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Placeholders

### **Reimagining *Lost Territories*: the Sputnik Photos archive**

When we think about the symbolic moment of the fall of communism in Europe, usually we imagine people crossing the fallen Berlin Wall. Our vision of this historical event is based on both photographic and television reports. It can't be reduced to a single image but for sure it is a projection that deeply permeates the collective consciousness, especially in the western part of the world. This collective projection assumes that there was an outbreak of euphoria among the citizens of the German Democratic Republic over regaining their freedom and agency. However, as Boris Buden pointed out, that projection was not a gaze of the active participants of events of the time, but of external observers. 'Our idea of the twilight of communism divides into a blind occurrence and its symbolic representation, which was created outside the event,' concludes the author of *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* [Zone of Transition: The End of Post-Communism].

In the light of the above comment, I will discuss an alternative vision of post-communist countries, presented by Sputnik Photos - a collective of photographers from Central and Eastern

Europe, established in 2006 by: Andrej Balco, Jan Brykczyński, Manca Juvan, Justyna Mielnikiewicz, Rafał Milach, Domen Pal, Agnieszka Rayss, and Filip Singer. Between 2008 and 2016, Sputnik Photos worked in the former republics of the USSR. The photographs they took at the time became the core for developing the *Lost Territories Archive* – a database including a few thousand images that served as the starting point for **exhibitions and books**. They connect different projects, photographs, sometimes they do not attribute authorship. The projects drawing from this extensive material are close in their concept to the idea of an atlas – understood in the meaning proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman and thus, as a **‘visual form of knowledge,’** in which the continuity of narration is replaced by inter-image relations and associations that come forth as a result. By repeatedly using the same photographs in different constellations, they reconfigure the image of the dominant experiences of inhabitants of post-Soviet countries and of degraded nature.

Sputnik Photos collective is concentrated on long duration of transformation, called the **‘post-communist’ era**, a transitional phase, in which **the socialist society would be subjected to the transformation into a democratic-capitalist society**. (Brzeziński) At this point, however, there occurs a painful fracture, which the photographers from Sputnik Photos take a closer look at. Under the surface of going into raptures with Western consumerism and sexy freedom, loom the melancholy and disenchantment of Homo Sovieticus, who has **lost the illusion of collective solidarity and sunk into bitter loneliness**.

### **Thesis:**

The Sputnik Photos has been trying to go beneath the surface of the media imagination and the dominant political narrative, often reduced to the fact that the fall of communism meant liberation from the terror of totalitarian regimes along with opening to the processes of democratization. What is crucial for the subject discussed at the Photo Media 2026 conference: Sputnik Photos plays an important role in **unsettling and reimagining** the perception of post-socialist countries in Europe. In the *Lost Territories Archive* I find a strong correspondence with Susan Borck-Morss’ thesis that **the great utopias of modernization determine a common ground for the West and the East**. In the case of both geopolitical formations – socialist and capitalist – dreams of social happiness were driven by a belief in the modernizing power of industry. The

instrumentalization of these dreams by the authorities, however, leads them to be turned against the masses, who were originally supposed to be the beneficiaries of the processes of social transformation. The world shaped by neoliberal democracy and exposed to capitalist hallucination appears here not so much as a dreamland, but a system in which *homo sovieticus* - to use Svetlana Alexeyevich's term - is lost. The members of Sputnik Photos show not only the **utopia of modernization** implemented by the USSR but also the **utopia of liberation** from oppression that the end of the Cold War and the salutary wind from the West were supposed to bring. In the proposed talk, I will introduce various projects based on the *Archive of Lost Territories* as a form of critical examination of post-communist societies, which after the 1989/1991 breakthrough did not gain an agency, but remained puppets of the historical and modernization process (Boris Buden).

Keywords: post-communism, lost territories, modernisation, atlas, constellation