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CONTESTED HERITAGE AND IDENTITIES IN POST-SOCIALIST BULGARIA

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The labour camps are one of the traumatic memory places for Bulgarian society. Until today, 25 years after the end of the communist regime, the issue of camps remains controversial and provokes acute political debates. The public memory for them passed through various stages of “warming” and “cooling” (if I could use the metaphors of Charles Maier 2002). The memorialization of camps, making them a part of the memorial heritage of the nation can be seen as part of the process of transitional justice and as a way of building a new democratic order in post-socialist Bulgaria. The politics of memory for labour camps in transitional justice perspective I have analyzed in other studies (Luleva 2012). Here I will only recall that the recognition of the former camp inmates as repressed, obtained under the law on civil and political rehabilitation of the repressed by the communist regime\textsuperscript{1}, was crucial for their individual and collective identity. Besides, the law outlines the framework of structuring the group of those having suffered reprisals from the communist regime and their institutions and sets new frameworks of discourse in remembering and shaping the cultural and collective memory.

In this text I will focus on the changes in the cultural memory on the labour camps in Bulgaria in recent years. Undoubtedly the camp in Belene – the biggest camp in the

communist Bulgaria is a common place of memory, but not a place of shared memory for Bulgarian society, as a series of researchers recognize (Dejanova 2009; Koleva 2010). The cultural memory on Belene is not frozen and unchanging. It is changing. In the following sections I will consider the changes in the cultural memory on the „Belene camp“ and the public discourse of it as I show Belene as a polemical place of memory, a place of dispute in interpretations and of the different strategies for dealing with the past employed by the main agents, policy-makers in terms of the memory of the recent past2.

By analyzing the memorialization of the “Belene camp” I will expose the interaction of four, I think, most influential factors in the formation of cultural memory in Bulgaria today: 1. the change of the generations, commemorating the recent part; 2. the role of the media; 3. the role of the supranational framework: the European institutions and policies of memory and 4. the non-governmental organizations and political parties. In a number of cases they have taken over the role of the state institutions as agents of memory and commemorations.

The communist camps – from the public silence to the political arena

The Bulgarian readers learned about the Stalinist terror and the Soviet camps as early as the mid 60s, when they secretly read “One Day of Ivan Denisovič” by Alexander Solženitsyn. Later in the years of the Soviet perestroika the publications on the Gulag Archipelago in „Novy mir“ and „Ogonek“ reached the Bulgarian audience. The Bulgarian labour camps, which existed almost throughout the entire

2 The various interpretations of the past in the memory culture of the post-socialists countries are subject to a number of studies. For example, see Todorova 2010; Todorova, Troebst 2014; Marc 2013; Luleva 2013; Beyen 2015.
period of socialism, were spoken about publicly after the end of the regime of Todor Živkov. The theme of the camps became part of the political debate on communism in the early years of transition. Then research on the communist camps and memories of former camp inmates were published for the first time. Films were also created. However, the memory of the camps did not go beyond these texts and the few memorial plates near Pernik, Lovech and Belene. The theme of repressions during the communist regime and camps did not find expression in museum expositions. The ambiguous and contradictory attitude to the previous period expressed itself in a "disappearance" from the museum halls. Thus the museums – the institutions that officially take care of the memory of the nation – have shunned the topic of the camps and generally maintained a policy of forgetting them.

The survivors, repressed by the communist regime, created their own organizations, which organized annual "national commemorative gathering" on the Island of Persin near Belene – the location where the biggest political camp in the socialist Bulgaria existed – the so called "Work-reeducation facility (WRF) – Belene". Through public commemorative rituals the organizations of the repressed paid homage to the victims of the regime and declared their presence in the public life. In the first years of transition, they were joined by the political parties of the democratic center and right wing parties, which took anticommunist stance. Some of these parties – such as the party of the Agrarian Union and the Social-democratic and Democratic parties proclaimed themselves to be the recipients of the respective "old" parties of the democratic opposition that existed until 1948. Their leaders, members and supporters constituted the main contingent of inmates in labour camps. Some of them had waited for the end of the communist regime and actively participated in the commemorations. For those people the commemorations
had a meaning of a political act and helped their formation as political and memory groups. Despite being united by anti-communism, the repressed are not a single, homogeneous political and memory group\(^3\).

The first commemoration on the Island of Persin – at the location of the Second site of WRF- Belene, was held on the 1\(^{st}\) of June 1990 in the presence of President Želev, the leaders of the UDF and hundreds of repressed in camps and prisons across the country. The date chosen was hardly accidental. On the next day – the 2\(^{nd}\) of June – there is a tribute to the heroes who died for the freedom of Bulgaria. The people who passed through the communist camps and prisons are devastated physically and socially marginalized, but they have the self-awareness that they were persecuted for their political views (of farmers, democrats, social democrats, etc.). This context makes them feel not as victims of the regime, but its opponents, therefore – fighters, heroes. The meeting of the former camp inmates was very emotional; the hopes for a political change were great. Some of them got actively involved in political life; they were elected for deputies in the Grand National Assembly. Their number in the next parliaments sharply decreased along with the declining political influence of the organizations of the repressed. I met and talked with some of these former camp inmates in 2009 and 2010.

Especially impressive was my meeting with Krum Horozov. Arrested and convicted as a member of the Youth Agricultural Union, he spent 10 years in prison and one year (1954–55) in the Belene camp. After his release, he resided in Rousse, where he worked in construction. After 1989 he got involved in political life as a deputy to the Grand National Assembly. In the 1990s Krum Horozov issued a self-

\(^3\) For more details on the differences and competition between the groups of the repressed, see Luleva 2012.
published album “Prison – Belene”. It presented a collection of sketches and paintings of the camp, which Horozov painted from memory. These paintings he kept as valuable treasure and showed to his guests – journalists, researchers and politicians who visit, led by their interest in him as being one of the last living witnesses who passed through the communist prisons and camps. Krum Horozov arranges the pictures, glued on cardboard, on the old sofa and tells his story.

Krum Horozov, Rousse 2010. Photo: Ana Luleva

This story he has published in his memoirs “Ozareneto” [The illumination] (1999). The paintings were reproduced and displayed in exhibitions in different cities across the country and in the European Parliament in Brussels.

Krum Horozov fights for the memory on the “political camp Belene” to be preserved. He contributes to this task with his personal memories, which now turned into text and images, are one of the main pillars of the cultural memory.
about the camp today. Besides, he is also an advocate of the idea the island to be converted into a memorial park. For this idea he worked while he was a member of the parliament, and later he continues to write letters and suggestions to the Presidency and the National Assembly. He constantly repeats that Belene is a Bulgarian sanctuary, which was desecrated by the presence of a prison for criminal offenders on the site of the former communist camp. For him and his followers it was important that the camp be remembered as related to the struggle against the regime:

“I wanted a museum to be established in Belene, but as long as there is a prison, it won’t work. There should be an open access, a shrine should be made, a reconstruction should be done… a port, passing ships should stop, a beautiful alley, to enter the site, to see and light a candle… Belene was a prison for political opponents; it was a labour camp for politicians, for the new intelligentsia of rural Bulgaria – deprived of the right to study, driven out of Universities, out of the state administration – we were tortured there to remove the humane from our souls and made us accept this animal like. There we fought for the freedom of Bulgaria, against the dictatorship and there a prison for criminals still remains now. There is no place to enter and pay homage – it is a disgrace”.

The state institutions do not respond to the proposals by the Union of the repressed. They did not close down the functioning prison on the island of Persin, did not support the repressed in establishing a museum or memorial of the victims from the communist camps on the island. Creating the impression for a symbolic continuity, the prison is still operating; the island remains its territory and “absorbs” the old WRF-Belene.
Today there are the ruins of buildings built in the 80s, when during the so called Revival process the camp was opened again and in there Bulgarian Turks and Bulgarian Muslims were retained. There is a small commemorative plaque reminding that this was the place where a “Second site of the Belene camp” used to be and that on June 1, 1990 at that location the first meeting of camp survivors took place in order “to pay homage to the thousands of victims of the totalitarian regime”. The plaque was placed in 2005 by the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU), the district of Pleven. This inscription, as well as the wooden cross attached to the building, is the only indication of the camp. Nearby a stone stele was erected on which the names of those who passed through the camps in the communist Bulgaria should be inscribed. The difficult access to the island, the disputes between the organizations of the repressed and the competition between the groups of the repressed make this task impossible to accomplish and the stele stands blank for years.

The repressed held their meeting on the island every year on the last Sunday of May. The commemoration follows a similar scenario and faces a gradually fading public interest. The interest of politicians and the public in the camp theme weakens along with thinning of the ranks of former inmates. Their voice is quieter; their political and electoral weighting irreversibly disappears.

In 2010, when I first paid a visit to Belene and to the island of Persin, I wrote in my diary: „the landscape of the island of Belene does not remind people of the communist camp – a place of slave labour and human suffering. Today

__Belene (or Persin) is the name of the biggest island of the Belene archipelago in the Danube River. In 1949 the labour camp was located there. Since 1959 it was transformed into “Belene” prison. Along the river, opposite the island, is the village of Belene. In 1964 it was declared a town. Nowadays Belene is a small town with about 8 000 inhabitants.__
the island is only accessible for one day during the year – the Commemoration Day. For the rest of the year it is unreachable because it is part of the territory of a still functioning prison” (Luleva 2012). The commemoration then gave me the impression of a political event. A hundred or so people attended – elderly people, camp survivors, their relatives and members of the Unions of the repressed from various parts of the country. The political parties, traditionally claiming moral allegiance to the memory of the victims of communism, did not send representatives of their central leadership. After the usual prayer commemorating the victims of communism, the speeches of the leaders from the organizations of the repressed followed. The leaders of the repressed emphasized that Belene was a sacred place – “the Bulgarian Golgotha”, “the Bulgarian Gulag” through which the Bulgarian “martyrs and fighters” had passed. The inhumane conditions in which the victims of the regime were placed were evoked. Everyone expressed their disappointment that Bulgarian society did not know about and was not “grateful to these martyrs and victims”. Once again it was mentioned that the repressed should unite to make their voice heard.

Paying homage on the island of Persin near Belene provides an opportunity for the repressed to meet each other, “to count” and declare their political stance. The rhetoric of commemoration, evident at other public events of the repressed as well, indicates that the anti-totalitarian discourse on the democratic values and justice provides them with the opportunity to construct a positive and, in many cases, heroic image and meaning of their lives as “fighters against the totalitarian regime”: “We fought for the freedom of Bulgaria… In the prison and in the camps we learned to become pastors of justice in our country… We struggled for a just society”. In parallel, the individual traumatic experience is integrated into the collective cultural trauma of the “martyrs of Belene”,

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turning into a source of collective identity, evoking a sense of pride. There was a visible effort to make a hierarchy of the “repressions” and the victims, and a competition among them. One respondent pointed out, “All of them had been to camps, prisons, but they cannot stand each other. The suffering does not bind them together”.

In 2010 there was an obvious lack of political will and social consensus for preserving the camp on the island of Persin as a symbol for the communist camps in the national memory culture. My conclusion back then was the following: “All are sharing their disappointment that ‘with every passing year the number of pilgrims has been decreasing, restricted to the circle of their relatives’. The media and other institutions did not show interest, the camp theme had gradually passed into the zone of public amnesia” (Luleva 2012: 138–140).

The changing memorial landscape

Four years later, in 2014, this picture starts to change, nevertheless. A new stage in the history of the memory of Belene has recently began, and it is about to get out of the zone of public oblivion. The change has been due to the activity of Father Paolo Cortesi, a parish priest of Belene. He arrived in Belene in 2010 and since 2012 he has been a parish priest and rector of the Sanctuary of the Venerable Bishop Evgenii Bossilkov, located in the small Danubian town. Belene is the birth place of Evgenii Bossilkov, the first Bulgarian Bishop of the Nikopol diocese of the Catholic Church in Bulgaria. In the sanctuary the baptismal font, in which he was baptized in 1900, is kept. A piece of the shirt, in which he was executed in the Central Sofia Prison in 1952, is preserved in the altar. The relic is a donation made by Pope John Paul II.

Father Pavel (as the citizens of Belene call him) cannot accept the fact that the memory about the suffering of hundreds of people on the island would be lost and that oblivion
has now taken the place of the sinister labour camp. On his own initiative, he set up a small museum in the churchyard, displaying photos and documents, telling about the life of the venerable Monsignor Evgenii Bosilkov and his death as a martyr in the communist prison in 1952. As martyr of the faith, Evgenii Bosilkov was canonized in 2000. An exhibition has been staged in the Evgenii Bosilkov Cultural Centre, also to be found there, presenting the persecution of priests by the communist regimes in different countries.

Father Pavel has a dream and is working towards its accomplishment: that Belene becomes a commemoration site for those who suffered in the camps during the totalitarian regimes in the 20th century Bulgaria.

“I live at a distance of 50 m from the portal. I cannot sleep in peace. This place has to be guarded because there the earth has been sanctified by the tears and blood of the sufferers, no matter which regime they were opposed to”, he says.

On April 27, 2014 he initiated the first meeting of an Organizing Committee, which was to work towards the setting up of a foundation and a memorial museum for the victims of totalitarianism in Belene. The media announcement and the invitation, personally mailed to hundreds of Bulgarian citizens, read in parts:

‘On April 27, 1949, by decision of the BCP government, a work reeducation facility was established on the Island of Persin, next to what was then the village of Belene, and the adjacent other smaller islands, which was rapidly transformed into the largest concentration camp for the regime’s political opponents. Some 65 years have elapsed since, and there is nothing in Belene. In commemoration of the victims from all
concentration camps in Bulgaria you are invited to join us in constituting a committee. The aim is by joint efforts to set up a foundation, which is to collect and sum up the existing evidence and build a memorial museum on the Island of Belene.\footnote{https://www.facebook.com/ostrovbelene?fref=ts;}

A few people from Veliko Tarnovo, Svištov and Pleven, who had suffered reprisals, several local residents of Belene, the mayor and media representatives in the region attended the first meeting of the Organizing Committee. Father Pavel told about his dream: that Belene turns from a place of oblivion to a place of commemoration. He showed a short film about the museum of the victims of communism in Romania and snapshots from the Bulgarian Island of Persin, where just ruins, oblivion and a blank concrete wall built years ago but not finalized as a memorial, had remained from the sinister Second Site. In his emotional speech he laid stress on the duty to remember and commemorate human suffering on the island. The mayor of Belene stated his personal support for the initiative. The representatives of people who had suffered reprisals from the communist regime also stated their support for the initiative.

Father Pavel actively takes the opportunities to popularize the initiative in the social networks; he has his personal blog and a blog dedicated to the Concentration Camp on the Island of Belene. Via Internet he popularizes evidence, published years ago in the media and materials about the concentration camps in Bulgaria. Just a month after the first meeting of the Organizing Committee, the visits to the “Belene Concentration Camp” webpage has increased (there are 6000 friends of the Belene Foundation), the memory of it
has “warmed up”. Dozens of people follow the activities of Father Pavel and share his ideas.

On June, 1st of 2014 the traditional event on the Island was organized by the Union of those suffering reprisals and the Organizing Committee for the Island of Belene. This time more people got together on the island. Apart from the usual groups organized by the unions of those who had endured reprisals, arriving from different places, there were new faces, too: young people, families with small children and many more residents of Belene in comparison to preceding years. The event was announced and held in a way different from the usual (political) gathering of people having suffered reprisals (a Rally). It was a pilgrimage and commemoration of the people who had suffered on the island (Commemoration). In his emotional speech from the rostrum, Father Pavel associated the obligation to remember human suffering with the Christian faith:

“I keep the sanctuary of the blessed Evgenii Bosilkov. Belene has been sanctified by the blood and tears of our brothers and sisters. I want the memory of those who suffered to be kept alive. Because in my view, they had experienced the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Here was a place of suffering and it must become a place of resurrection. This was the Bulgarian Golgotha; I want it to be a resurrection for all. Belene should be the site of memory. And the site for education in human rights, truth and democracy.”

He shared also his idea that at the entrance to the museum and memorial the words of the Saviour be inscribed: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted“.

The next important step towards the institutionalization of the commemorative practices and the realization of the
idea of a memorial and museum of the victims of the totalitarian regime in the town of Belene was the creation of a legal entity – a non-profit organization „Cultural Center Evgenii Bosilkov – Belene“. The subject of its activity was set as follows: “preserving the memory about the victims of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century; construction and maintenance of a park – a memorial on the Island of Persin, town of Belene as well as a museum about the victims of totalitarian regimes in the town of Belene; preserving and promoting the memory of Evgenii Bosilkov; preservation of the cultural – historical and ethnographic heritage in the town of Belene and the region and creating conditions for the development of pilgrimage tourism in the region; establishing and maintaining contacts with national and international organizations in order to promote the ideas of the European Community on memory; development and strengthening of spiritual values and civil society to protect and promote the memory of the victims of totalitarian regimes of the 20th century; publishing activities related to the cultural-historical and ethnographic heritage in the town of Belene, the region and others.”

The web site of the center there is a statement that the initiative was inspired by “our fellow Evgenii Bosilkov, born in 1900 and executed in 1952: a true European, who lived in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Bulgaria, whose personality embodies the tragedy that befell Europe during the twentieth century”. On the future activity it says: “Above all, we will continue to build around the personality of Egenii Bosilkov and its Sanctuary a circle of friends of all people who wish to remember and honor him and the other innocent victims of the regimes of the twentieth century – friends, different in nationality, religion, political views, social status, united in the belief that the suffering and death of these people are an

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invaluable gift that must be preserved and passed on to future generations … Together with these friends we will continue to rummage through the past in order to discover the testimonies of victims – memories, correspondence, photographs, places, objects … everything that can help us not to forget because a nation without a memory is a nation without a future”.7

The civil association was introduced to the society of Belene on February 1st, 2015 by the chairman of its Board – Father Cortesi. This was a symbolic date: the 1st of February was declared as the Day of gratitude and homage to the victims of the communist regime by a decision of the Council of Ministers from 2011. An important part of the activity of the center is concerned with the maintenance of Archive and Library, through which to “spread the culture of memory both in Bulgaria and in Europe and the world”. For the short period since its inception “Cultural Center Evgenii Bosilkov – Belene” shows consistency in implementation of its objectives. The memory about the camp is kept “hot” as much as the website presents archival materials, memoirs of inmates, profiles of similar places of suffering turned into memorials, reports on visits to the island. The next big step is also accomplished – the breakthrough in the restrictive mode of access to the island: since June the cultural centre provides a service “visiting the Second site of the island” upon request submitted in advance. Father Pavel organizes such visits of pilgrims from Italy and a group of students from Milan, guests to the parish in Belene in July 2015.

Thus, the commemorative events, organized by Father Pavel, are already supported institutionally by a civil association as well. And they are not only limited to the annual pilgrimage on the island at the end of May. For two years in remembrance of the victims of the totalitarian regimes of

7 Source:<http://bosilkov.com/bg/persin/intsiativa-69>
the 20th century a commemoration is held on 23 August – the date declared by the 41st National Assembly in November 2009 as the Day of remembering the crimes of the National Socialist, Communist and other totalitarian regimes, and paying homage to the memory of the victims of these regimes. The church calendar and the calendar of commemoration overlapped in November 2014. On November 13 the Catholic Church honors the memory of the Blessed Martyrs Bishop Evgenii Bosilkov, the priests Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichov. The Church marks in a liturgy the memory of those four Bulgarian Martyrs who shed their blood as evidence of their Christian faith and loyalty to the Church unity. In the Nikopol diocese the day is a celebration of the Blessed Evgenii Bosilkov. On November 15, 2014 a Day of memory was organized in Belene. The event includes solemn holy Mass in the Sanctuary of Bl. Evgenii, at which “together with the four martyrs – Evgenii, Pavel, Jehoshaphat and Kamen, the Bulgarian victims of totalitarian regimes were commemorated as well”, opening a monument to Pope John Paul II by the Apostolic Nuncio in the presence of the President Rosen Plevneliev, the town’s Mayor, representatives of various political parties and organizations of the repressed and a Round table in the hall of the prison “Witnesses of the faith during the communist regime”. As organizers announced, it became “the most emotional moment of this memorable day. For the first time, representatives of all Christian denominations gathered together to share the bitter experience of suffering martyrdom, which lasted a quarter of a century”.

Then the President visited the Second site and made the following statement:

“Community and solidarity are the values that we all – politicians, religious and civic leaders are called to restore. The main lesson from the communist past, which we must
remember is that a strong society, is built on strong local communities, which in turn can not exist without faith and without memory”.

The biggest commemoration, organized by the Cultural Center Evgeni Bosilkov – Belene, is the annual pilgrimage on the island at the end of May. In 2015, it was conducted as a national pilgrimage entitled “Bridging the Generations”.

On the day of the national pilgrimage to the memorial at the Second Site, the Island of Persin. Photo: Ana Luleva, 2015

In May Father Pavel gave a press conference for the upcoming event; he talked about the cultural center and invited the Bulgarian citizens to visit Belene on 30 May. He and the volunteers of his parish had prepared. The grass was mowed. In the building, cleaned of junk accumulated for years, the

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exhibition “Memory camp Belene” was prepared by the journalist Hristo Hristov and exhibited with the help of the cultural center.

The morning of pilgrimage (which in the Orthodox calendar coincided with All Souls’ Day) Father Pavel greeted guests at the gates of the sanctuary. With the usual hospitality water and coffee was prepared for those who wished. On the long table in the yard many books were arranged – almost everything available from the published studies and memories on the camp and on the repression of the communist regime. That is, if we use the metaphor of Etkind, the memory “software” of camps – the element of the cultural memory that contains knowledge about them. Arriving people saw the museum collection, went to the church, rested in the shady yard, and opened the books. Some people would
buy to supplement personal library. Besides the usual groups of farmers, repressed and their families from different parts of the country, families with children from Belene and the region had also come. The presence of many young people who came for the first time on the island was impressive. This year a lot of things were done for the first time – from the preparation and layout of the memorial ritual, through the list of officials and media interest – to the scenario of the ritual and the subsequent response.

The list of officials was long: the President of the National Assembly C. Cačeva, the Minister of Defense, representative of the presidency, deputies, governors, the mayor of Belene and others. The commemorative ritual followed a new scenario. The anthem of Europe sounded in place of the former Second site. Father Pavel welcomed citizens and representative of institutions and called for unity and cooperation:

“And we here, in Belene, right here, illuminated with tears and blood, ascend the Cathedral of memory [bold – P. Cortesi]. This is open to everyone who wishes. There is room for everyone! There is a place for you, the survivor of the regime: give us your testimony. There is a place for you, young man: this place should be made tight, cleaned, and made attractive. There is a place for you, a politician or an institution: the place needs support. There is a place for you, citizen of Belene: to welcome, accompany and explain. There is a place for you, citizen of Bulgaria and Europe: you can help with a donation, support, promotion, organization of visits. Dear friends, the hard work is yet to come. But if each of us contribute something, as I hope it will become, after some months or another year, Belene will become a more friendly town, a Town of Memory that every day will welcome people from across Europe and around the
world, who will flock here to understand, to honor and to be educated in the spirit of liberty”

For the first time the visitors watched a play on the memoirs of former inmates presented by students and youths from Belene. Then in official speeches it was highlighted that the memory of the victims of the communist regime should be preserved. In his message the Member of the European Parliament Andrey Kovačev, who for years has supported the cause of maintaining the memory of the Belene camp, said: “The truth about the atrocities committed by the repressive machine of communism should be enshrined in history books. The objective historical reading of the period from 9 September 1944 to 1989 will restore the justice for victims and will prevent repeating the mistakes of the past”.

For the first time in the presence of the President of the National Assembly and the Minister of Defense military honors accompanied the laying of wreaths to the memorial. The event was covered in the central issues of the national TV. In the coming days, the media attention was attracted by the reactions of politicians (mainly from the left), who saw in the theater performance unacceptable involvement of children in the “reconstruction of violence”. The scandal has grown and transferred to the Parliament, where a request to the Social Minister Kalfin was made whether they violated the rights of children and what would be the sanctions for the organizers of the show. The Minister, a member of the Party of the Left, stated his personal opinion that the involvement of children in reconstruction of violence is inappropriate as well as its presentation on the website of the official institutions (the website of the Ministry of Defense had detailed coverage of

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the pilgrimage, accompanied by a cadre of the theater performance). He informed the MPs that sanctions can not be imposed for no reason, according to the findings of the verification made by the Social Assistance Agency and the Agency for Child Protection10.

The scandal was used by the BSP to recall his version of the historical truth and to emphasize that the Belene camp is one of the “disputed facts of the past”. The party is the successor of the Communist Party and has repeatedly demonstrated its unwillingness to depart from its legacy. The BSP issued a statement in which opposed the day of Botev and the heroes who died for the freedom of Bulgaria (June 2) and the remembrance in Belene, which was called “religious-political event” and the theatrical performance – “outrageous ‘reconstruction’, recreating bygone dramatic and controversial historical episodes”. By accepting without a doubt that in Bulgaria there was fascism, the authors of the declaration pointed that the “concentration camps” Gonda voda and St. Nicholas were created by the government headed by Bogdan Filov. For the Belene camp they mentioned that “it was opened in 1949. It accommodated political opponents of the government as well as criminals. The camp was closed ten years later, by decision of the then Politburo, i.e., by the same authorities who opened it after finding that in the camp perversions and violence occurred”11. The desire to downplay what was done by the communist authorities is evident, as first, it was said that in the camp there were criminals – a fact highlighted whenever you need to sow doubt that all recognized as repressed in Belene were really such for political reasons; and secondly – to immediately emphasize that

10 http://www.vsekiden.com/174014

11 http://bsp.bg/news/view/7337-deputatite_ot_bsp_lqva_bylgariq_razkritikuvaha_vyyvlichaneto_na_deca_v_sceni_s_politicheska_cel.html
the camp is “closed by the same authorities who opened it after they found that in the camp perversions and violence occurred”.

This statement must convince the public that the government itself corrected what it had done, because it would not allow “perversion and violence”. The opponents of the thesis of the socialists immediately reminded them that it was not the camp in Belene, but the camp in Lovech that was closed after the inspection found inhumane „deviance and violence“ carried out there. In this case, the declaration had to reject any doubt about the fault of the communist regime in relation to the camps and to tell the public that another regime must bear this guilt: “Let remind – concentration camps in Bulgaria were created at the time of fascism”. This categorical statement was displayed in the headlines. After all that being said, in the spirit and style of the communist propaganda from the recent past, the BSP declared further: “We, the Bulgarian Socialists, honor all the innocent victims of the bloody political opposition in Bulgaria, from June 9, 1923 to 1989. Today on the island there is a monument and other memorial signs in memory of the victims.” The last sentence creates the impression that what now exists on the island (“a monument and other memorial signs”) is sufficient and acceptable to the Socialists.

The declaration is a direct attack against Father Cortesi as it stated that is was not the job of a Catholic priest to leave “the field of preaching and organize political activities with children”. Its activity in Belene causes their anxiety: “in deference to the work of His Holiness Pope Francis, to his crusade for more kindness and humanity in our world, we share the concern about the lack of common ground between what is preached by the Holy See and that which is attempted in

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12 Ibid.
Bulgaria by a belated „crusader“ of the Cold War”. Obviously honoring the innocent victims of the communist regime did not fit into the concept of “kindness and humanity” of the Bulgarian Socialists and they see in Father Cortesi the archetype of the enemy from the Cold War.

So the remembrance and the theatrical performance that went beyond the standard accepted so far in the scenario of the memorial ritual caused memory work and a clash of interpretations on the camp past of Bulgaria. The scandal, created by politicians (mainly leftist and involving others with vague ideological orientation, trying to attract media attention), raises the question:

Is a new memory culture possible?

Though speaking as a Catholic priest, Father Pavel’s speech on the Commemoration Day, as well as his statements in the media and addressed to the citizens of Belene are inclusive. He emphasizes that the commemoration and revival of the memory is for all: Christians, Muslims, atheists, Protestants, people of different political views, social status and professions; because all of them are humans, having experienced sufferings and martyrdom.

“Belene must be a place of unification. Not dissent. Because all had equally suffered in the Belene camp: communists, partisans, priests, political prisoners, and “Muslims” as well”.

Father Pavel advocates the creation of non-partisan, non-denominational, supra-ethnic, supranational and European cultural memory. Memory that brings together based on the values of freedom and humanism: “Our dream is to make Belene a place of Memory, a place where all can come to understand, to honor, to learn more about freedom and
respect for human dignity … Freedom and human dignity are values of great importance. “

What is noteworthy is that in his idea about making the camps’ memorials he lays the accent on the sufferers, on the victims. Any political, legal and moral matters of seeking responsibility and punishment for the perpetrators, of guilt and forgiveness (also embedded in the Christian tradition) are completely lacking. “Our mission will never be successful if we harbored bitterness, hatred, revenge, arrogance. It is right that any suffering individual to be comforted and pacified and anyone who caused suffering – must repent and ask for forgiveness”, he said in his speech at the pilgrimage in May 2015. The new discourse about the camp places at the center the suffering of innocent people deprived of their most valuable asset – the freedom. It associates Belene with the European camps of the twentieth century. Addressing the visitors at the national pilgrimage in 2015 Father Pavel said the following:

“Today we are gathered here to honor those men and women who were deprived of freedom, those who were imprisoned unjustly here. But we want to transcend national borders to mention all those who at the same time were in camps in Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Gulag and other European countries, those who came under the blows of the totalitarian fist of the communist and socialist power that crushed or trampled nations for years. Let us remember the thousands of innocents who have been subjected to the same terror at the time of fascism and national socialism. To honor all those who have been in Gonda voda, Enikyoi, Auschwitz and Dachau, Goli Otok and so many others. Long was the way of Cross taken by humanity in the twentieth century – a road that crossed all Europe, and had passed here as well”.

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Father Pavel attracted local community to the cause with a new, unknown before narrative of martyrdom, which is in line with the European policy of memory and the integration of victims of Nazism and Stalinism. He often emphasizes:

“Bulgaria is the only state in the EU where there is still no memorial of this. And it is important that there be not just a memorial, but also a cultural centre which is to educate: something like a school of human rights. There must be such a memorial, taking something good out of the evil, so that it might teach the following generation to respect those thinking differently. And this means to educate them in freedom and democracy”.

This means that the project should be developed as a non-party one: not one or other group mentioned should be specified; it should not be privatized by one or another political party. In the words of Father Pavel, “This will be a monument to all victims of the totalitarian regimes in Europe. Alongside Bulgaria’s history, victims will also be shown from Germany, Poland, Russia, Italy, and Spain… It will be a place where children can learn what had happened without any political bias.” In other words, this initiative is open to all sharing the European values of freedom, truth, democracy and the protection of human rights, notwithstanding their political affiliation.

The documents on the memory of European institutions and the European politics of remembrance are a source of legitimacy for his initiatives presented to the residents of

\[13\] Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 1481/2006 on the need for international condemnation of crimes of the totalitarian communist regimes, the European Parliament of 2 April 2009 „European conscience and totalitarianism“ and the Parliamentary
Belene, the local authorities, the Bulgarian state institutions and the general public. In the last four years there has been a remarkable change in the public opinion and the attitude of Belene residents to the camp. While in 2010 the feeling of discomfort dominated along with a reluctance to talk about the camp, mixed with a sense of shame or an ambition to normalize the camp and erase the memory of it as a place of repressions, today attitudes are different.

The journalist Hristo Hristov, who follows the work done by Father Cortesi in the field of memory in the site desebg.com, wrote that he „was about to convince the local administration and the factors in the town that the subject of the past is part of a more different debate, that has not been led yet, a debate rooted in the faith and European tradition that can be profitable from the public and from an economic point of view“. Father Pavel removes the guilt from the shoulders of the residents of Belene, he does not accuse nor judge them, he seeks to understand them (in their conformism and their attachment to the previous regime) to make them join the cause, which is good for the future of the town and its transformation in the center of pilgrimage tourism: „We want Belene to become a town of memory, visitors’ and educational center. Belene will become a more friendly town, a Town of Memory that every day will welcome people from across Europe and around the world who will flock here, to understand, to honor and to be educated in the spirit of liberty“.

This project of the Cultural Center Evgenii Bosilkov Belene is in line with the global upsurge of interest in places of „pain and shame“ and turning them into places of atrocity tourism, which are approved by the values of human rights and social justice (Logan, Reeves 2009). Auschwitz,

Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe from July 3, 2009 „New unification of a divided Europe“.
announced as a World Heritage Site in 1997, is annually visited by over one million tourists. Father Pavel underlines that Belene can copy the model of similar memorial museums in other European countries: “I have been to Auschwitz, Dachau and numerous other camps, erected in commemoration of those murdered in them. I have indeed been amazed by the fact that there is still no such place in Bulgaria in commemoration of those murdered by the regime. In my view Belene is just the place, where something serious can be made, where people from all over the world could become acquainted with and commemorate the victims of the communist regime.”

The comparison between Belene and Auschwitz and Dachau is made by the repressed as well, with whom I talked. Krum Horozov said that he was inspired to paint the pictures for the Belene camp after visiting Buchenwald. Father Pavel borrowed the idea of theaterically recreating the camp past from the plays presented by children in Italy on the day of the Holocaust. The culture of remembrance of the Holocaust proved to be an “universal container for remembrance of a range of different victims groups“, in the words of Eva Kovacs, a suitable matrix for the establishment of Bulgarian cultural memory of the victims of the communist regime.

Conclusion

Let us again return to the question – is it possible to create a new culture of rememberence in Bulgaria, which will merge the victims of all totalitarian regimes, and in this way equate Stalinism and Nazism, the Holocaust and the Communist camps? The case “Belene” shows the formation of prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004) and post-memory (Hirsh 2012), the active agents of which are not the witnesses, the surviving inmates, but people of the future generations who have not lived their experience, yet believe it is valuable and the memory of it must be preserved. Through modern media
and art that memory can reach a wide audience and they can form a community to change the memory landscape in the town.

However, two years after the beginnings of the project about the memorialization of Belene, it becomes clear that the values of freedom and respect for human rights, on which the project to create a memorial for the victims of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century rests, though universal, can not unite on national level the political elite associated with today’s anti-communists and former communists.

In the memory of Belene they both see a resource for political identification, opposition and defense of „their“ version of the past. The repressed in the communist camp did not know about those supporters of the PMC and of the Left, who before them had built the dykes on the Danube. The latter, in turn, do not want to commemorate the repressions survived by members of the Communist Party after 1944. This is a narrative which functioned only in a closed private circle of family memories. The loyalty to the party has imposed a willful forgetfulness on that part of its history. In the commemoration on the island they only see political benefit for their opponents – anti-communists.

While the commemorative ritual in Belene was only confined within the narrow circle of the repressed and their families, without media coverage and special political consequences, it was convenient for the Left. The changing memory frameworks, the striving to throw a „bridge between generations“ and put memorialization in non-party and supranational frameworks have provoked the concerns of the heirs of the Communist Party.

The project initiated by Father Cortesi for the memorialization of Belene is a project for the Europeanization of the local and national memory, for creating a place of atrocities in the spirit of the European policy on commemorating
Communism and Nazism as equally evil. The projects, however, intersects with the political interests of the elites – local and national – who see in commemorating the past various means of political tactics. Obviously, the decisions of the European institutions are not sufficient to unite the divided memories (see. also Littoz-Monnet 2012). The struggle for hegemony of discourses and models of interpretation of the past remains, and the case „Belene“ is just one example of how at the local and national level, these struggles are realized.

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