

# **Marketing Post-Communist Nostalgia in Romania: A Case Study on Contemporary Anniversary Events**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the concept of “post-communist nostalgia” in Romania within the younger, post-communist generations, focusing on specific leisure practices such as communist themed parties organized by nightclubs. The first part of the paper focuses on the theoretical framework of the study and on the more general subject of nostalgia, to question the place of post-communist nostalgia in the broader context of collective memory. The second part examines the communist themed parties related to alternative memory practices in the Eastern European countries, and views this phenomenon from a local perspective, using a case study approach combining field research, participant observation and content analysis. The results indicate the “post-communist nostalgia” theme to be more of a marketing argument, rather than the expression of youngsters’ attachment to a bygone era, while also raising new questions on the emergence of this theme in the local popular culture.

**Key-words:** collective memory, alternative memory practices, commodification of communist nostalgia, displaced nostalgia.

## **1. Introduction**

Post-communist nostalgia is questioned here as a form of engagement with the communist past. Around 2009, twenty years after the Romanian anti-communist movement banning Ceausescu’s regime, a rather unusual mixture of visual propaganda elements and advertising tools could be seen in the growing on-line environment, taking advantage of the newly discovered marketing potential of Social Media. Our first approach of this topic goes back to 2011, during a research on the generational heritage of cultural and leisure practices before and after 1989 (Bardan, 2011). Among other practices, we focused on contemporary anniversary events regarded as occasions meant to coagulate a certain collective identity (Crozat & Fournier, 2005), especially since a series of national surveys on cultural consumption indicated that participation in local festivals was a favorite cultural activity of Romanians (CSCDC, 2005-2009). For our study, specific dates recalling anniversaries of the old regime were selected as following: January 26<sup>th</sup>, the birthdate of Nicolae Ceausescu, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May as Labor Day, May 21<sup>st</sup>, the anniversary of the Romanian Communist Party, and August 23<sup>rd</sup>, the National Day during the period of communist rule. Using online search, news and social network aggregators, a query on these dates revealed them still to be used as occasions for various local events. Most of the results were dated between 2008 and 2011 and were retrieved from clubs that organized communist themed dance parties, through a body of advertising posters relying heavily on a specific visual rhetoric, such as the red flag of the Communist Party, the sickle and hammer, the coat of arms of Socialist Romania, illustrations of pioneers saluting, the portrait of Ceausescu alone or surrounded by other communist leaders: Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. Apart from the posters, photographs documenting the events were showing role-playing participants dressed in clothes of the communist era: overalls of

workers from construction sites and adaptations of pioneer and high-school uniforms. Moreover, the photos revealed that it was more to study than the use of communist symbols: the average age of the participants appeared to point towards a generation born around, or after 1989. How, and mostly, why would youngsters voluntarily use events and symbols of an epoch radically jettisoned by their parents' generation?

The opportunity to further investigate this paradox was supported by a field research we conducted in 2015, focusing on communist themed soirées organized by local nightclubs. We further explored the development of the phenomenon, while the present article describes the partial results of this ongoing research. The literature review covered below identified several lines of discussion, calling for a broader context, where the process of coming to terms with the communist past appears as a key common reference.

## 2. Related Work

The first set of observations concerns the trends for post-communist nostalgia, as several national surveys that were carried out between 2007 and 2014 revealed a minor, yet steady growing propensity in favor of opinions related to nostalgia for the communist past, raising a flag by both native and foreign scholars (Dragomir, 2011; Rossen, 2011) while rejoining polls conducted in other Eastern European countries (Pew Research Center, 2009). Although data collected from local polls was to be regarded with a methodological caution, an alarmist tone was nevertheless spread by dissemination of results in the Romanian media. Mainstream press titles (Evenimentul Zilei, 2009; PRO TV, 2010; Adevărul, 2013) fueled the collective imaginary with Romanians' nostalgia for communism. At the same time, poll statistics (INSCOP Research, 2013-2014) highlighted that appreciation for the communist regime could be found not only among the elders, but among the youngsters as well (Revista 22, 2013). Corroborated with a 2010 research that questioned Romanian teenagers and reflected similar results (Soros Foundation, 2010), these trends have been associated with factors related to rural habitation, lower socioeconomic status and education, but also to the poor instruction about the communist past provided in schools, most of the teenagers relying on media products and family for information. An idealized recollection of the communist past stands as another important source for nostalgia: as historian Luminita Murgescu pointed out, "(...) opinion polls show that for a large part of the population, the Communist regime no longer signifies a trauma, and the regime is not passed on to the young generation as a traumatic experience" (Murgescu, 2012, p. 10). Also, researcher Bogdan Cristian Iacob estimated that the polls reveal the danger of installing a "selective and personal memory" regarding communism (Iacob, 2010), while sociologist Vasile Dâncu considered that the sociopolitical context and an intense identity crisis may explain why the youngsters chose a positive valorization of the past (Dâncu, 2015). A matching observation comes from the academic literature: commenting on the process of integrating the communist past in the Eastern European countries, scholar Maria Todorova noted that late post-communist nostalgia reveals a new phenomenon: "the tentative but growing curiosity among the younger generation" (Todorova, 2010, p. 7). Last, but not least, initial observations of this study confined the communist themed clubbing events to urban areas, and participants' profile with higher socioeconomic status and education, drawing an opposite portrait of the youngsters appreciating the communist past, as identified above (Soros Foundation, 2010).

A second line of discussion is related to the media framing of nostalgia through press and advertising discourses, seen as sources that fuel nostalgia for the communist period. Other than the aforementioned alarmist framing of poll results in local media outlets, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Romanian communist regime prompted a broad coverage of the 1989 events, as well as topics related to social and economic aspects of life in communism, within an editorial strategy extended beyond 2009. Focusing on a content analysis of *Libertatea* daily newspaper published between October and December 2010, Manuela Marin identified several editorial and marketing features underlying a nostalgic framing of the communist era: a positive image, a selective memory of the past, merchandising of popular products, all triggering a specific response of the readership, as “the nostalgic feelings of *Libertatea*’s readers are based on a clear contrast between a retroactive positive image of the communist past and a gloomy and inferior present time” (Marin, 2013b, p. 14). The advertising industry appears also to be taking advantage of remembrance processes, whether in reviving old brands, such as *Dacia*, *Pepsi-Cola* and *Rom* chocolate (Marin, 2013a), in setting a particular marketing positioning of local brands, drawing on the unique memories related to them (Moraru, 2013) or in exploiting the figure of Ceausescu for commercial purposes (Drașovean, 2008).

The third group of observations is based on the fragmented public discourse on remembering communism, including academia. Among other arguments, such as the current social insecurity and quality of life, local debates accounting the surveys underlined the institutional limits addressing the problem of dealing with the legacy of the communist past. Recalling Halbwachs’ model of the “collective memory” (1950), Vasile Dâncu commented the IRES poll of 2010 with the observation that memories are fueled by a “real competition meant to promote, in many forms, the image of the communist period” (Dâncu, 2015, para. 6), thus referring to popular culture, as one can find a wide variety of products and practices, ranging from movies and books, to advertising campaigns that appeal to communist brands. These forms of recovering the past may be linked to Herman Parret’s concept of “mnemonic culture” seen as mental imprints, or traces of the past that come from memories and anamnesis, and appear as an “unwritten, spontaneous and pragmatic memory that is both collective and individual” (Parret, 2004, p. 38). Caterina Preda also identified a plurality of views on the past, as well as a competition of narratives: counter-memories created by artists were prompting an alternative view over the nostalgia expressed in polls (Preda, 2015). On the other hand, Manuela Marin put in perspective the emergence of post-communist nostalgia in Romania within a chronological framework (2016), and she placed the gradual replacement of anti-communism and its related negative themes in a wider social and political context. One of her arguments is the slow and challenging institutional process of coming to terms with the country’s communist legacy, with a key moment in December 2006, when the presidential endorsement of the final report on the communist dictatorship in Romania (known as the “Tismăneanu Report”) was meant to bring closure to the matter. However, as Alina Hogeă pointed out, focusing on media discourse analysis, the “Tismăneanu Report” generated more public debates and political turmoil, sign that “the contorted path taken by Romania to confront its communist past is not a finished process yet” (Hogeă, 2010, p. 16). Mihai Rusu’s views on the matter appear as more acute, for the collective memory regarding the communist past is marked by a “latent conflict” and a “mnemonic battle” between an official narrative of communism, lately codified in the “Tismăneanu Report”, and a vernacular culture of remembrance, symptom of a severe dissension in the Romanian society (Rusu, 2013; Rusu, 2015). The above controversy is seen as an unproductive exploration of post-communist nostalgia by Măriuca Morariu (2012), as she challenged mainstream views that disqualify alternative practices of remembrance and

advocated for alternative paths of dealing with the past.

One last line of questioning concerns the cultural practices of the youngsters before 1989. During our PhD thesis on Romanian cultural industries of the 1970s and the 1980s, we documented past practices based on imported western entertainment (Bardan, 2010). Asked about the meaning of their cultural habits, our informants recalled also feelings of longing for the unreachable: a nostalgia for an imagined West - freedom, capitalism and lifestyle - unevenly combined, as identified also in recent scholarly works on post-socialist contexts (Berdahl, 2010; Angé & Berliner, 2014; Todorova & Gille, 2010). This phenomenon calls for Appadurai's concepts of "imagined nostalgia", as the longing for something one has never had, and "armchair nostalgia" – one without lived experience or collective historical memory (Appadurai, 1996). Thus, for the post-communist generations, the communist past is only a culturally mediated memory, by family, school as well as the popular culture inspired by a bygone era. This line of questioning invites to examine the possibility of a mirroring phenomenon: could present day youngsters be nostalgic for a communist past they never experienced, just like the generation of their parents longed, in their youth, for an imagined idealized West?

### 3. Problem Statement

Documentation on communist themed soirées and parties came up with a body of more than 70 advertising posters published on-line since 2008, some of which can be seen in Figure 1.

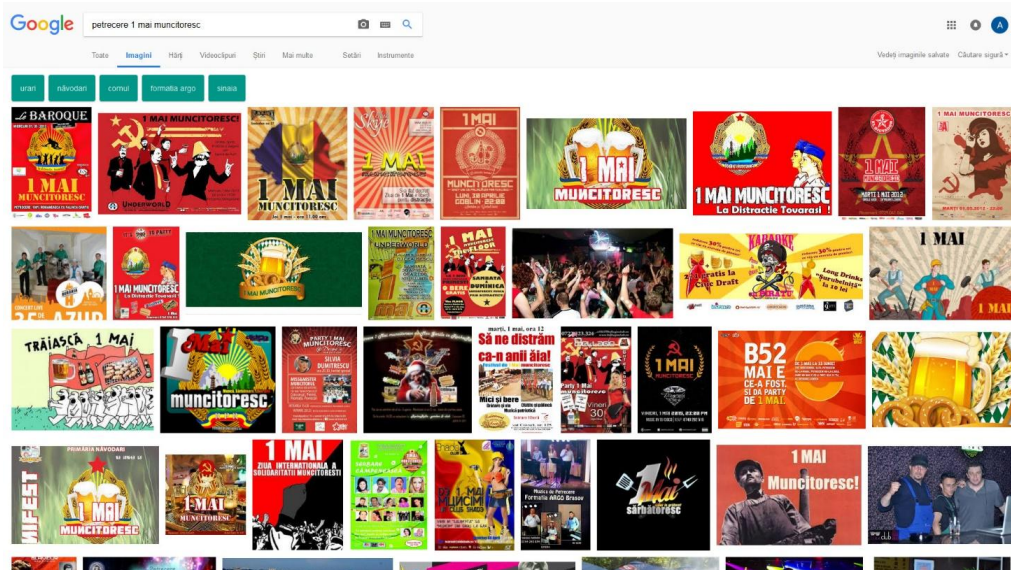


Figure 1. Screenshot on a Google images results page for a query on the topic of "Party 1<sup>st</sup> of May Labor Day"

(Source: authors' archive, screenshots retrieved April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018, from: <https://bit.ly/2IZCIp5>)

Could these images inform about a "post-communist nostalgia clubbing"? If so, Svetlana Boym 2001's typology of nostalgia would provide a relevant framework. Exploring the ways of

giving shape and meaning to longing fueled by remembrances of the past, Boym set a distinction between “restorative nostalgia” and “reflective nostalgia”, the first type evoking national past and future, while the latter is more about individual and cultural memory (Boym, 2001). Data on previous communist themed parties came mainly from the press, where media coverage focused on the marketing potential of the events and the positive response of the participants. Articles such as “Nostalgia is a Hit: Communism isn’t Dead” (Adevărul, 2012), “Constanta: Communist Party in a Fancy Club” (Adevărul, 2010) or “Communist Party 2010: I have my Red Scarf, I am a Pioneer” (Adevărul, 2010) emphasized the growing trend for communist nostalgia among young adults, recording opinions on their motivation towards this form of entertainment. Given the fragmented and partial data on the subject, a two steps field research was set: a first phase was based on participant observation, in order to record the development of selected clubbing events. A second step would explore the meaning of these practices, drawing on a content analysis of interviews recorded during the field research. In the process of selecting our informants, Michael Patton’s concepts of “purposeful sampling” and “information-rich cases” were used, meaning “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). In our case, we planned to conduct interviews with nightclub owners and PR staff, as long-term observers of the public, and, if possible, with participants identified as regular clients of the clubs.

The first exploratory phase started in April 2015. The objective for a communicational and ethnographic perspective was to document, through participant observation, communist themed parties that were going to be organized, during 2015, in Bucharest, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May and on August 23<sup>rd</sup> - dates established as important anniversaries in the communist regime. Several topics were to be observed: the concept of the event, costumes, decorations and props, program and playlist, as well as the public’s profile and its level of engagement to the event. An important component of this step was data recording: according to Bernard (2006, p. 347), in order to support the validity of the study, the researcher gathers detailed accounts and observations in field notes. In our case, recording all accounts in detail was anticipated as a difficult task, given that the specified field would feature crowded spaces with low light and loud music. As means to secure this step, as well as to avoid biases and subjective reporting, a small team, of six observers including the author, was gathered, planning to record, using an electronic device, remarks of the group during small talk. Thus, the focus group model was adapted to the field’s context, by discussing topics based on a list of items prepared in advance.

For the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, five events were identified, advertised on Social Media. Three of them corresponded to our criteria, meaning evening parties organized in dance clubs (“El Dictator”, “The Barrel”, “The Vintage Pub”), all three taking place in the Old Town, a trendy entertainment district of Bucharest. The other two events were programmed for the afternoon: a worker’s barbecue that we visited, and a Disco party with concert at “Promenada” shopping mall, which we failed to attend. The worker’s barbecue marked the opening of “Lokal” garden for the outdoor season, and although the poster featured elements of communist iconography, there were no references to the past except for the traditional food served. In the evening, all three visits to the communist themed parties in the Old Town provided us, one after another, a similar experience. Except for the staff, wearing safety helmets or pioneers’ red scarves, nothing whatsoever was related to the advertised theme, not even the music. As all observers agreed, the events were no different to other soirées at the scene: “It seemed like it was business as usual, in all three cases” were the words of one of the observers. On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, only one event was identified, a soirée organized by “La Un Ceai” teahouse. A similar plan of the field study was prepared, with a group

of four observers. There were themed decorations, a candy bar with traditional sweets, pioneer red scarves, and a dedicated playlist. The place displayed a cozy atmosphere, propitious for chatting and occasional recollections of the past. Yet, it didn't seem to fit in the clubbing event model that we were investigating.

The findings of the first exploratory phase showed, by all evidence, that the selected communist themed parties were inconsistent with the image projected by the posters advertising the events. Although unexpected, the negative cases encountered determined two methodological adjustments: first, proceed with the planned interviews with club owners and PR staff. This time, the goal was to discover the reasons behind the inconsistency encountered during the participant observation phase. The second adjustment was to broaden the research object and include other variables related to clubbing, such as live musical performances, or other activities that could be associated with the past. Also, the chosen period for analysis was extended to identify if patterns may occur, such as series of similar events or long-term projects.

#### 4. Concept and Terms

Our study planned to explore whether elements of nowadays popular culture could function as triggers for cultural and leisure practices where post-communist generations would engage with the communist past. Before presenting the method and results, a brief overview of the main concepts will be provided, as a key step on refining the elaboration of our research questions. First, from the growing body of literature on nostalgia, as well as related conceptualizations, we referred to those approaches that integrate a dynamic dimension, putting in perspective past, present and meaning. According to Fred Davis (1979, p. vii), nostalgia, seen as a deeply social emotion, is fueled by the past, but is mainly a product of the present, while Tom Panelas appends this definition considering that nostalgia "is always evoked in the context of current fears and anxieties, and looks to alleviate those fears by 'using the past in specially reconstructed ways.'" (Panelas, 1982, p. 1425). For Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is a "sense of loss and displacement" that may be also considered for "the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete" (Boym, 2001, p. XVI). Building on this conceptual framework, a special attention was given to the specific context of events we were studying: the late effects of the global economic crisis would impact more on the social insecurities of youngsters, rather than the meaning of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Romanian communist regime. Moreover, as the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart pointed out, nostalgia should be regarded as "a cultural practice, not a given content: its forms, meaning and effects shift within the context – it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present" (Stewart, 1988, p. 227). In this perspective, the question was not whether post-communist youngsters were expressing their nostalgia by attending themed parties, but rather what meaning they attached to these practices. Did it refer to a fashionable and cool nostalgia, or was it rather a spoof on socialism? Academic research accounting other Eastern European contexts provide several lines of investigation. Among these, studies on the commodification of socialist material culture are providing a relevant framework: for Jonathan Bach (2014; 2002), nostalgia functions as a form of cultural transmission (Bach, 2014; Bach, 2002), while Jeziński & Wojtkowski (2016) view the marketing of post-communist nostalgia as a social and cultural practice.

Second, relating nostalgia to the communist past can be better understood within the framework of a multidimensional process of remembrance. Such a topic puts forward the necessary complementarity between "autobiographical memory" and "collective memory" in the

context of contemporary history (Halbwachs, 1950). In this respect, the fragmented public discourse on communism in Romania may be related to several narratives on communism articulating multiple forms of a remembrance culture that changes according to the communities, events or subjects concerned, recalling Halbwachs' modeling that describes the process of joining several collective memories around a common identity (Halbwachs, 1950, p. 48). In Halbwachs' line of conceptualization stands the "communicative" and the "cultural" memory, developed by Jan Assmann (1995; 2008) as two forms of collective memory based on different ways of remembering, which include "traditions, transmissions, and transferences" (2008, p. 110) specific to a shorter or a longer temporality.

Last, but not least, while research concerning the younger generations' nostalgia for the communist past is still rather scarce, a sound theoretical account is provided by sociological and anthropological approaches. As such, nostalgia that is not based on direct experience is labeled as "imagined nostalgia" or "armchair nostalgia" (Appadurai, 1996), the one for times which were not known firsthand translates as "displaced nostalgia" (Wilson, 2005), while anthropologists' disciplinary posture towards disappearing worlds calls for the notion "exo-nostalgia" (Berliner, 2014). With a construct conceptualization traced back to 1989 (Gineikienė, 2013), the marketing literature is also concerned with variations of nostalgia, in order to better discern effects and outcomes of nostalgia-related communication, and its applications in various marketing contexts. As such, influencing variables issued by individual and demographic factors were taken into account to differentiate between personal and direct nostalgia and its indirect forms. The latter are labelled as "historical", where the past is defined as "a time before the audience was born" (Stern, 1992), "simulated", as longing for an unknown past through mediated experiences or "collective", for the shared longing - "symbolic of a nation, culture or generation" (Baker & Kennedy, 1994). A particular case is the "vicarious nostalgia", a term inspired by a growing retro consumption trend, rooted in secondary sources and drawn by "an aesthetic consumption and a preference for objects associated with a period typically ten to fifteen years before the birth of the informant" (Goulding, 2002, para. 3). An extensive typology was advanced by Holak, Havlena, & Matvee (2006, pp. 195-196), with four categories referring to a) personal nostalgia, a direct individual experience, b) interpersonal nostalgia, an indirect individual experience, coming from other individuals, such as intergenerational communication, c) cultural nostalgia, a direct collective experience and d) virtual nostalgia, an indirect collective experience featured as fictional and coming from "books, video materials, or conversations with experts and scholars" (Holak, Havlena, & Matveev, 2006, p. 196).

## 5. Methodology

Accommodation of socialist material culture through social and cultural transformation has been analyzed within a wide variety of objects (Jeziński & Wojtkowski, 2016; Bach, 2014; Marin, 2013a; Czepczyńska, 2010), ranging from products to services, from places to media practices. A key common feature underlying these processes comes from the dynamics of re-appropriation and production of new symbolic meanings. Scholar Jonathan Bach calls the concept of "secondary production" coined by Michel de Certeau (1984), when considering the way "the symbols, slogans and styles of the old regime are dislodged and recombined in ways that make them effectively contemporary" (Bach, 2014, pp. 124-125). Our ongoing research draws on a similar approach, yet the scope of the current article is limited to the sole exploration of communist themed clubbing events, in order to map their place in the broader discussion related to

the emergence of post-communist nostalgia in Romania, and is supported by the following research questions:

Q1: To what extent and why has the communist era theme been used in the advertisement of clubbing events?

Q2: Which are the main references to the communist past that are used in clubbing events?

#### *Method*

The case study method was chosen as a comprehensive research strategy, for it provides, according to Robert Yin, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, (...) when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, (...) and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). Therefore, the focus of this article is to provide in-depth explanations of a contemporary social practice and to understand the context determining specific developments. A multiple-case design was adopted, while the unit of analysis was set for themed clubbing events associated with or inspired by the communist past. Enhancement of research validity was supported by data triangulation based on the use of multiple sources of evidence, in order to develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2014, p. 120).

For Q1, the analysis was formed by data collected from field research, with participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in the form of guided conversations with eight informants, which took place between July and September 2015. A set of complementary meetings was carried out during 2017-2018. Secondary data comes from an extensive online media review of articles and press releases, which was used to assess either occurrence, or coverage of an event corresponding the unit of analysis specified above. A new methodological adjustment was made, extending the investigation beyond the 2015-2018 initial period, back to the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, the study would encompass a historical perspective on the phenomenon, aiming also to trace its origin. Additional data on the context was retrieved mainly from the literature review of this study. Case description was chosen as analysis strategy. The coding scheme operationalized the events into a set of features, focused on the “venue”, on “participants”, on “activities”, on the “scope”, and on the “context”. The technique of cross-case synthesis was used to identify similarities and differences between the cases.

For Q2, the analysis considered the negative cases documented in 2015 and therefore focused on exclusive cases where the image projected by promotional materials were consistent with the content of the event, where the public’s profile matched the criteria of “post-communist generation”, and where its level of engagement to the event could be assessed. Supplementary features were used in the coding scheme of the events, such as “concept”, “resources”, and “audience profile”. Data comes mainly from interviews and participant observation, with additional data retrieved from owned electronic media of our informants (presentations, Facebook pages). Since long-term projects were considered for Q2, the interviews took place between August 2015 and July 2017, with four key informants and consisted of guided conversations, as well as informal discussions, conducted in various public spaces, depending on the time and the availability of the interviewee. A similar method, with case description and cross-case synthesis, was used. Given the broader scope of the second research question, content analysis of the interviews was also used (Holsti, 1969).

#### *Case description for Q1*

Several observations were drawn from the negative cases studied in 2015 and were corroborated with data from informal talks and interviews with PR staff and club owners of selected venues,



where communist themed parties were advertised. Snowball sampling led to other key informants who reported on previous periods, developing a timeline and a wider context for the themed parties. In this respect, it appears that similar events have been organized even in the early '90s in "Club A", the oldest student club in Romania, and an established brand of the underground cultural life since the communist period. Working there as PR manager, one of the informants recalls the first years after the 1989 revolution as extremely creative and productive, with a wide range of cultural events, in a time where clubbing venues were rather scarce. Among other costume parties, communist themes soirées were held every now and then, functioning as "a therapeutic experience mocking a semi-traumatic period" (PM, 2015). Over the years, the party was named "The Pioneers' Ball" and became a traditional event organized each year, on January 26<sup>th</sup>, the birthday of Nicolae Ceausescu. Online records of this series of events can be traced back to 2004, with a press release promoting the ball as a parody, and with a party invitation dedicated "to those who 15 years ago were proud Falcons or Pioneers" (Curierul National, 2004). However, a subsequent review put the event in a sociological perspective, noting that "past editions were more fun, livelier. Slowly, those who once were pioneers disappear from the clubbing 'circuit'. They become responsible householders, see for taxes and car loans, and raise children. Ceausescu no longer means, for today's high school students, other than a story" (Adevărul, 2008). Still, following editions got in the media spotlight: in 2005, the "The Pioneers' Ball" was co-organized with "Pro FM" radio station, and was also covered by Mediafax, Romania's leading press photography supplier. Photo records are also found for two more subsequent editions (Mediafax Foto, 2005, 2007, 2008).

After 2008, within a growing and competitive clubbing venue environment, the communist themed party model was quite widely adopted at communist anniversary dates, mostly as a marketing tool intended to attract new customers and retain the regulars, through parody and an engaging program including an oldies musical program, costume parades, adapted menus and drinks, role playing and humor contest. Decorations and props were easy to improvise, yet when it came to obtain pioneer red scarves, competition between nightclubs rendered the task a challenging job, due to the depleted stocks of this memorabilia. However, recent years showed a certain dilution of the phenomenon, as reported by our informants, trend corroborated with the decreasing number of advertised events on social media. More recent, press reviews of the 2017 anniversaries marked a significant change of the mainstream media framing: TV programs dedicated to the 1<sup>st</sup> of May showed an editorial shift of the titles, as the term "Working-class 1<sup>st</sup> of May" was traded for a less "ideological" term, becoming "Transylvanian 1<sup>st</sup> of May" at PRO TV (PRO TV, 2017) and "Festive 1<sup>st</sup> of May" at Antena 3 (Antena 3, 2017). Visual identity and symbols were equally changed, accordingly. The August 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary was marked, in Bucharest, by a political parade of around twenty cars decorated with flags and propaganda panels, an event organized by members of the Romanian Socialist Party, so-called followers of the Romanian Communist Party (Delcea, 2017), but the event was not covered by the mainstream media. Another revealing example is the re-positioning for an event organized on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018 by "Beraria H", an established beer hall in Bucharest, from a "Pioneer's Party" to a retro "Oldies Party" ("Șlagărs Party"), as advertised by one of the event's organizers (Burn the Sofa, 2017).

The generational change should be considered here as a key aspect: in this regard, creative director Alexandru Dumitrescu noted that advertising can still play on communist nostalgia for audiences over a certain age, but for youngsters it should be marketed as vintage (Dumitrescu, 2006). Corroborated with data from our informants, the correlation between the year

of birth and statistics estimating at 28 years old the local mean age at first marriage (Eurostat, 2013) pointed to around 2010 to be the time span of generational change in clubbing attendance, as people born in the 1980's were entering adulthood. Further inquiry questioned whether the post-communist generation was losing interest in the communist themes parties. Yet, the radical conversion of the current's years "Pioneer's Party" of January 26<sup>th</sup> was based not on the lack of relevance of the theme for the venue's public, but due to the negative social media responses. Coming to terms with the communist past still appears to be a complex, and sometimes contradictory process.

*Case description for Q2*

Q2 explores clubbing events as memory practices, by identifying long-term projects where the public would be given the opportunity to express specific ways of relating to the past. As such, the present research joins the line of studies documenting the nature and the function of local grassroots alternative memory practices (Georgescu, 2010; Asavei, 2016).

The first case study is about "The Dead Ceaușescu", a side-project punk band created in 2006, tag-lined "A Tragic Comedy in One Act". Gathering performers from well-known local punk groups, the crew was brought together by the lead vocalist, Gabby Molotov, after adapting a song belonging to the Californian punk rock band "Dead Kennedys", hence an inspiration for the Romanian group's name. The repertoire draws on punk style covers after Ramones, Dead Kennedys, The Clash, as well as original songs, developing a political parody show on Communism and Ceaușescu. The concept relies on a mixture and an alternation of propaganda hymns, photos and video projections with punk songs performed live by the band. Lyrics play heavily on the semiotics of anti-Communism, anti-Ceaușescu and anti-establishment, as stated on the group's Facebook page: "In a country where neither the dictator died, nor the police forgot it was the Militia, The Dead Ceaușescu offer exactly what you'd expect from a punk rock band: dynamism, political satire, disorder and chaos!" (The Dead Ceaușescu, 2018). The lead vocalist, Gabby Molotov, considers this concept in the line of political ridicule and humor developed in the communist era. The investment in costumes and props is constant and consistent with the show's concept, as illustrated by figure 2, with pioneers' red scarves, workers' overalls, safety helmets, and a specific macabre make-up. The crew members view their side-project to emerge out of passion, good music, the quality of the performance, while still having fun. The public reflects a twofold audience: people in their 40s, amongst which are friends and colleagues of the band, and youngsters in their 20s, rock fans attracted by the sound, the music genre and the playlist. In charge with the show's audiovisual effects, DJ Teo observed that propaganda footage displayed on the screen stirred the younger audience, for they found it hard to believe that it represented the reality of some decades ago. "The Dead Ceaușescu" shows are organized on a quite regularly basis, in Bucharest, especially on the anniversary days, such as Ceaușescu's birthday, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, Halloween and other adapted occasions. A special performance is planned for July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the current year, when the band will play in the opening of a Dead Kennedys' concert, their main source of musical and aesthetic inspiration (The Dead Ceaușescu, 2018).



Figure 2. Photo taken during a concert of the punk band “The Dead Ceausescus”, Underworld, March 2015

(Photo courtesy of George Popescu, [www.pogge.com](http://www.pogge.com))

The second case study documented is “Discotecă”, founded on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 by Paul Breazu, Vlad Stoica and Cătălin Matei, a team of “sonic archeologists”, as they call themselves (Discotecă, 2013). Connected by a strong interest in the sound of various forms of local popular culture, the group mainly explores Romanian music of the ‘70s, the ‘80s and the ‘90s, aiming to re-contextualize disco hits, as well as less known tunes, reintegrating them in the clubbing environment.

The concept of the events, that has also proven to be a recipe for success, is based on a DJ party encompassing a live show performed by local pop stars from the past decades, as illustrated in figures 2 and 3. In the first interviews carried out with the group’s members, they summarized several factors contributing to the instant success of “Discotecă”: first, the larger historical context of the ‘90s, where Romanian older tunes became obsolete by association with the communist period and were no longer broadcast on radio or television; the same music resurfaced the next decade via the Internet and social networks, personal archives were digitalized and published on dedicated streaming platforms, such as SoundCloud and Youtube, within a global emerging trend of retro and vintage culture (Reynolds, 2011).



Figure 3. Screenshot of a page presenting the posters for the first concerts of Discotecă (Image courtesy of Discotecă, [www.facebook.com/discROteca/](http://www.facebook.com/discROteca/))



Figure 4. Photo taken during a concert of Discotecă, featuring Stela Enache, Expirat, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 (Source: author's archive)

Second, the evolution of the clubbing environment in the 2010s decade towards a rather conventional space is another specific context where “Discotecă” emerged, disrupting Bucharest’s nightlife scene. Past and present are put together not only for the public, but also for guest artists, who were used to sing in bars and restaurants in front of a static audience, applauding but not usually dancing. According to Paul Breazu, the nightclub “brings a different type of energy and builds a different connection between the stage and the dance floor.” The group’s members also emphasized the apolitical approach of their project, stressing another important feature: there is little to no intervention on the quality of the sound, mixed mainly from vinyl records, along with digital tunes retrieved from laptops. Visual projections of images documenting past everyday life

supports the music. The concept of nostalgia covers here a certain way of producing music, a specific sound, regardless of the ideological context of its creation. The public plays a key role in every show, drawing on a new type of clubbing culture of remembrance. Audience is estimated at a core group of 22-32 years old, extended to a larger cluster whose age ranges from 18 to 40 years, while the average attendance is estimated at 700 participants (Discotecă, 2013). Without exception, participant observation recorded a high level of engagement to the live concerts, with applause, cheering and whistles. Moreover, spectators that have experienced neither the communist period, nor the products of its popular culture, knew the lyrics by heart and sang along with guest artists. Another interesting detail resorted from field research: in several occasions, as we observed the audience, we noticed some of the youngsters were attending the events with their parents. More recently, "Discotecă" tested the mainstream scene of urban music festivals, with a live performance of singers, such as Mirabela Dauer and Corina Chiriac at the Electric Castle Music Festival, held in Cluj-Napoca, July 2017. Press reviews also noted a high participant engagement, with a vibrant atmosphere, created by about 2,000 people, amongst which "very many very young spectators knew the lyrics by heart" (Florescu, 2017).

A third case study, identified later in our research, is the punk band "Niște Băieți", founded in 2006 and inspired by the Californian group "Me First and the Gimme Gimmes". The band covers Romanian oldies, adapted on a punk-rock rhythm and sound. As noted on their bio page, "Niște Băieți" "accommodates in punk rock rhythms the immortal pieces written before, during and after the [*communist, Ed.*] 'golden age', to pass them on to younger generations" (Metalhead, n.d.). Data collection and field work for this case is still in an early phase, therefore it will not be considered for analysis.

## **6. Analysis of Results and Discussion**

The case descriptions based on corroborated data from multiple sources brought some interesting points regarding the use of the theme, as well as references to the communist past in clubbing events. Not all the information was analyzed, for several methodological adjustments were made since the beginning of the study.

### ***6.1. The Use of the Communist Era Theme in Advertisements of Clubbing Events***

The first research question explored the extent to which the communist era theme was used in promoting clubbing events. This research question also investigated the arguments supporting its use. The negative case encountered in 2015 prompted a new approach of data collected through interviews with PR staff and club owners, extending the context in which this type of leisure practices emerged. Table 1 summarizes the key findings of the cross-case synthesis.

Period	Venue	Participants	Activities	Scope	Context
1990s decade	Club A	Exclusive members club, limited attendance, regular guests	No promotion, themed parties with engaging program	Having fun, mockery, parody, a remembrance healing process	Little to none competition of clubbing venues
2000s decade	Club A and other nightclubs opened after the renovation of the Old Town	General public, generational change, Millennials replace Gen X	Promotion of event, parties with engaging program, sometimes improvised	Variation of clubbing activities, marketing	Emergence of clubbing venues
2010s decade	Nightclubs in the capital's Old Town, and in other cities	General public, Millennials, tourists and expats	No consistency between promotion and party activities	Marketing, sales & optimizing club attendance	Heavy competition of clubbing venues

Table 1. Cross-case synthesis on communist themed clubbing (source: authors' archive)

For Q1, cross-case synthesis shows two main patterns regarding the use of the communist era theme in promoting clubbing events: the first one is related to the 1990s decade, in a time where clubbing venues were scarce. With a limited attendance due to the profile of "Club A" as an exclusive members club, communist theme parties were mostly casual events, organized to parody the recent past, functioning as a remembrance healing process. Events were not advertised and were confined to a cultural space with a solid underground tradition. In this case, the "post-communist nostalgia" concept draws on a parodic reframing of the past. The second pattern points to the use of the communist theme mainly within a marketing approach. However, here two secondary patterns may be identified:

(a) The 2000s decade came with the development of the local leisure environment, when communist themed clubbing proved its commercial potential. More or less formally organized events were also set in a parody framework, playing on the stereotypes of the "Worker" and of the "Pioneer". The concept of "post-communist nostalgia" is understood here as a marketing argument.

(b) Starting with the 2010s decade, clubbing advertisements preserved the visual propaganda elements, yet the communist themed events began to lose the key features of previous parties; the negative case documented in 2015 showed even the absence of an oldies playlist. For this latter secondary pattern, the "post-communist nostalgia" concept falls into a "form without substance" model.

### 6.1.1. The Two Successive Waves of Communicative Memories for Post-Communist Nostalgia

Scholars working on topics linked to Eastern European countries (Kalinina, 2014; Marin, 2016, 2013b; Berdahl, 2010; Nadkarni, 2010) identified two waves of communism-related nostalgia, each shaped by specific national contexts, and given different forms and meanings. Based on the study of communist themed parties, our results acknowledge a similar succession of two nostalgia waves for Romania, ranging from healing irony to commercial appropriations of the past. Drawing on Assmann's framework of "communicative memory" that is "socially mediated" and "relates to a group" (Assmann, 1995, p. 127), the following examples provide a brief overview on the transversal dynamics of this twofold process:

- For post-Wall Germany, Daphne Berdahl related earlier forms of nostalgia to the commodification of Socialist material culture, while current incarnations of nostalgia tend to be hyper-commercial and in self-parodying forms (Berdahl, 2010).
- For post-socialist Hungary, Maya Nadkarni saw earlier forms under an ironic distance from the kitsch of official state culture, while the current incarnations focus on the revalorization of local Socialist-era styles and objects (Nadkarni, 2010).
- For contemporary Russia, Ekaterina Kalinina analyzed the 1990s as a decade featuring a critical and reflective dimension in the representations of the Soviet era, followed by a decade of commercial, then political exploitation of the past. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's framework of nostalgia, Kalinina aimed to bring "an illustration of how reflective nostalgia is being gradually supplanted by restorative nostalgia" (Kalinina, 2014, p. 3).
- For Romania, Manuela Marin identified a first phase represented by a massive public dissociation from the communist past, with a limited nostalgia specific to supporters of political factions claiming ideological continuity. The second half of the 2000s marks the emergence of a nostalgic phenomenon, based on social and economic grounds, rather than corresponding to Boym's *restorative* type (Marin, 2016, 2013b).
- For Romania, results of the present study show that earlier forms of nostalgia appear as spoofs on communism and on propaganda practices, with themed parties functioning as a "therapeutic experience". Current incarnations draw on the instrumental and commercial use of socialist material culture, reflecting a phenomenon that is currently losing popularity, as illustrated below by figure 5.

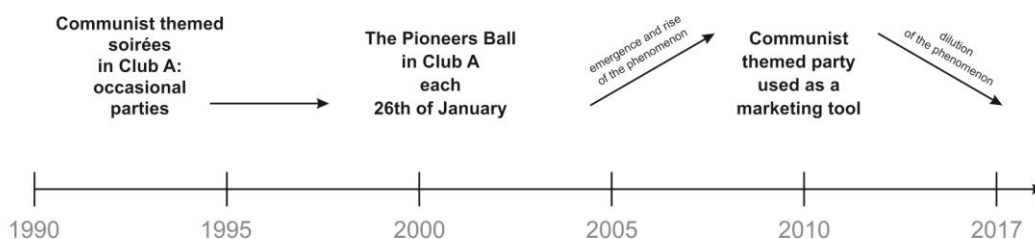


Figure 5. A timeline on the use of the "communist" theme in Romanian clubbing events (Source: author's archive – author's illustration)

### 6.2. Main References to the Communist Past Used in Clubbing Events

The second research question has investigated the use of references to the communist era in clubbing events and will be discussed in three parts. The first part will evaluate the two selected cases, “The Dead Ceaușescu” and “Discotecă”, as a vector of cultural transmission, based on table 2, which resumes the key results of the cross-case synthesis. The second part will discuss these events within the broader context of themed clubbing events associated with or inspired by the communist past, while the third part will comment on the emergence of post-communist nostalgia related to the fragmented public discourse on remembering communism.

	<b>The Dead Ceaușescu</b>	<b>Discotecă</b>
<b>Period</b>	Starting with 2006	Starting with 2012
<b>Venue</b>	Underworld Club (punk and alternative rock concerts) and other underground music venues	Nightclubs, small concert halls, and spaces for alternative expression
<b>Activities</b>	Punk-rock concert, alternating locally adapted punk covers with propaganda footage	DJ party encompassing a live show performed by former local pop stars
<b>Scope</b>	Satire, quality performance, having fun	Re-contextualize the music of the past decade within the clubbing environment
<b>Context</b>	Broader sociopolitical context of fragmented public discourse on communism	A global emerging trend of retro and vintage culture and a local context of rather standardized clubbing events
<b>Concept</b>	A Tragic Comedy in One Act	A group of pop-sonic archeology, a RomPop discollective and neuro-sociological experiment
<b>Resources</b>	Archive audiovisual documents and propaganda artifacts	Audio archives, documentary footage of everyday life
<b>Audience profile</b>	A twofold audience: people with direct experience of the communist past and youngsters of post-communist generations	Mainly young adults of post-communist generations, some of which bring their parents to the show

Table 2. Cross-case synthesis on long term clubbing projects using references to the communist past (source: authors’ archive)

For Q2, cross-case synthesis considered two different types of long term projects, both using popular music as the major support for the scope of the event. “The Dead Ceaușescu” is inspired directly by the political and ideological dimension of the communist era, while the use of punk music appears as a rather heavy and contradictory medium, contrasting strongly with the images of glorifying propaganda projected during intermezzos. The concept of “post-communist nostalgia” reflects in this case a solid critical stance towards a transgenerational disenchantment. On the other hand, “Discotecă” takes its references from a more diffuse conceptual area of leisure and entertainment, and plays more on the continuity and the flow of the music, within at least three



strategies: the chronological approach of the playlist, the integration of the guest artist's performance into the musical context of the event, and the after-party DJing, by mixing old tunes and recent tracks into a new sound, strange yet familiar at the same time. For "Discotecă", the "post-communist nostalgia" concept comes with a twofold interpretation: the first corresponds to the producers' concept of a savvy archaeological approach and re-contextualization of popular music from past decades. The second, applied to the audience's experience, relates the most, from a semantic point of view, to the original meaning of nostalgia as "bittersweet longing". Based on participant observation, this understanding is illustrated by the strong reactions of participants, regardless of age and generation, to the tune "High School Years" from the soundtrack of a 1987 coming-of-age Romanian movie.

### **6.2.1. A Vector of Cultural Transmission**

Besides the conceptual differences between the two projects, a series of common features emerge once considering the wider perspective of "post-communist nostalgia" as a form of engagement with the communist past. In this respect, elements from popular culture used by both "The Dead Ceaușescus" and "Discotecă" become "external objects as carriers of memory" and fall into Assmann's model of "communicative memory" (2008, p. 111), along with objects from other cultural media, such as books, advertising, film, and television that fuel social interactions across and within generations. Re-contextualization of specific references from the past used by the two Romanian projects is also another form of semiotic re-appropriations, specific to the commodification of memory as examined by Jonathan Bach in his work on the *Ostalgie* phenomenon, where nostalgia functions to create a "a popular-cultural form of knowledge transmission" (2014, p. 134). Aimed by different scopes, a critique of imposed establishments through satirical discourse or an archeological approach of the sound regardless the ideological baggage of the '70s and '80s decades, the concepts behind both "The Dead Ceaușescus" and "Discotecă" share a common ground when prompting an active narrative on the present mediated by the past.

### **6.2.2. Beyond the Commodification of Memory**

Borrowed from Western cultural patterns, the commodification of culture and the nostalgia industry in post-communist countries play to mobilize collective memories as a marketing strategy. Moreover, according to Jeziński & Wojtkowski, digitalization and the new media contribute to "successful framing the nostalgia into a fashionable hipster cultural trend package of 'vintage', which is appealing to younger generations" (2016, p. 103). Along with other products of the local culture industries, the Romanian communist themed clubbing of the 2000s decade draws on a similar framing, yet accounts for specific shorter-term tactics, adapted to the cyclical trends of the leisure market. Unlike the communist themed parties, the ongoing projects of "The Dead Ceaușescus" and "Discotecă" appear to share a common ground regarding the scope, the assigned resources, and the consistency of an aesthetic program, based on a long-term strategy whose continuance is still to be proven. This distinction calls for Dominik Bartmanski's iconological alternative framework for understanding post-communist nostalgia, since a limit of the culture industry approach comes from its focus on the *commodification of memory* (2011, p. 2018). As such, market purposes may explain the ironic play on communist culture, but it "assumes a considerable degree of detached irony and self-conscious distance on the part of both

promoters and consumers of the repackaged communist icons” (Bartmanski, 2011, p. 218), and thus it fails to encompass forms of nostalgia that fall outside this explanatory grid. The next section reviews “The Dead Ceaușescus” and “Discotecă” as cases that grow beyond the commodification of memory.

### 6.2.3. Alternative Memory Practices Functioning as Mnemonic Bridges

As different as they may appear, the abovementioned cases appear as two sides of the same coin when considered under the lens of alternative memory practices. Both projects elude any longing for the communist regime, or for Communism *per se*, but draw, to a great extent, from objects and images belonging to this bygone era. Under Bartmanski’s iconological approach that views post-communist nostalgia as a dynamic process of constructing meaning, “The Dead Ceaușescus” and “Discotecă” correspond to a “performative quoting of the past”, along with other nostalgically contextualized objects that reveal the cultural dimension of the remembering process. Within this framework, the present study regards the interest of pursuing alternative memory practices as “nostalgic icons” that “are successful because they play the cultural role of mnemonic bridges *to* rather than tokens of longing *for* the failed communist past” (Bartmanski, 2011, p. 213). As such, it contributes to the line of studies that challenge the limits of normative models of remembrance, and broadens the perspective on contradictory remembering practices that fuel the fracture of the public discourse on the topic.

## 7. Conclusions and Future Work

The main focus of this article was to examine communist themed clubbing under the theoretical framework of “post-communist nostalgia” understood as a form of engagement with the communist past. Our conclusions are to be seen as preliminary findings within the broader context of an ongoing research. In this respect, we proceed with a necessary methodological caution in approaching post-communist nostalgia as a challenging object of study, due to its multidimensional, and rather contradictory framings (Todorova, 2010, p. 2).

Based on a case study combining field research, participant observation and content analysis we explored the reasons and the arguments behind the use of the communist epoch as an advertising theme promoting clubbing events, given the larger context of fervent local polemics on the emergence of post-communist nostalgia, as reflected by media framing and competing memory discourses. Results show that communist themed clubbing does not cover in any way elderly or younger Romanians’ wishes of reviving communism, nor is it linked to nostalgic recollections of the past, but it is referenced as a way of engaging with the bygone era either by parody, by satire or by accommodating the older tunes of popular music. Subsequent observations highlighted the evolution of these leisure practices, pointing to a raising phenomenon during the 2000s decade, reaching a peak towards 2009-2010, still persistent, but with significant lesser intensity to present days. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Romanian communist regime concurs largely with this timeline, while also providing an overview of the two past decades reflecting two waves of post-communist nostalgia. Moreover, examples from scholar literature point to the two successive waves as a dynamic process traced across the post-socialist space, thus revealing the volatile semantics of the term. A special attention was given to the exploration of two long-term projects, “The Dead Ceaușescus” and “Discotecă”, encompassing references to the communist past whose meanings vary and “refer to different clusters of embodied experiences” (Bartmanski, 2011, p. 226).

In this perspective, the construction of meaning becomes a central question of our

ongoing study. The analysis on the evolution of communist themed parties exposed them as cases that may not be representative of the whole post-communist nostalgia phenomenon, but instead as cases that illustrate the complex dynamic semantics at work in the society in a given period. Our previous work identified several semantic mutations of terms such as “political communication”, “propaganda” and “luxury” during the communist era, analysing the tension between the normative dimension of the terms and their incarnation in the context of variable social and cultural practices (Bardan, 2015).

The discussions of the present article also add a new sociological layer of understanding regarding the emergence of post-communist nostalgia, by placing an emphasis on cultural meanings besides the causal explanation that point mainly to social and economic grounds, as consequence of the changes engendered by the transition.

The limitations of this article concern the partial data collection regarding the 1990s decade, for only oral accounts of the period were used in the analysis. An extensive document review, corroborated with research in the archives of “Club A” might shed a new light on the emergence of communist themed parties. Also, the partial documentation on long-term clubbing projects resulted in the absence of a third case study from the analysis, under-powering results of cross-case synthesis. Both limitations may be addressed in future research.

This article suggests three main directions for future research aligned with our framework: (1) a retrospective analysis, to refine the history of communist themed clubbing for an in-depth investigation on how the first years after the 1989 revolution have shaped original perceptions and recollections on the communist past; (2) a prospective study on the hypothesis of a cyclic post-communist nostalgia, given the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of communist regimes in the year following the publication of the present article. Linked to this direction is the emergence of a third wave of nostalgia, seen as a *restorative* type, based on Kalinina’s observations to the 2012–2013 Russian context where state-controlled media appeared to “exploit nostalgia for political purposes and nurture a comeback of authoritarian ideologies” (Kalinina, 2014, p. 18). (3) A third direction is building on a particular finding from our case-study of long-term clubbing projects using references from the past. Reflecting on the twofold profile of the audience, “The Dead Ceaușescu” and “Discotecă” appear not only as mnemonic bridges between the past and the present, but also between generations. From this point of view, complementary reception studies should work on the question if nostalgia can facilitate the continuity of identity, considering, along with Janelle Wilson, that “individually and collectively, the past is remembered and, in this act of recall, it is often re-created” (2005, p. 8). Using Janelle Wilson’s conceptual framework of “displaced nostalgia”, we will explore the “post-communist nostalgia” focusing on the construction of meaning for post-communist generations.

**Acknowledgement:** I would like to warmly thank informants, colleagues and collaborators for helping me with their time and their valuable insights on this research. I would also like to thank George “Poqe” Popescu, Paul Breazu and Vlad Stoica for helping with photographs and illustrations, and permissions for their use.

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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