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To cite this article: Adriana Stan & Cosmin Borza (2024) From *Ostalgie* To *Ostodium*. The Anti-Communist Novel in Post-1989 East-Central Europe<sup>1</sup>, *Central Europe*, 22:1, 76-87, DOI: [10.1080/14790963.2024.2294419](https://doi.org/10.1080/14790963.2024.2294419)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790963.2024.2294419>



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Published online: 24 Jan 2024.



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# From *Ostalgie* To *Ostodium*. The Anti-Communist Novel in Post-1989 East-Central Europe<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to theorize the post-communist anti-communist novel as a distinct and productive genre in East-Central European literatures, which we describe – in polemic with the better-known *ostalgie* – as a narrative of *ostodium*. We argue that anti-communist fiction became a cohesive genre in post-communism owing to its rigid view of the past, which was kept alive and significant, while simultaneously being antagonized, even after communism had collapsed. To that end, we explain how the anti-communist mindset assumed by intellectuals from the region during communism (which had then been branded as ‘anti-politics’) maintained monopoly over post-communist cultural production, and merged with ascending post-communist neoliberalism that promoted an anti-statist public mythology. We further outline the shifting shapes in which the ideological bias of the post-communist anti-communist novel was conveyed, and draw distinctions from proximate genres, such as the political novel, *le roman à la thèse* and historiographic metafiction. One crucial argument in this respect regards the postmodern entanglements of the post-communist anti-communist novel: in maintaining an univocal rejection of the communist metanarrative, they took on a stronger political *thèse* than in Western postmodernism, but also enhanced postmodernism’s anti-realist drive by failing to provide an understanding of the post-communist present.

## KEYWORDS

Anti-communism; Post-communism; East-Central European Cultures; Democratization; Political Fiction

This thematic issue<sup>2</sup> examines the ideological context and cultural impact of the anti-communist novels written after the demise of the Soviet Bloc. Until now, the anti-

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<sup>1</sup>We use the concept of East-Central Europe, instead of the more restrictive, ideologically-biased notion of Eastern Europe, following Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer’s view from the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, I – IV (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004–2010). Although an extensive coverage of the literary cultures of the region falls outside the scope of this short thematic issue, our goal is to highlight a set of literary works, topics and formal patterns that are representative of an essentially overlooked genre of East-Central European literatures whose production and reception deserves attention and debate.

<sup>2</sup>This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 101,001,710).

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communist novel has only been analysed in its pre-1989 embodiments, mainly as part of Cold War studies.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the post-communist anti-communist novel was never theorized as a distinct genre. None of the many studies on post-communist fiction even recognizes that such a genre exists, despite the fact that the number of anti-communist novels being written actually increased after 1989. In this respect, the post-communist period can be roughly divided into three stages which correspond, at large, with the first three post-communist decades. While anti-communist fiction led the literary production of the 1990s, as the respective interpretation of the past monopolized all other public spheres, the anti-communist discourse was inherited and the genre remained influential throughout the 2000s, a surprising phenomenon considering the campaign for European integration and for liberal democratic values that ensued across the region. It was only after 2010 that post-communist anti-communist fiction became less popular for authors, although it maintained its canonical status. In recent years, or at least until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, anti-communism has no longer seemed an urgent subject, even for East-Central European writers and intellectuals. Two possible explanations can be factored in for this presumed eclipse of the genre. On the one hand, post-communist cultures eventually adopted the widespread view that grand national narratives had lost their power to shape identities.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, anti-communism became partly disreputable for many intellectuals, as it was gradually included on the political agenda of populist movements which started to openly criticize the European Union.

Nevertheless, the short period that has elapsed since the high point of the genre is crucial for an objective attempt at theorizing anti-communist post-communist fiction. This genre has emerged full-fledged in East-Central European literatures by encompassing the extensive, but unofficial 'literature of dissent' and the 'anti-political' mindset assumed by local intellectuals during communism.<sup>5</sup> 'Dissent' against communism did not vanish following the regime changes, but resurfaced and grew even stronger in the 1990s as an overt condemnation of the recent past. This climate was also fuelled by the prolonged influence of the former nomenklatura in post-communist political life.<sup>6</sup> The continuing anti-communist standpoint was firmly adopted by the mainstream historiographical and political discourse after 1989 because it was also regarded as *the* necessary first step for Westernization/democratization/European integration. Immediately, and with consequences that are still evident today, post-communist societies embraced the teleology of transition-to-capitalism as a necessary corollary of anti-communism, and popularized it as the unquestionably 'natural' attitude towards the communist past.<sup>7</sup> In Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia, this view became especially popular in mainstream media

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, John V. Fleming, *The Anti-Communist Manifestos: Four Books that Shaped the Cold War* (New York: Norton, 2009) and Hannes H. Gissurarson, *Voices of the Victims: Notes Towards a Historiography of Anti-Communist Literature* (Brussels: New Direction, 2017).

<sup>4</sup>See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>George Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay* (London: Quartet Books, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>In Romania, the first two presidential elections (1990, 1992) were won by a former member of the communist Central Committee, Ion Iliescu. In Hungary, the Socialist Party won the parliamentary elections of 1994, 2002 and 2006. In Poland, Lech Wałęsa lost the 1995 presidential election to the former communist apparatchik Aleksander Kwaśniewski.

<sup>7</sup>See Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009); Boris Buden, *Transition to Nowhere. Art in History after 1989*, ed. Paolo Caffoni, comp. Boris Buden and Naomi Hennig (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020); Andrew C. Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Postcommunism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Post-communist Nostalgia* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010).

and intellectual circles, as the first post-communist governments of these countries showed reluctance towards implementing extensive capitalist reforms.<sup>8</sup> The wider public climate thus enabled the anti-communist novel to emerge as a well-defined genre in post-communism, after it had been partially repressed and had developed nonlinear and increasingly complex narratives during the communist era. Although most voters did not share this obsession with eliminating all traces of the communist past after 1989, and nurtured a certain nostalgia for the former regime, anti-communism became a consensus within the intelligentsia, especially since they felt that the communists had hijacked, sabotaged or organized the fall of communism. Anti-communist fiction also seemed productive to certain writers – in terms of visibility, at least –, given that the contemporary literary field was deprived of many benefits previously ensured by the state protectorate, and struggled to maintain ‘relevance’ in the new free market.<sup>9</sup> The battle for relevance was, of course, especially important in the field of highbrow literature, as the post-communist literary market was flooded with fiction of all forms that had been previously banned, mostly from Western Europe and the United States. Anti-communist novels published throughout all the countries of the former Soviet Bloc – by David Albahari, Michal Ajvaz, Mircea Cărtărescu, Péter Esterházy, Rustam Ibragimbekov, Daniela Kapitaňová, Imre Kertész, Ivan Klíma, Fatos Kongoli, Vladimir Makanin, Olga Tokarczuk, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, etc. – responded to this public climate and garnered wide national and international acclaim.

Considering this context, the main aim of this special issue is to outline the distinct features of the post-communist anti-communist novel in relation to the established and converging genres from which it borrowed, but with which it did not fully overlap: the political novel,<sup>10</sup> *le roman à la thèse*<sup>11</sup> and historiographic metafiction.<sup>12</sup> In particular, this special issue seeks to answer such critical questions as how did the borrowing from other genres fuse into in a brand-new genre in post-communist East-Central European literatures? Why does metafiction assume here a stronger political *thèse* than in its standard Western postmodern variants, whose stance against capitalism had gradually lost its strength?<sup>13</sup> What accounts for the widespread public success of anti-communist novels in post-communism, at a time when their object of dissent had officially disappeared? Thus, the following contributions all endeavour to determine the particularities of this genre by examining the broad scope of the literature it produced, ranging from postmodern metafiction to revivals of the realist narrative. As shown throughout these studies, the post-communist anti-communist novel employed various styles and registers: the parodic rewriting of the late 19th century – early 20th narrative patterns,

<sup>8</sup>See, for a detailed overview, Cornel Ban, *Ruling Ideas: How Global Neoliberalism Goes Local* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism. The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>Robert Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia. The Political Novel since 1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). See also Ștefan Firiță, ‘Political Fiction or Fiction about Politics. How to Operationalize a Fluid Genre in the Interwar Romanian Literature’, *Dacoromania litteraria* 7 (2020): 164–81.

<sup>11</sup>Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup>Amy Elias, ‘Historiographic Metafiction’, in Brian McHale and Len Platt (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 293–307.

<sup>13</sup>Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1–11. For an extensive development of the idea, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

which had previously been absorbed by socialist realism; the dystopian depiction of communism meant to vilify this historical experience, even when this involved the use of certain *topoi* usually reserved for mass literature; and the new historiographic or biographical narratives that chose to portray in realist, but also moralizing, terms the traumatic stages of communism, and/or its lasting effects on the present. However, despite its shifting shape, as shown by these forms, anti-communist fiction became a cohesive genre in post-communism owing to its stable, monochrome view of the past, which was paradoxically estranged from its subject area by the collapse of communism, while simultaneously being kept alive and significant in the post-communist period.

We believe that a special issue devoted to new perspectives on the post-communist anti-communist novel is necessary because the analysis of post-communist literatures continues to be confined to the frame of ‘*ostalgie*’ (a nostalgia for the former ‘eastern bloc’ of communist regimes).<sup>14</sup> As noted above, post-communist societies did witness significant nostalgia evidenced by the political success of socialist parties after 1989. Nevertheless, this was not a phenomenon that garnered intellectual legitimacy and became truly productive artistically. In fact, this best-selling approach on recent history<sup>15</sup> – which was supported by its many embodiments in mass visual culture – only reasserted the Westernized image of post-communist East-Central Europe as backwards-looking. Within the triumphant transition-to-capitalism scenario that was embraced wholeheartedly by cultural elites in the region, communism could indeed be imagined through regressive nostalgia, but could no longer provide a viable economic alternative to the neoliberal system.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on *ostalgie* failed, however, to account for the deeper forces at work in post-communist cultural production, in which the anti-communist intellectual elites – some of whom had emerged during late communism – took the lead during the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> Challenging this critical trend, we argue that, in post-communist cultures, the presentation of communism, projected by literature and the arts, and endorsed by the historiographical and political discourse, was grounded in resentment rather than objective analysis, and this viewpoint was much more extensive and seminal than has been hitherto understood. The correlated impact of the aforementioned discourses imprinted a traumatic view of the communist past within the collective imagination. What we call, in this context, the metanarrative of *ostodium* was extraordinarily productive across East-Central European post-communist cultures. It is true that, during the 1980s, some of these cultures had found an outlet for their anti-communist anger in the *perestroika* moments and even in the syndicalist, anti-

<sup>14</sup>See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Dominic Boyer, ‘*Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany’, *Public Culture* 18 (2006): 361–81; Todorova and Gille, *Post-communist*.

<sup>15</sup>The boom of commercialized *ostalgie* in the post-communist cultural markets was especially obvious in Germany, see Joshua H. Whitcomb, ‘A Problematic ‘Modell’ for Success: East German Nostalgia and Identity in Modern Germany’s Attempt to Come-to-Terms with its DDR Past’, *Of Life and History* 2 (2019), <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=oflifeandhistory>. (accessed April 10, 2023). See also Claudia Sadowski-Smith, ‘*Ostalgie*: Revaluing the Past, Regressing into the Future’, *GDR Bulletin* 1 (1998): 1–6; Daphne Berdahl, ‘“(N)Ostalgie” for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things’, *Ethnos* 2 (1999): 192–211.

<sup>16</sup>As a result of this inability to acknowledge an alternative to capitalism, the post-communist anti-communist novel affirms Mark Fisher’s arguments about the ideological enclosure of post-Cold War capitalism. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (New Alresford: O Books, 2009).

<sup>17</sup>Gil Eyal, Iván Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Postcommunist Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1998).

totalitarian movements of the *Solidarność* type. However, their public expression was either incomplete, or still marked by an understandable self-censorship. It was, therefore unsurprising that post-communism would witness an outpouring of anti-communist anger in a variety of public discourses. Among these, *ostodium* found a privileged medium in the novel, which still held the force to disseminate collective myths, due to the long tradition of literature as a critical component of ‘nation-building’ in East-Central European cultures ever since 19<sup>th</sup> century. Andrew Baruch Wachtel famously summed up this historical peculiarity by describing Eastern Europe as ‘that part of the world where serious literature and those who produced it have traditionally been overvalued’.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the dialogism that many theorists have regarded as an intrinsic feature of the novel, the post-communist anti-communist fiction was rather rigid in terms of its underlying stance. In fact, the metanarrative of *ostodium* restricted the problematic scope of this literary narrative, as well as its choice of setting and types of characters. Firstly, in depicting communism, novelists opted for periods or contexts that confirmed the repressive/totalitarian paradigm, from the 1950s or from late communism’s struggles with various escalating crises. On the other hand, they showed less interest in depicting the liberalizing momentum of the late 1960’s Thaw. Such a time pattern, in which the narrative strives towards total historical coverage of communism, but favours the 1950s and the 1980s, is perfectly demonstrated in the fictional works of emblematic anti-communist writer Ismail Kadare. Admittedly, many anti-communist writers who published in post-communism experienced as adults the crisis of the 1980s and also responded to the intense historiographical scrutiny of the Stalinist 1950s that occurred immediately after 1989.

A similar fictional preference was obvious in the narratives set in the 1990s which deemed the communist past as responsible for the faulty present. Significant in this respect is the work of Radu Aldulescu, the most representative Romanian novelist of the 1990s. His novels cover in neo-naturalist style the precarious realities of early post-communism, but, as Mihai Iovănel pointed out, they can only explain them through a ‘simplified version of social-economic determinism stemming from trivial anti-communism: in these terms, the communist past is the one to blame for the ugly side of the present’.<sup>19</sup> This view was inherited by the realist novels set in the post-2000 decade, in which anti-communism had already become an embedded reflex. As such, it became activated even in the case of writers who were otherwise aware that the European integration process was already having visible drawbacks, such as increasing social inequality, the shift towards non-specialized and low-wage labour, the precarization of small towns and rural areas, and the privatization of public services. Although these processes resulted specifically from the destruction of the communist economy, novelists who examined them (such as Olga Tokarczuk in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, and Péter Esterházy in *Not Art*) maintained their anti-communist stance rather than a specifically anti-capitalist one. Secondly, these novels foregrounded, in regard to the past, the individuals and the social categories which communism had disadvantaged – the disowned bourgeois, the forcefully collectivized peasant, or the maliciously harassed

<sup>18</sup>Wachtel, *Remaining*, 14.

<sup>19</sup>Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* (History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990–2000) (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 406. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are ours (Adriana Stan and Cosmin Borza).



cultivated man –, while proletarian characters remained either absent, or portrayed in superficial manner.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, by equating communism with repression, trauma, public surveillance, or police harassment, these novels contrasted individual morals and subjectivity against all forms of mass politics and state power that were presented in overwhelmingly negative terms. To account for this, anti-communist fiction emphasized devices of psychological analysis in order to enhance the emotional impact of communism on individual lives by presenting them throughout an existential struggle against the repressive communist regimes.<sup>21</sup> Revealing examples of this approach include the novels written by Radka Denemarková and Gabriela Adameşteanu which have been rewarded with translation into western European languages: both authors rely on female protagonists to conduct what amounts to psychological analysis of the communist period and occasionally degenerates into melodrama.<sup>22</sup>

Analysis of the post-communist literary narratives of ostodium is, therefore, especially important for two main reasons. From a social-political viewpoint, this literary genre reveals that the post-communist societies in which it developed chose to share a consensual, even emotional, understanding of the past, instead of a more nuanced debate that would have facilitated a diversity of interpretations.<sup>23</sup> From the perspective of literary history and theory, the post-communist anti-communist novel provides the rare case of a (semi)peripheral product that challenges Franco Moretti's famous statement that forms imported from the West merged with local content.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, the local content itself was, in this case, shaped, to an 'autocolonial' extent, by Western expectations about East-Central literatures' oppositional stance towards communism, which writers themselves internalized during, and after, the Cold War.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, imported forms themselves were reconfigured in this context, as illustrated by the new functions displayed by postmodern metafiction. Although decisively influenced by Western trends, anti-communist novels had a specific content unique to East-Central Europe which altered the propensity towards heteroglossia and relativization that metafiction had originally adopted in the West. Given the delay of legal and political procedures meant to enact 'transitional justice',<sup>26</sup> post-communist fiction took upon itself the function to symbolically perform a 'literary lustration', as described by Peter Morgan in the works of Ismail Kadare, Wolfgang Hilbig, Péter Nádas and Péter Estérhazy.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup>For instance, Romanian Dan Lungu's *Sunt o babă comunistă!* (I'm an Old Commie!) (Iaşi: Polirom, 2007) portrays in a light-hearted manner a former worker in a socialist factory, now retired. The novel claims to cover, and thereby shrinks by means of caricature, the protagonist's entire social history during communism. Slovak Peter Pist'aneč's *Rivers of Babylon* also depicts one typical social process of communism – rural-urban mobility – by means of satire and with little attempt to comprehend its complexity.

<sup>21</sup>Radka Denemarková, *Money from Hitler* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2009), Gabriela Adameşteanu, *Provizorat* (Provisional) (Iaşi: Polirom, 2009).

<sup>22</sup>Jiří Holý, 'Conventions of Radka Denemarková's Novel *Peníze od Hitlera* (Money from Hitler) along with its Reception', *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne* 12 (2017): 371–79.

<sup>23</sup>See Florin Poenaru, *Locuri comune. Clasă, anticomunism, stânga* (Common Places: Class, Anticomunism, Left) (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2017), 139–157.

<sup>24</sup>Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.

<sup>25</sup>Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism. Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2008). See also Vedrana Velickovic, 'Belated Alliances? Tracing the Intersections between Postcolonialism and Postcommunism', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48 (2012): 164–75.

<sup>26</sup>Lavinia Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup>Peter Morgan, 'The Afterlife of a Dictatorship: Ismail Kadare's Post-Communist Reckoning with the Albanian Past', *Journal of European Studies* 50.3 (2020): 281–94.

The particularities of the post-communist anti-communist novel may be better understood by comparing it to the magical realist novel, which was also a product of cultural peripheries and deployed a similar cluster of metafictional features, local historiographical accounts, and political content.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the political core of magical realism, which was critical of Western modernity and thus had a leftist bent, was bypassed by Western readings of the genre, which chose to celebrate its spectacular aesthetic form instead.<sup>29</sup> The opposite happened, up to a certain point, with the anti-communist novel's emergence in post-communist East-Central Europe. Of course, anti-communist novels written during communism were generally praised by Western critics, leading to the assumption that the 'antipolitical' sentiment, in György Konrád's term, was generalized among Soviet Bloc writers of the time. This viewpoint emerged even if the political bias of such anti-communist novels, written after the demise of socialist realism, was rather subdued by the use of Aesopian language and parabolic registers in order to avoid censorship. Little attention was, however, given to the better-developed – and with a more explicit content – post-communist embodiment of anti-communist fiction.<sup>30</sup> Considering that during the 1990s, this genre of novel employed mostly postmodern devices, it was legitimized – in a manner akin to the aestheticization of magical realism – through its postmodern features, rather than through its much more distinctive anti-communist character.

By highlighting this particular *thèse*, our approach goes against common readings of East-Central European postmodernism that focus exclusively on its subversive dimension, which scholars from both sides of the former 'Iron Curtain' considered a renewed rejection of 1950s socialist realism.<sup>31</sup> This reading might have been adequate for the 1970s–1980s postmodern fiction which emerged in East-Central Europe at the time, when the anti-communist mindset also came to widespread attention. Although, throughout the region, the 1970s were also a time of new accommodation with the regimes by the population (as shown by the increase in Party membership), anti-communism strengthened its status in the West: Jean-Paul Sartre distanced himself decisively from the Soviet Union after 1968's Prague Spring, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1970, and Milan Kundera became a widely feted writer in France following his move there in 1975.

As implied by classic accounts of East-Central European postmodernism such as Marcel Cornis-Pope's, the subversive character of late communist postmodernism was emphasized mainly in response to Fredric Jameson's questioning of Western

<sup>28</sup>Mariano Siskind, 'The Genres of World Literature. The Case of Magical Realism', in Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 345–55.

<sup>29</sup>See Michael Denning, 'The Novelists International', in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel*, vol. I: *History, Geography and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 703–25. The article argues that there are striking similarities between magical realism and socialist realism in terms of their ideological input.

<sup>30</sup>The under-analysed status of the post-communist anti-communist novel is obvious: on the one hand, anti-communist fiction written during communism enjoyed widespread recognition in the West, and was allotted extensive commentary both before and after the fall of the regimes, with its leading figures like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Czesław Miłosz, and Milan Kundera becoming literary superstars; on the other hand, the prolific field of post-communist studies has never spotlighted the specific focus of anti-communist fiction. See Kovačević, *Narrating*, 2008, and Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes, 1988–1998* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

<sup>31</sup>Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and after* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Christian Moraru, ed., *Postcommunism, Postmodernism, and the Global Imagination* (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2009).



postmodernism, and its capacity to exert a social and political critique.<sup>32</sup> However, in its postmodern form, reiterated in the post-communist period, the anti-communist novel displayed similar limits in terms of social and political scope, as long as it remained confined to a univocal view of the communist system. Therefore, the language of this fiction, which was aimed at deconstructing metanarratives, especially that of socialist realism – as was argued by the proponents of the ‘subversive’ approach – ended by rejecting realism altogether. To that extent, it reflected the larger tendency of post-communist anti-communist fiction to avoid all instruments of realist analysis. The anti-realist drive was, of course, specific to every permutation of postmodernism. In East-Central European literatures, the postmodern trend became institutionalized and acquired cultural power only after the fall of communism, when it could also capitalize on its added value of export, since it became praised in the West as the epitome of a post-Cold War mindset. Later around 2000, East-Central European postmodernism would gain additional exposure through regional histories of European literature (Neubauer, Cornis-Pope) and world literature theories that endowed cultural (semi)peripheries with a heightened potential for artistic creativity.<sup>33</sup> For all these reasons, the post-communist anti-communist novel’s emergence as a distinct genre relied on postmodernism’s renown in East-Central Europe during the 1990s. However, as some of our contributions illustrate (Ștefan Baghiu and Ovio Olaru, ‘Capitalist Heterotopia & Lost Social Utopia: Documenting Class, Work, and Migration in Post-Communist East-Central European Fiction’, Mihai Iovănel, ‘Inside the Labyrinth. The Post-Communist Novel between Anti-Communism and Nostalgia’), the anti-communist mindset remained so strong that it prolonged its literary impact even after postmodernism came to its natural end at the very end of the twentieth century. The new millennium witnessed a return of veracity in all areas of culture, which brought the global demise of the anti-realist devices and textual sophistication which had been the mainstays of postmodernism.

But even as postmodernism waned, anti-communism maintained a lasting influence, which can be best explained by the certain similarities it possesses with neoliberal principles, due to their shared stance against a strong state and their celebration of individual values. For example, the post-communist enthusiasm for Western-type neoliberalism benefitted from the popular discourse of antagonizing a past whose only alternative was implicitly presented as western capitalism. This discourse was relentlessly delivered by most media and intellectual circles throughout the 1990s and late 2000s, even as post-communist governments hesitated to fully embrace the neoliberal model, while right-wing populist movements (such as the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish PiS) successfully played the card of anti-Westernism. Anti-communist narratives suggested that the (still) peripheral status of post-communist societies should be blamed on the vestiges of the communist system and on its mentalities that undermined the effort to assimilate Western democratic values. At the same time, these narratives refrained from directly questioning Western models of society which were deemed in the public space as ideal standards for East-Central Europe. Of course, the post-communist anti-communism displayed through the region was not exclusively pro-Western. However, it was this option that dominated in the long run, while populist variants of anti-communism

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<sup>32</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

<sup>33</sup>See WReC: Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2015), and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005).

which were critical of Western capitalism gradually lost leverage, although they did span certain literary outcomes such as the Hungarian anti-communist and anti-liberal novelists István Csúrkó, Sándor Csoóri, and Zoltán Pósa. Recurrent within the anti-communist worldview was an anti-statist stance – to the extent that communism was defined by state violence – which fitted perfectly into the capitalist frame of post-communism that aimed at reducing the influence of the state in order to empower the private sector. Once they chose to equate communism with repressive power, thus viewing the state in rather abstract and negative terms, anti-communist novels were less concerned with exploring concrete social relations and the functioning of institutions. Instead, they only approached the latter in light of the damages they inflicted on the individual. This critical feature of the genre highlights how anti-communist novels come closer to *romans á la these* than to the more complex novels of political debate. A significant example in this respect is provided by the postmodern metafiction that developed in Romanian literature throughout the 1980s based on a narrative program directed against the 1970s political novels of the ‘obsessive decade’ (the local variant of the Thaw novel), which had addressed the ravages of the brutally Stalinist 1950s.<sup>34</sup> The Romanian postmodern programme was meant to deconstruct the totalizing propensity of the political novel, and thus expose the falsity of its approach to ‘reality’. But it was only after 1989 that local postmodern writers voiced in explicit ideological terms their dissatisfaction with the weaker version of anti-communism displayed through the more realist political novels written by their predecessors. In this later context, when postmodernism came to the fore, the anti-communist stance of the political novel of the ‘obsessive decade’ was indeed weaker, since it was confined, at the time of its formulation, to the critique of the Stalinist system that had been officially permitted by Ceaușescu’s regime.

Nevertheless, the postmodern creative paradigm was not the sole reason that anti-communist novels steered away from the realist convention that was inherently oriented towards social analysis. Rather, this limit was inscribed within the anti-communist view itself, with its restricted coverage of social realities. Illustrative in this case are the two celebrated Hungarian (post)modern novelists analysed by János D. Mekis in ‘Telling the Truth via Fiction: Imre Kertész, Péter Esterházy, and Hungarian Post-1989 Literary Anti-Communism’. Despite their historical embedding into autobiographical, family-related experiences, and the sociological scope of their setting, the narratives written by both authors criticize communism via postmodern deconstructive devices which eventually lose most of their realist underpinnings. They regard the system as a metanarrative mechanism that is manifest in political dogma, standard language and ritualized, collectivist social behaviour. This allows them to present communism as a full-blown absurdity that disconnects the individual from its own past and from reality itself, which propaganda and dogma have turned into ‘irreality’. On the one hand, this illustrates the opinion shared by East-Central European commentators that, despite lacking the social, political, economic and technological support of Western postmodernity, and therefore taking the form of a ‘postmodernism without postmodernity’,<sup>35</sup> the postmodernism which emerged in late communism experienced the same ‘precession of simulacra’ that

<sup>34</sup>Ruxandra Cesereanu, ‘The Romanian Gulag as Reflected in the Novels of the ‘Obsessive Decade’’, *Transylvanian Review* 24 (2015): 29–43. See also Alex Goldiș, ‘Pentru o morfologie a romanului ‘obsedantului deceniu’’, *Caietele Sextil Pușcariu* 3 (2017): 494.

<sup>35</sup>Mircea Martin, ‘D’un postmodernisme sans rivages et d’un postmodernisme sans postmodernité’, *Euresis. Cahiers roumains d’études littéraires* 1–2 (1995): 3–13.

was theorized in relation to Western capitalist societies.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the anti-communist critique of politically-enforced collectivist forms of social existence adds to East-Central European postmodernism's emphasis on the individual and on his/her authenticity. Western postmodernism was, on the contrary, dismissive of the idea of subjectivity, given the indebtedness of the paradigm to poststructuralist theory. The celebration of individual values against politicized forms of collectivism was best served by protagonists selected from the intellectual/artistic field, as evidenced by Camelia Dinu's contribution 'Vladimir Makanin and Post-Soviet Trauma Disorder', which abounded in the post-Soviet postmodern enactments of anti-communism.

Anti-communist novels combined this devotion to the individual with less concern for in-depth social analysis, which was all the more striking when those novels also dealt with the post-communist world. One example in that respect was their tendency to read the post-1989 rekindled nationalism as a perilous 'legacy' of communism,<sup>37</sup> rather than as an indicator of the brutal contemporary transition. By failing to recognize other than past causes, such post-communist anti-communist narratives lost their explanatory function towards the present.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, anti-communist novels set, albeit partly, during post-communism display clearly their limited grasp of contemporary realities. As Camelia Dinu points out in her contribution, their anti-communist ethos leads to attempts to explain the 'social and moral confusion' of the post-totalitarian world by invoking 'dysfunctions of the prior times'. Similar flaws in understanding both the present and the past are illustrated by the pulp subgenres explored in Mihai Iovănel's contribution. Western postmodern metafiction assimilated such subgenres within larger explanatory narratives about the multi-cultural, multi-identity, fluid structure of their contemporary world, but the use of similar tropes in East-Central European post-communist anti-communist fiction has only made obvious a generic inability to rationalize communism. Iovănel argues that mystery and conspiracy theories frame the allegories employed by Polish, Czech, Romanian, and Serbian writers as they grapple with the disorienting nature of post-communism. At the same time, these writers eschew any deep understanding of the communist past by instead projecting it as an incomprehensible enigma. Faced with this epistemic gap, the narrators of these novels retreat within phantasmagorical worlds, in a gesture that is, in fact, typical of the escapist fiction written during – and against – communism.

If the anti-communist novel relies on postmodern metafiction to reveal the uncertain status of the post-communist societies of the 1990s, which were reeling to adjust to the present through the familiar gesture of vilifying the past, the 2000s changed the economic, political and social condition of these countries. Framed by their official integration into the structures of the European Union (in 2004 for the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, and in 2007 for Romania and Bulgaria), which was

<sup>36</sup>See Carmen Mușat, *Strategiile subversiunii. Incursiuni în proza postmodernă* (Strategies of Subversion. Forays into Postmodern Fiction) (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2008), 23: 'The totalitarian communist society and the post-industrial society share [...] the process whereby reality is suspended and replaced by a network of manufactured images, ideological 'simulacra', which were only meant to embellish a decaying organism.

<sup>37</sup>Martin Mevius (ed.), *The Communist Quest for National Legitimacy in Europe: 1918–1989* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>38</sup>See also Michael D. Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism. Emancipation, Transition, Nation, and War* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 240: 'The Wars of Yugoslav Succession, when nationalism – in opposition to liberalism – is in play, hold a critical function in transition culture: the unspoken, but deadly alternative to markets and pluralism'.

accompanied by an ever stronger, and explicit official condemnation/criminalization of communism (made by the European Council, Romania in 2006, Hungary in 2010 etc.), a new post-communist social dynamic emerged by the mid-2000s.<sup>39</sup> Its clearest outcome was the massive migration of East-Central European workers to Western markets, which accelerated the destruction of the social cohesion that had been ongoing since the fall of communism. As far as the arts were concerned, during the same period, in East-Central Europe, as elsewhere around the globe, postmodernism lost its vitality, making way for new waves of realism. If Western theorists read this realist revival as a reaction to global capitalism (an attempt that ended up in resignation),<sup>40</sup> the same could not be said about the corresponding trends arising in post-communist literatures. Here, the anti-communist mindset and its embedding within the public imaginary made the narrative realism, which resurfaced during the 2000s, continue to be reactive to the tainted communist past that was perceived as an obstacle towards full capitalist development. Even younger writers, whose biographical experience of communism was limited to their childhood, felt the intellectual pressure of anti-communism whose monopolistic version of memory reached its institutional peak by the late 1990s. Alex Goldiș's contribution to this special issue analyzes in detail this phenomenon in Romania, then relates it to the realist narratives published after 2000 which, due to their semi-biographical substance, were intended as nostalgic recuperations of childhood during communism. However, Goldiș observes that these narratives also reveal the 'internalization of the anti-communist stance which completely dominated the public sphere after the Romanian Revolution', and 'the strategy of transferring responsibility to childhood identity' which was indicative of the writers' self-censorship towards the subject'.

Although the post-2000 realist narratives from East-Central Europe achieved a more nuanced understanding of their contemporary economic and political context than it had been possible during the chaotic 1990s, they still overlooked the difficulty of adjusting to the world of global capitalism, placing the root of the problem in their societies' failed departure from communism. The migration novels analysed in the contribution by Baghiu and Olaru essentially capture this existential struggle. They reveal how the massive social displacement which ensued throughout the 2000s was not seen as illustrative of the destruction of social cohesion that had previously been secured,<sup>41</sup> albeit in propagandistic forms, by communism, and was now being dismantled by 'disembedded neoliberalism'. Instead, even though they employed testimonial weight and relied on empiric documentation, these novels still projected a 'civilizing' (i.e. de-communizing) perspective in which 'social dumping' was recast as 'social mobility'.

To conclude, the main scope of this special issue is to acquaint a wider readership with the existence and the massive influence – literary and cultural alike – of the anti-communist novel that emerged in post-communist literatures. This specific narrative form was never approached in the West as a distinct typology, partly because it was encompassed within the larger trend of postmodernism, with its presumed ability to deconstruct metanarratives. Of course, throughout the post-war period, anti-communism was known in the West to have nurtured the aesthetics, and the inner

<sup>39</sup>See Laure Neumayer, *The Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>40</sup>See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

<sup>41</sup>Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003).

feelings as well, of most writers who were living in the Soviet Bloc, at least those working outside the confines of socialist realism. For the Western public, this otherwise legitimate perception was amplified by the anti-communist exiled intellectuals, many of whom became award-winning literary figures after they crossed the Iron Curtain. However, the same public also shared the view projected at the end of the Cold War, namely that anti-communism had vanished alongside the political system which seemed, until then, to have been its *raison d'être*. As far as literature is concerned, most analyses of post-communist cultures have indeed underestimated the perpetuation and the impact of the anti-communist ethos after 1989, and focused instead on the buzzword of *ostalgie* with its implication that the problems that emerged after 1989 were the result of an insufficiently radical break from communism.

In fact, anti-communism is still a critical issue in our advanced globalized world. In particular, it remains relevant for citizens of post-communist societies, where the debate on the communist past has usually been led in catastrophic, emotionally charged terms which often distorted – by selection – historical realities. The novels analysed by the contributors to this special issue demonstrate, through the anti-communist stance embedded in their fictional worlds, that communism was misconstrued in the public imagination, rather than understood, metabolized, and finally surpassed. This explains why, although historical distance from communism has been accomplished in the three decades following 1989, there is still no epistemic distance and sufficient objectivity. Anti-communist novels illustrate this predicament, but also carry the potential, inherent in literary fiction in general, to create a deeper awareness than other cultural/public discourses could. Therefore, they can open a larger space of reflection with cultural, social and political implications, to understand how post-communist societies continue to feed on their resentment, and not just on their nostalgia, for communism; and for readers to grasp some of the underlying mechanisms that have prevented, and still prevent, a closure with the past.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [grant agreement No 101001710].

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