



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bulgaria political briefing:**  
**Bulgarian Society and the Battle for Historical Memory regarding  
the Role of the Red Army in the Victory over Nazi Germany**  
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## **Bulgarian Society and the Battle for Historical Memory regarding the Role of the Red Army in the Victory over Nazi Germany**

### **Summary**

*One of the most significant socio-political issues in Bulgaria for the last month was related to the removal of the Soviet Army monument in the center of Sofia, built during the years of socialist rule in 1954 and dedicated to respect for the contribution of the Red Army in the Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. The issue of the monument's removal has become the center of public debate as its opponents highlight the role of Soviet army in the establishment of a Soviet-style communist totalitarian regime in Bulgaria after the War. The public debate showed the existing deep division in Bulgarian society, not only regarding the role of Russia/USSR in Bulgarian history, but also regarding the interpretation of modern Bulgarian history in general. At the same time, the removal of the monument caused a sharp reaction from Russia. The existing public anti-Russian wave also covered other cities in Bulgaria where there are monuments related to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945, and the question of their removal was also raised.*

Profound societal changes always begin with proposing new ideas and rejecting the old ones. After the end of the Cold War, with the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria, the new political forces in the country began a fight against the symbols of the previous regime, by changing the names of streets, institutions, villages and cities. Part of the fight was also related to the removal and destruction of monuments and memorial places related to the anti-fascist resistance in Bulgaria during the WWII. The arguments for this kind of political decisions and actions are that such monuments cannot be described as anti-fascist, because Bulgaria was not governed by a fascist party and there was no fascist regime in the country.

This is true fact, but it is also true that there were enough fascist parties in Bulgaria that supported the regime after the coup in 1934 and without any doubt Bulgaria joined the Tripartite Pact coalition led by Nazi Germany. That's why the Bulgarian resistance during the WWII is a consistent part of the European anti-fascist resistance.

According to some data, after the end of the Second World War, more than 4,000 memorials dedicated to the historic battle of the Soviet army against fascism were built in Europe. Over 2.5 million Soviet soldiers who participated in the defeat of Hitler's Germany are

buried in them. There are the most monuments and graves of Red Army soldiers in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Similar memorials of the Soviet Red Army can also be seen in Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, Croatia, France, Romania, Bulgaria and even in the USA.<sup>1</sup>

After the Second World War, over 130 monuments were erected on the territory of Bulgaria dedicated to the fallen Soviet soldiers and in honor of the victory of the Soviet Army against the Nazi Germany. This was an expression of the gratitude of the Bulgarian people to every single soldier who died for the Liberation of Bulgaria and Europe from fascism.

The political attacks on all the monuments left from the socialist era started at the beginning of the so called transition period in Bulgaria, in 1990. The result was the removal, relocation or destruction of many monuments, and many others were left unmaintained, leading to their neglect and eventually account destruction.

Today, the fight of the newly emerged right wing political forces with the symbolic monuments can be considered successful. Streets in towns and villages have new names, thousands of monuments were torn down, thrown away and melted down before the decision to collect and eventually expose them in the so called Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia, established in 2011, which was two decades after the first wave of demolitions of historical monuments in the country.

Nowadays, already thirty-four years after the start of Bulgaria's transition to political democracy and a market economy, right-wing political forces in the country still continue to fight against the symbols of the past.

Moreover, the battle with the monuments from the socialist era is once again a key mean of legitimization of the right-wing political forces in Bulgaria, who use this mean to impose an incorrect, highly politicized and rather distorted view of history in general.

Therefore, probably the biggest symbolic clash of 2023, which continues at the beginning of 2024, became the fight against the Monument to the Soviet Army. Thirty-four years after the beginning of the so called Transition period, the right-wing political forces in the country finally found a suitable geopolitical and internal political situation to attack this spectacular symbol of the victory of the Red Army over Nazism in Europe during the years of the Second World War.

The context in which this time the attack on the monument was successful and it was finally destroyed and removed was, of course, Russia's war against Ukraine, which led to a large-scale anti-Russian campaign in Bulgarian society, which was followed with a desire for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marica.bg/balgariq/obshtestvo/4000-sa-savetskite-memoriali-v-evropa-shte-ocelqqt-li>

demonstrative destruction and removal of such type memorials that are related to the common history of Bulgaria and the Soviet Union from the time of the Second World War and the period after the war.

The monument to the Soviet Army is a monumental composition made in the style of socialist realism erected in the centrum of city of Sofia. It was officially opened on September 7, 1954. The monument was created by a team led by the famous Bulgarian sculptor Ivan Funev with the idea of symbolizing the gratitude of the Bulgarian people to the Soviet soldiers.

Until the end of 1989, the monument to the Soviet Army was one of the emblematic places of the Bulgarian capital, where various celebrations were held.

It is a 37-meter high representing Soviet warrior, a Bulgarian worker and a mother with a child. With a machine gun in hand, the Soviet warrior announces the victory over fascism. In the lower part of the monument, there are several compositions representing the creation and the victorious march of the Soviet Army.

### **What does the Monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia represent?**

The eastern haut-relief of the monument represents composition called "October 1917", which depicts sailors, soldiers, workers, girls who formed the Soviet Army.

The haut-relief on the south side of the monument represents composition called "The Front" or "All for the Front, All for Victory". It represents the entire Soviet people, putting all their efforts into helping their army.

The western haut-relief is called "The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union" and it shows the fighting spirit and power of the Soviet Army in the war against the German invaders.

On the front of the monument there is an inscription "To the Soviet Army the liberator - from the grateful Bulgarian people".

On both sides of the central approach to the monument, 10 pedestals are erected, on which bronze laurel wreaths are placed. They symbolize the ten most decisive battles of the Soviet army in the defeat of the German-fascist army. On the two pedestals, at the very beginning of the approach to the monument, there are two more sculptural compositions under the name "The Bulgarian people welcome the Soviet liberating army with bread and salt, with flowers and gifts".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dnes.bg/obshtestvo/2023/12/13/kakvo-predstavliava-pametnikyt-na-syvetskata-armiia.592148>

The monument to the Soviet Army should be called the Red Army, as the army that defeated the German Wehrmacht in World War II was called. But in 1954, when the monument was built, this army was already called Soviet, so that became its official name.

### **The long story of the attempts to destroy and remove the monument from the city center of Sofia**

Requests for the removal (renaming, demolition, destruction, relocation, transformation into something else) of the Monument to the Soviet Army appeared very soon after the geopolitical reorientation of Bulgaria from the Eastern Bloc (the COMECON and the Warsaw Pact) to the Western Bloc (the US, EU and NATO). Then the monument, which its opponents began to call the Monument of the Red Army of Occupation, became a symbol of the subordinate role that Bulgaria had in the Soviet bloc. This was another manifestation of the Bulgarian inferiority complex.

Immediately after the political changes in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 1990s, the walls of the monument were scratched with graffiti. In March 1993, after long public debates, the Metropolitan Municipal Council voted a decision to remove the monument, which remained unimplemented, as it turned out that the monument is state property and cannot be removed by a municipal decision.

In the following years, the monument to the Soviet Army became a preferred venue for beer festivals, techno parties, Christmas bazaars and basketball competitions.

At the beginning of 2006, the Municipality of Sofia restored the night lighting of the monument, and security cameras were placed around it. However, its walls are periodically scratched with graffiti.

At the end of 2010, an initiative committee was created to dismantle the monument.

In recent years, the monument has also become a stage for political art.

In 2011, for the first time, the sculptures were painted as American comic book characters and entered the news of the world media. In 2012, the faces of Soviet soldiers were covered with masks of the British revolutionary Guy Fawkes. On the anniversary of the suppression of the Prague Spring in 2018, the monument was lit up in pink with the inscription "Bulgaria apologizes!!!".

The inscription "Glory to Ukraine" and the country's flag appeared in 2014. In the same year, four people who wrote "Occupiers!" were also arrested on the monument.

The numerous actions and attempts against the monument have intensified with the escalating political clash between Russia and the West, which escalated two years ago into Russia's war in Ukraine.

### **The war in Ukraine, Bulgarian society and the decision to remove the monument**

Namely, Russia's war against Ukraine catalyzed and intensified the public political debate in Bulgaria related to the idea of removing the monument. Bulgarian society is significantly divided, since for some the monument is a symbol of the liberation of Bulgaria and also of Europe from Nazi Germany, and for others it is a symbol only of the occupying "red army" that invaded the country in September 1944.

The decision to remove the monument was taken again by the Metropolitan Municipal Council in March 2023. In October of that year, it was ordered that the monument be prepared for dismantling. Days before, a metal fence had been placed around it for safety purposes.

Meanwhile, opposition political parties such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the "Left" party and the "Revival" political party declared themselves in defense of the monument, and organized a number of protests in its defense over the whole 2023 year. In early August 2023, they made a tent camp in front of the monument as a protest against its removal.<sup>3</sup>

The arguments against the monument have been well known for years. According to those who insist on its removal: it is not a real war monument because it does not mention any soldiers who died in Bulgaria; it is not even a symbol of the victory over fascism, but of the domination of a totalitarian system imposed by foreign troops on Bulgarian territory; it is propaganda art, despite the skillful compositions; since the Cold War period, the monument has served to justify communist totalitarianism, which used the heroism and suffering of the Soviet people in World War II to legitimize its power. Last but not least it was argued that the so called "post-communist Russian imperialism" also uses this propaganda art to legitimize itself, and it also justifies Putin's aggression against Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

The dismantling of the monument began on December 12, 2023. The officially announced arguments for its removal were that it required "urgent dismantling, relocation and restoration" due to the fact that, as a result of the lack of maintenance for 70 years, cracks appeared in the bronze castings and there is a real danger of elements falling from the figures. "With this state

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/pametnik-na-savetskata-armiya-ograda/32719942.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dw.com/bg/razdalata-s-moca-pt-km-samoosvobozdenie-na-blgaria/a-67709034>

of the monument, serious accidents with citizens are possible. This is also the reason for installing the additional fence."<sup>5</sup>

According to the Sofia District Administration's Safety and Health Plan, there are cracks in the figures on the monument, the granite paving and facings are in poor condition, and many of the slabs on the plinth are cracked and/or lifted.

The restoration will have to preserve the artistic value of the sculptures so that they can be displayed as exhibits in the Museum of Socialist Art.<sup>6</sup>

The dismantling of the Monument to the Soviet Army caused heated discussions not only among the public, but also in the Parliament. Deputies from "Revival" party, Bulgarian Socialist Party and "There is such people" reacted sharply.

The city organization of the BSP came out with a position against the dismantling of the monument as early as February 2023, in which it is said that the Monument to the Soviet Army is a monument to 27 million citizens of the then Soviet Union - Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs, Caucasians and from dozens more nationalities who gave their for the liberation of Europe and the world from fascism. In the military operations of the same Soviet Army, the First Bulgarian Army, headed by General Vladimir Stoychev, gave tens of thousands of apparent victims. Their act of heroism under the banner of Victory saved Bulgaria from national humiliation, because until 1944 it was an ally of Nazi Germany, drawn into this disastrous alliance by its politicians.<sup>7</sup>

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev also expressed its position saying that "The barbaric destruction of monuments is not only an attempt to erase history, but greatly exacerbates public opposition." According to him "There is currently an aggressive offensive against statehood, history and memory. Destructive processes are taking place that instill division and intolerance in society. A deep public indignation is brewing, which will inevitably have political consequences".<sup>8</sup>

The head of state added also that "Bulgarians will not stand idly by the attacks against our history, which is also an attack against our future"

Russia has also officially declared against the dismantling of the monument. Moscow's reaction was very sharp. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/pametnik-na-savetskata-armiya-ograda/32719942.html>

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> <https://novovreme.com/nay-novo/za-pametnika-na-savetskata-armia/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/radev-za-pametnika-na-savetskata-armija-zree-dalboko-obshtestveno-vazmushtenie-koeto-shte-ima-politicheski-posledici.html>

the dismantling as a "barbaric act".<sup>9</sup> "The barbaric actions of the Bulgarian side have no justification and no forgiveness. We consider the destruction of the monument to our common past to be another hostile step by official Sofia, aggravating the already deadlocked situation in bilateral relations. Bulgaria is again, as has happened more than once, choosing the wrong side of history. It will have to fully pay the consequences of this shameful decision," said Zakharova.<sup>10</sup>

During the procedure for dismantling the monument, it was appealed in court as illegal. On December 14, 2023, the Ministry of Culture issued an order to stop the dismantling of the monument due to the lack of coordination with the minister responsible for cultural monuments, which was not fulfilled. The Inspectorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage at the Ministry of Culture stated that the Monument to the Soviet Army is included in the list of immovable historical cultural heritage. However, from a meeting of the Specialized Expert Council at the Ministry of Culture held on December 15, it became clear that the restoration activities of the monument don't have to be coordinated with the Ministry.

After the dismantling of the Soviet Army monument in Sofia, similar initiatives were announced against Red Army monuments in other Bulgarian cities such as Plovdiv and Burgas. In both cities there are sentiments for the dismantling of such monuments.

## **Conclusion**

30 years after the first decision of the Metropolitan Municipal Council, the Monument to the Soviet Army in the center of Sofia, known among its opponents as the Monument to the Red Army of Occupation, is now being dismantled. This was the longest fought battle for a monument in Bulgaria - at the domestic political, legal and international level.

According to a number of prominent Bulgarian historians, the case with the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia shows very confused ideas about history. Attempts to destroy the monument are motivated by the desire to protest against the actions of modern Russia, which, however, prefers to be identified with the Russian Empire rather than the Soviet period. And the greatest merit of the Red Army, in honor of which the monument was built, is precisely the victory against Nazism, which apparently no one in Bulgaria wants to remember.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://btvnovinite.bg/predavanja/tazi-sutrin/demontazhat-na-pametnika-na-savetskata-armija-prodalzhava.html>

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> <https://epicenter.bg/article/Prof--Iskra-Baeva--Pametnikat-na-Savetskata-armiya-i-obarkanite-predstavi-za-istoriyata/309764/11/0>



The historical truth is that this monument is a symbol not of the occupation, but of the role of the Soviet Union and its Red Army in the victory over Nazi Germany. It is also an indisputable fact that there could not have been a post-war democratic world (in Western Europe) if there was no victory of the Red Army. The monument should remind Bulgarians that Bulgaria was an ally of the Nazi Germany and helped its military operations. At the same time, however, an indisputable fact that also symbolizes the monument is that Bulgaria fought in the final stage of the war on the side of the Anti-Hitler coalition as part of the Third Ukrainian Front, and Bulgarians also participated in the pan-European anti-fascist resistance movement, thanks to which Bulgaria preserved its borders and territorial integrity after the War.

Similar monuments continue to exist in countries such as Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia. These countries, like Bulgaria, were part of the Tripartite Pact and were defeated. They keep the memory of this part of their history as well.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the critical thinking Bulgarian historians are worried by recent political attempts for imposing a very false historical image, by whitewashing the historical memory of Bulgarians regarding that period when Bulgaria was an ally of Nazi Germany and when the political regime in the country was non-party government (completely undemocratic), when the regime was repressing its Jews and was ready to send them to the death camps (but society saved them) and when the government was repressing its citizens with leftist beliefs.

These tendencies are visible in the Bulgarian politics of the last years, and they can clearly be traced in the history textbooks curricula, where the positive evaluations of the development of Bulgaria before 1944 were highlighted, and the concept of terrorism is associated only with the communists. Again according to critical-thinking historians, this trend is an unfortunate attempt to develop Bulgaria through the idealization of a past that is extremely unsuitable for modern Europe. The destruction of the monuments of the Bulgarian anti-fascists movement and the Red Army only confirm this trend, which opposes Bulgaria to those European countries that were part of the European resistance against Fascism and Nazism.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://24may.bg/2023/12/20/%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B1%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%8A%D1%81-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://zemya.bg/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%84-%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%89%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%88%D0%BB%D0%BE/>