, i.e. for texts that deal with the pasts in postsocialist and post-transformation literatures. In order to capture disputed pasts, the legacies of socialism, and the discontents of transformation and migration, autofictions are better suited to transcend individual lives and to capture collective experiences. This new life-writing still retains some of the attitudes towards truth and authenticity that marked older forms but they are infused with fiction to paint a bigger picture. In her Nobel prize lecture, Olga Tokarczuk deplored the dominance of the first-person narrative because it builds ‘an opposition between the self and world’ and argued for a ‘tender narrator’ who ‘personif[ies] shared feelings’ (Tokarczuk 2019, 4, 23). Autofictions and autobiographical novels appear to be the solution to this problem, combining the trustworthiness of the first-person life narration with an exposed fictional element that points the reader towards the fact that narration involves invention. Looking at autofictional forms of life-writing it becomes evident that authors in Central Eastern Europe make use of this form in order to describe not only personal experiences but to capture generational and collective attitudes. After the memoir boom that characterized the 1980s and early 1990s, the late 1990s and 2000s have been marked by the wish to come to terms with the recent past and its legacies in a different vein. Irina Paperno noted that diaries and autobiographies written under Soviet rule ‘tend to derive their claim to significance from the catastrophic quality of personal experience’ (Paperno 2009, xi) and strive to create communities of remembrance and shared experience. Contemporary autofictions and autobiographical novels of socialist time focus on the more mundane, everyday aspects and less on the tragic. They convey personal experiences using humour, the fantastic, the grotesque, relying on autobiographical narrators that are marginalized due to their age, gender, or class.

Autobiographical and autofictional representations of socialist times were long dominated by authors critical of the politics of this era. In the last two decades authors who were children or young adults during late socialism have added to the picture,

trying to enrich and amplify visions of life under socialism by adding a distinct perspective. Focusing on a period in life that is usually perceived as ‘apolitical’ they steer the reader away from stagnant debates marked by politics towards the everyday. Thus, autobiographical and autofictional literature on growing-up socialist becomes a means to address the increasing heterogeneity of late socialist culture confirming, undermining or rejecting concepts of socialist childhood, gender roles, consumer culture, political practices of subversion and adaption across literary cultures in Central and Eastern Europe. The device of remembering childhoods allows writers to integrate different views of late socialism, critical and nostalgic, in one and the same text. Literature hovering between fact and fiction plays an important role here.

Remembering late socialism in autobiographical novels and autofictions from Central and Eastern Europe

Stories about growing up in late socialism in different countries of the Eastern Bloc turn out to have surprisingly much in common. The protagonist/narrator of most analysed texts is a child/adolescent whose biography, or at least some of its elements, can be easily linked to the biography of the author (only in the novel by Mircea Cărtărescu the story is told from the perspective of an adult). This makes the works in question a kind of record of a generational experience of the authors, born predominantly in the 1960s, for whom the memory of late socialism is also the memory of their own childhood and adolescence. This experience—despite the specific nature of late socialism in individual countries of the Eastern Bloc—has a clearly transnational character, just like the stories themselves, told from the postsocialist perspective: the similarity can be observed at the level of recurring motifs and plots, as well as of storytelling, the way narrators are constructed or the very choice of an autofictional formula. In literary works, late socialism is remembered not as a political system (although great politics breaks into the literary world more or less abruptly), but as a microcosm of private and intimate relations, primarily in the family, but also at school and in the neighbourhood, inside which an individual must exist and survive. The texts repeat the theme of a dysfunctional family, intergenerational conflicts, oppressive school, etc.; the protagonists defend themselves against the oppression with humour, by retreating into the inner world, or by writing a diary—a gesture that is therapeutic in nature. Through literature, however, what is private becomes public and as such it becomes part of the contemporary politics of memory, in which the attitude towards real socialism is as much nostalgic as it is critical. The autofictional formula utilized by the authors perfectly expresses their attempts to face the past and to tell about the

everyday life in late socialism, but it also articulates the inability to restore that world and oneself from the past. The authors' biographical experience is transformed in literature, shifted, just like the memory of the past world described in the texts; it builds a community, but also a distance.

The articles in this cluster explore the ways of remembering late socialism in Polish, Czech, Romanian, and Russian autobiographical novels and autofictional texts. Works by acclaimed authors such as Joanna Bator, Izabela Filipiak, Irena Dousková, Mircea Cărtărescu, and Alexei Ivanov are discussed within the frame of literary studies but also memory and gender studies.

Agnieszka Mrozik examines how the period of late socialism, seen through the eyes of adolescent girls, functions in Polish 'quasi-autobiographical novels' by Izabela Filipiak (*Absolutna amnezja* [*Absolutne Amnesia*], 1995) and Joanna Bator (*Piaskowa Góra* [*The Sandy Hill*], 2008). Born in the 1960s and self-identified feminists, the authors became voices of the women's movement in post-1989 Poland. From their novels, the picture of late socialism emerges as either nightmarish or grotesque. Examining family relations, but also intimate relations, the author argues that the novels' focus on gender/sexual differences stays in line with the dominant message of the women's movement in Poland, which after 1989 lost sight of class differences, contributing to their naturalization and taming.

Anja Tippner discusses Irena Dousková's autofictional books *Hrdý Budžes* [1998; *B. Proudew*, 2016] and *Oněgin byl Rusák* [2006; *Onegin Was a Rusky*, 2018], observing how they are tinged with nostalgia and infused with irony and humour. The Czech author remembers her childhood in a non-conformist family dealing with everyday life in socialist Czechoslovakia. While taking a closer look at the poetics of childhood autofictions and their contribution to cultures of remembering socialism, the article examines the ways in which writing childhoods creates a specific socialist identity through scarcity, ingenuity, and working with/against restraints and the way humour is used to transmit difficult memories.

Doris Mironescu and Andreea Mironescu study the literary projection of 1980s Romania in Mircea Cărtărescu's autofictional novel *Solenoid* (2015). This rich, paranoid, metaphysical, and counterfactual autobiography uses a late socialist backdrop to create a metaphorically skewed representation of the self and the world. To describe this narrative structure as an emergent subgenre of the post-postmodern maximalist novel, the authors coin the term 'maximalist autofiction.' They convince that Cărtărescu uses hyperbole, parody and the results of a maximalist surrealist imagination to propel the discussion of socialism and cultural peripherality beyond the dated parameters of the East/West dichotomies, describing a lively centre-

periphery dynamic that brings Romanian socialism, so to speak, in the twenty-first century.

Ksenia Robbe analyses the 2016 novel *Pischeblok* [*The Food Unit*] by Alexei Ivanov, a leading Russian author of historical and speculative fiction. In contrast to the author's earlier works, which only briefly recalled the late Soviet childhoods of the main characters and were otherwise focused on the post-Soviet period, this novel is entirely situated in the pre-perestroika past—more specifically, in 1980, the year of the Olympic Games in Moscow. The article engages with the meanings and resonances produced by this shift of focus from adult protagonists stranded in the post-Soviet time-space of indeterminacy to the childhood and child characters of Ivanov's generation. While the novel explicitly aligns itself with the large corpus of representations known for generating 'Soviet nostalgia,' the article suggests that its mnemonic 'reanimation' of the Soviet extends beyond the nostalgic optic (or what is usually interpreted as 'nostalgic').

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Notes

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¹ For a discussion of the concept of nostalgia and post-communist memory see Boym (2001).

² 'Il est [...] évident que dans les pays dits de l'Est, la Serbie, où la vérité est prise très au sérieux [...] les bouleversements politique ont libéré une écriture du 'je' qui se bat pour l'individu, l'individualité, la liberté d'être soi et de manifester ce 'moi' trop longuement opprimé dans un groupe imposé par la politique.' (Grell 2014, 95–96)

³ There are two articles that discuss the term with regard to life-writing in Czech literary criticism. See Fonioková (2018) and Soukupová (2015).

⁴ With regard to Polish literary criticism the term 'autofikcja' is also used to describe the creation of a public author persona and self-stylization through various text genres. For this type of use see Michalak (2016).

⁵ For a discussion of Romanian autofictions by women see Pîrjol (2018).

⁶ 'O tom, okazhetsia li avtofikshn iavleniem i za predelami Frantsii, vozmozhno, poka eshche rano sudit.' (Levina-Parker 2010) The word 'samosochinenie' that she uses in the title as a synonym can be literally translated as self-composition or self-writing. Anna Turczyn (2007) takes a similar approach, i.e. going back to Lejeune and Doubrovsky, when she introduces the term 'autofikcja' into Polish literary studies.