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Maksym SOKLAKOV, Student  
ORCID ID: 0009-0002-4892-634X  
e-mail: maksym.soklakov@knu.ua  
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

## MONUMENTAL MOSAICS AS PLACES OF MEMORY IN PUBLIC SPACES OF UKRAINE

**Background.** *Modernist monumental mosaics as an intrinsic part of Soviet cultural heritage are ubiquitously present all over the urban environments of Ukraine. With rare exceptions, they remain predominantly unacknowledged as being valuable objects of cultural heritage. Many fine works of monumental art are already lost and others remain under constant threat. The precarious situation of modernist mosaics calls for a thorough reexamination of a complex situation with memory politics in Ukraine overall.*

*The goal of this article is to explore the theoretical-methodological framework of memory studies for its applicability to the analysis of socio-cultural value of Soviet monumental modernist mosaics within the context of their destruction by the ongoing process of commercialization and decommunization of public spaces in post-socialist cities.*

*The research objectives are to investigate the current status of modernist mosaics within contemporary Ukrainian heritage preservation discourse and conceptualize it within the memory studies framework.*

**Methods.** *Case studies, narrative and textual analysis, interdisciplinary integration of cultural and memory studies, application of the "collective memory" approach, synthesis of "postmemory" and "places of memory" concepts.*

**Results.** *Created by Ukrainian monumental artists of the Soviet period, modernist mosaics are already deeply embedded within the urban environment. Within the framework of memory studies, modernist mosaics may serve as 'places of memory' of that particular period of history and in that way contribute to its reinterpretation and further formation of the complete image of city memory and of inclusive memory politics of Ukraine.*

**Conclusions.** *The theoretical-methodological framework of memory studies appears to be an appropriate tool for analysis of socio-cultural value of monumental mosaics. There is a necessity for further inquiries into this field and its further engagement in the development of Ukrainian heritage preservation discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Soviet architectural modernism, monumental mosaics, cultural heritage, memory politics, "postmemory", contested heritage.*

### Background

The cultural heritage of Soviet architectural modernism in urban spaces of Ukraine is in a precarious situation because of numerous interwoven economic, cultural, and political factors: overall public ignorance, private proprietary interests, the process of decommunization, and the ongoing war – just to name a few. An intrinsic part of this heritage is the technique of monumental modernist mosaic which is one of the most authentic and unique artistic phenomena of the Soviet period. One can find them all over the urban landscapes of Ukraine, however, they remain largely unacknowledged as a distinct phenomenon of art history and valuable objects of cultural heritage.

This topic was problematized by scholars and activists after the events of Euromaidan when mosaics came under the threat of deconstruction under the premise of the laws on decommunization. Active public discussions on the question of collective memory and mnemonics were taking place, however, no significant changes in the heritage preservation legislation were developed. This is evidence of the underdeveloped legislation for the preservation of the Soviet cultural heritage and an overall baffling situation with memory politics in Ukraine.

Many fine works of monumental art are already lost, and others remain under a constant threat either of gradual decay or rapid deconstruction. Imminent dangers looming over Soviet monumental art, call for a thorough academic research and recontextualization of modernist mosaics within contemporary Ukrainian heritage preservation discourse.

The article aims to reexamine the phenomenon of Soviet modernist monumental mosaics, in order to understand the peculiarity of the art technique. The first research objective is to identify the socio-economic context of the urban environment in which mosaics are embedded to understand the problems that arise about their protection as the objects of cultural heritage. The second research objective is to explore the works of Ukrainian activists and

scholars on the topic of Soviet cultural heritage and supplement them with the conceptual framework of memory studies. Finally, the third research objective is to examine the applicability of the theoretical-methodological framework of memory studies to the artistic phenomenon of Soviet monumental modernist mosaics.

### Methods

Case studies, narrative and textual cultural analysis, interdisciplinary integration of cultural and memory studies, application of the "collective memory" approach, synthesis of "postmemory" and "places of memory" concepts.

### Results

A case study of modernist mosaics provides insights into the development of a heritage preservation discourse in contemporary Ukraine, as the reception of the Soviet architectural heritage may serve as an indicator of the formation of memory politics and the main vectors of social reforms and reorganization of the urban environment.

Throughout the years of independence and up until the events of Euromaidan, the presence of mosaics in public spaces remained predominantly unnoticed and ignored by the vast majority of the population. Mosaics were not acknowledged as a valuable element of architectural heritage, and they were under a threat of slow and gradual decomposition and decay.

The overall ignorance towards the architectural heritage of the Soviet Union indicates the historical process of rapid and uncontrolled privatization and commodification of the urban space caused by the transition from socialist to capitalist mode of production. Its main principle can be characterized as "architectural anarcho-capitalism" that places cost-effectiveness over the aesthetical value of the urban environment. This process produced a so-called "post-socialist city" (Fedoriv, 2018) which is characterized by the hybrid spatial forms that arise from the interconnection of socialist legacy and neoliberal economic reforms. The neglect of the communist past and embracement of capitalist values formed a new political,

economic, and cultural environment of the post-socialist urban environment. The specificity of a post-socialist city lies in the combination of old socialist and new neoliberal capitalistic ways of symbolic integration of public spaces.

It can be noted that a great number of monumental mosaics within urban environments are present on the facades of buildings that came under the process of privatization and commercialization. Mosaics became to be obscured by commercial outdoor advertisements of private entrepreneurs. Moreover, many mosaics were damaged because of the overall negligence and gradual decay or were intentionally destroyed because of the housing reconstructions and installations of thermal insulations that did not consider mosaics as something valuable. Inscribed directly into the public space that came under the privatization, the peculiarity of the technique of monumental mosaic contradicts the newly established dichotomy of private and public within a post-socialist city. It can be assumed that within public spaces in a post-socialist city process of privatization and commercialization goes hand in hand with decommunization and the neglect of Soviet cultural heritage.

The transition from highly centralized government to local governance produced numerous subjects of urban city planning policies, which increased the fragmentation of the urban environment. Central government, local council authorities, private entrepreneurs, various activist groups, and regular people began to shape the urban environment with accordance to their often-competing goals and visions of the city. In this way, the transition from totalitarian, Soviet state-socialism to a democratic European nation-state with a market-based economy was going on; however, this process was primarily focused on economic issues up until the events of Euromaidan, and the questions of identity and mnemonics were absent or placed on the margins of public discourse (Korolonko, 2015).

The issues of identity and mnemonics became prominent and highly controversial with the events of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014. Consequent political perturbations combined with the hybrid war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine radicalized society in its aspiration to overcome and break the ties with the totalitarian legacy. In the context of political instability, monuments of the Soviet past became a significant image of historical trauma, highly a controversial topic of Soviet-era legacy, and its symbols became a battlefield, a contested heritage. Perception of the Soviet past within Ukrainian society was still somewhat ambivalent (Rating Group Ukraine, 2014). Some people considered it to be an integral part of Ukrainian history, and others considered it to be symbolic evidence of numerous totalitarian crimes. These conditions can be described within the framework of memory studies as a confrontation between two mnemonic warriors with competing interpretations of the collective memory. The symbolic meaning of Soviet public space became actively contested and hotly debated, yet without any complete consent of both sides. As evident in the article of Alina Hodyna (2021) on the case of Soviet memory spaces in Chernihiv, these conflicts usually ended up in spontaneous acts of violence, vandalism, and demolition of Soviet monuments, however, these occasions did not contribute to the production of a drastically different interpretative framework for the Soviet cultural heritage.

Ukrainian city and its public spaces were going through some radical transformations, so to streamline and regulate the sporadic actions of activists and local authorities,

Verkhovna Rada accepted several laws, among which is "On the condemnation of communist and national socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and the prohibition of propaganda of their symbols" which initiated on a legislative level the process of deconstruction of symbols, monuments and memorials of totalitarian past. Hence, signs and symbols of the communist past were supposed to be removed from the public spaces and spaces of public access, such as museums, theaters, schools, subway stations, etc. These laws contained a prohibition on the destruction of artworks and objects of cultural significance, but no clear principle or mechanism for the evaluation of the 'Sovietness' of an artwork, and no methods of implementation of this policy were developed. Decommunization laws contained the articles related to the punishment for its improper performance or violation, however, the act of violation itself was not defined clearly.

It caused a rather chaotic interpretation and integration of these laws, which was the reason for numerous conflicts and misunderstandings, and gave way to constant confrontations. Because of the lack of clarity in the laws on decommunization, numerous artworks that had nothing to do with propaganda were destroyed. This process highlighted the overall weakness of legislative heritage protection of monumental arts in Ukraine (Prykhid, 2019). The responsibility for the removal of communist symbols from the communal property was placed onto the communal services themselves, i.e., the communal services were put to work with the memorial and symbolic landscapes of cities (Vlasenko, 2015). There had been numerous arbitrary and unauthorized deconstructions of monumental artworks. As it was characterized by Evhenia Molyar and other civic activists, the process of decommunization in Ukraine had been conducted with 'Soviet methods', i.e., straightforward mindless implementation without any structural dynamics in the society, simple political iconoclasm that «just replaced communist leaders with characters of national canon» (Kupriianova, 2015).

But with all the drawbacks, this process encouraged the re-evaluation and revision of conceptual ways of including the past in the representation of the memory in the urban environment. The main question raised was: what are the criteria for the definition of a certain monument to be kept or destroyed? Specifically concerning the objects of Soviet art heritage, which was always more or less ideologically laden. The difficulty of the situation is also tied to the complex legislative status of numerous memorials and mosaics, as most of them are still yet to be classified as valuable and to be registered. It is yet to be introduced to the public discourse that some monuments and memorials that should be deconstructed under the premise of law for decommunization may as well be registered as culturally valuable heritage that ought to be protected for its aesthetic or historical values. However, the criteria and procedures are yet to be fully developed.

In order to create a framework for the reception of modernist mosaics and to create theoretical basis for new interpretations of a controversial historical past, a theoretical-methodological basis of memory studies ought to be applied. The Soviet cultural heritage within this context may be classified as a contested heritage.

The introduction of the concept of "postmemory" to the public humanities discourse would allow us to initiate the process of rethinking the existing discourse of national identity, and how it works with "cultural memory" and consequently impact the emergence of new symbolic

landscapes of Ukrainian cities. The concept of "postmemory" and its presence within the environments of post-socialist cities is an undeveloped one, as most of the existing studies «focus on the notion of "the nation" and its birth in opposition to the official communist ideology». Within the public spaces of contemporary Ukraine, Soviet mosaics may be what Crețan (2023) defines as the 'postmemory in place' (or Pierre Nora's 'lieux de memoire'), an object of tangible heritage, the material element of the inheritance of the Soviet identity that would allow the younger generation to explore the bygone era, critically evaluate it, create its own interpretations of the past and produce the context for new identities.

Important problems that are faced by cultural memory are not only a resemblance and establishment of national identity but also the problems of memory and our relation to the traumatic oblivion and forgetting of a certain past, specifically when we reform existing or create new public spaces. Within the framework of memory studies, important is not how a certain object of heritage reflects its historical origin, but the way it is treated and depicted in the contemporaneity. The conflict of memories in the city's public spaces raises a question of our perception of the past. The symbolic dimension of a city becomes a battlefield for the contest over the interpretation of the past. Renaming of streets, either construction or demolition of monuments serves as a tool for the consolidation of a nation. The problematic asymmetry of memory of post-socialist cities lies in the historical influence of various ideologies on the urban environment. The city comes out as a product of different spatial interactions and simultaneously as a context for the unfolding of ideological principles. The structure of an urban environment defines the social behavior and cultural practices of the population, a city's space serves as a medium for the collective identity of its inhabitants.

What does it mean to rethink the "symbolic landscape" and how does it manifest itself in the urban space? Perhaps, it is worth starting with a reassessment and reformulation of the values that we put as a basis in the spaces of the city – both when we reformat or design new public spaces, and when we analyze the usual, traditional, or new spatial practices and everyday practices. The founding scholar of the theory of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs (1980), stated that the city contains numerous narratives built into it that are permanently present within the urban environment. City is a text, and we may read it on the go as a unique kind of book on the history of ideologies and architectural paradigms. Regular citizens indeed constantly read all sorts of things: commercials, graffiti, memorials, street names, etc.; all of them function in the form of text. In this sense, the city functions as a space with numerous texts inscribed onto its surface.

According to the concept of cultural memory, the city serves as a dynamic environment that allows for dialogue between different texts and consequent production of new texts and memories (Blacker, 2020). The city is a palimpsest, where its inhabitants inscribe their new ongoing narratives over the narratives of the past. The archive of the city is its physical environment itself, which reflects not only the past but also shapes our perceptions of urban history and our memories. City, as a cultural phenomenon, is never written in only one language, it is not monolithic in its essence, but rather is formed by various groups of population and numerous different political actors. Political perturbations, genocides, massive deportations, and politics of intentional historical obscurity are the reasons for lacunas in the history of the city,

however, the marginalized past always comes back in the form of a symptom and always has a potency to be virtually present. Within the methodology of contemporary urban and memory studies, a complete image of city history is a desirable and achievable goal.

Aleida Assmann (1999) points to the historical transition from ideologies and myths to the concept of collective memory. Within this framework, the ideological images lose their negative connotation and the focus of attention of a researcher is shifted from their ideological function to the "timeless power of influence of visual images or symbols and their historical construction". This thesis appears to be an appropriate point to start the reassessment of modernist mosaics.

The technique of Soviet monumental modernist mosaic was developed as a functional solution to cover the empty facades of newly built standardized buildings of massive urbanized housing microdistricts which constitute a majority of contemporary Ukrainian urban environments up to this day. The monumental art of mosaics was a radically innovative aesthetical decision that allowed for a peculiar type of perception of artworks within the urban environment, as the mosaics are always already present in their continuity, immediately within the living space, as if their aesthetical value is existing inseparably from architectural ensembles and their constant presence in the non-reflective field of mundane perception. What is more, due to the mundane presence of mosaics in the urban environment, their content could not be extremely ideologically overburdened, but rather consonant to the mundanity itself, although from a rather artistic perspective. In the center of most figurative mosaics is the image of an ordinary citizen, they depict everyday life and urban culture of that historical period in a unique artistic manner. Even historical motives that potentially could be overburdened with ideology are usually depicted through the prism of common people. Since mosaics remained largely ignored and unacknowledged, it can be concluded that with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they had lost their ideological referent and became a part of a Soviet cultural heritage. The meaning of a certain object of cultural heritage is never fixed but may change over time. Currently, mosaics can be accounted for as empty signifiers inscribed into urban environments but deprived of an interpretative framework. They do not refer to the past Soviet myth or ideology, but at the same time they, do not have an established interpretative framework of collective memory to perceive them at the present moment either.

The technique of modernist mosaics as a peculiar type of monumental art, is nowhere as commonly proliferated as over the post-Soviet space. It allowed the monumental art to find its way to the exteriors of the cities and to spread its sphere of presence not only on unique buildings and architectural ensembles but also onto regular housing buildings of massive construction and common use. This fact, combined with an extremely cheap material of colored ceramic tile and smalto allowed this specific type of monumental art to be massively produced, ubiquitously proliferated, and be perceived on a daily basis by an extremely wide range of people. The main theoretical framework for the modernist mosaics was the concept of "synthesis of arts", which was focused not only on the buildings themselves but on the urban environment as a whole (Bachynska, 2021). This allowed Soviet mosaics to be intelligently and organically integrated into the architectural forms, contributing to the aesthetical organization of the urban environment of Soviet cities.

According to the theoretical framework of the "synthesis of arts", the mosaics were perceived as an intrinsic part of the urban environment, hence they could not be pre-programmed by the officials. Instead, every work of art had to be unique and constructed in accordance with the local contexts of the particular environment. This fact, combined with the overall abstractness of this specific art form, allowed for the inclusion of local artists and for an unprecedented level of freedom in terms of artistic expression that more often than not went beyond the official socialist-realist canon. Some artists even utilized complex Aesopian language of visual symbols in their artworks in order to convey meanings beyond the official agenda of propaganda (Horova, 2016), which makes modernist mosaics appear even more as a peculiar and unique artistic phenomenon. The inclusion of local Ukrainian artists like Ada Rybachuk, Volodymyr Melnychenko, Alla Horska, Viktor Zaretskyi, Borys Plaksii, Ivan Marchuk, Ivan Lytovchenko, Valerii Lamakh, and many others, makes modernist mosaics to appear not as artificially imposed occupational propaganda but as an idiosyncratic phenomenon of Ukrainian art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, with only a few exceptions, almost none of the remaining mosaics are included in the State Register of Immovable Landmarks of Ukraine. Moreover, the whole topic of Soviet cultural heritage remains a highly controversial field, as existing state institutions like the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, and various civic initiatives like "Деконізація. Україна." (<https://decolonization.com.ua>), stand on the position of nationalistic mnemonic warrior, and actively contest and neglect the potential value of Soviet cultural heritage. The recent conclusion of the UINM on the removal of the 'Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian People' as a symbol of Russian imperial policy is a good example of the narrow-mindedness of the exclusive national ideological memory narrative. Within a framework of collective memory, a non-figurative monument exempt from any totalitarian symbols may symbolize anything depending solely on the interpreter.

Decommunization should be considered as a process that goes beyond a struggle with symbolic imagery, it should be implemented not only as a one-time operation of demolition of symbolics of the totalitarian past but rather as an incredibly artistic process of exploration of history, identity, and, public spaces, a process of re-interpretation of existing heritage and numerous historical traumas caused by the totalitarian politics of destruction, oblivion of historical past, and the forced imposition of newly constructed narratives (Vodotyka, 2017).

With regards to the modernist mosaics in particular and to the Soviet heritage overall, numerous activist initiatives were already active, stating and protecting the inherent value of Soviet architectural modernism and its place in the history of Ukrainian cultural heritage.

The first comprehensive and systematic study and perhaps the biggest thing that ever happened to modernist mosaics was a photobook by Yevgen Nikiforov, a Ukrainian photographer who traveled all over Ukraine, including annexed Crimea and Donbas region in order to document and catalogize numerous mosaics that are scattered all over the public spaces of Ukrainian cities. (Nikiforov et al., 2017; Nikiforov, & Baitsym, 2020)

Later on, was created the project of cultural initiative IZOLYATSIA by the name of "Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine" (<https://Sovietmosaicsinukraine.org>) that is dedicated to the research and cataloging of Ukrainian modernist mosaics. Authors of this initiative insist on the necessity of thorough research, exploration, and archiving of monumental art

and, the necessity for the active participation of architects, art specialists, and urban geography scholars in the evaluation and decision processes of deconstruction of mosaics. Besides that, there was a published public appeal (Kurina, 2015) several civic activists and cultural scholars to a series of governmental institutions with the requirement to stop the demolition of the symbolic imagery of the past and act for the preservation of Soviet heritage.

"ДЕ НЕ ДЕ" exhibition that was dedicated to the topic of decommunization overall and gathered more than 30 contemporary Ukrainian artists in an attempt to create a new interpretative matrix of the Soviet legacy, exploration of the Soviet heritage within the contemporary urban environment on critical view on attempts to get rid of it completely (Oliinyk, 2016).

It can be concluded that simultaneously with the monolithic view of national history, there are emerging attempts to build collective memory with due regard to ambivalence and the variety of historical experiences of the society. Signs of memory and identity come from different symbolic orders and relate to each other on different significant levels, recurring narrative modules constitute various identities. The tendency of fragmentation and diversification of the national memory indicates the ability of a society to accept different interpretations of the past, in this way building a diverse memorial landscape (Rose-Redwood et al., 2008).

#### Discussion and conclusions

There appears to be a necessity to reconstitute the inherently complex and multidimensional history of the development of Ukrainian urban environments. The forgotten phenomenon of Ukrainian monumental art of the Soviet period could and should be reintroduced to the public discourse. There is a necessity for more in-depth development of mnemonic discourse and legislative basis for the protection and preservation of the Soviet cultural heritage. Critical rethinking, and reintroduction of Soviet-era heritage requires an unbiased view and interdisciplinary socio-geographic approach that would be able to develop an open discussion about ways to contribute to the ethical and aesthetical dynamics in the architectural sphere of Ukrainian cities, of enhancing democratic processes in publicity and searching for new ways of representation of objectionable architecture, monumental art and their history. Ukrainian monumental artists of the Soviet era could and should be acknowledged as being culturally valuable. Their art should become the material of thorough research and study and therefore – be a part of our common cultural and historical heritage.

The technique of Soviet modernist monumental mosaics that was developed and proliferated as a particular artistic solution to a particular architectural challenge faced by the Soviet Union ought to be considered as a unique artistic phenomenon that constitutes the Ukrainian symbolic memory landscapes inherent to that particular socio-cultural and historical context. These mosaics are already inscribed onto the surface of Ukrainian urban environments. They appear to suit perfectly into the established theoretical-methodological basis of memory studies and may very well serve as places of postmemory, as historical evidence of that particular historical period. They are artistic signs that are deprived of their ideological referent and are open for reinterpretation within the framework of collective memory. Their integration into cultural heritage preservation would allow for the creation of a more inclusive and diverse collective memory and a creation of a more complete image of city history.

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Максим СОКЛАКОВ, студ.

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-4892-634X

e-mail: maksym.soklakov@knu.ua

Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка, Київ, Україна

## МОНУМЕНТАЛЬНІ МОЗАЇКИ ЯК МІСЦЯ ПАМ'ЯТИ В ПУБЛІЧНИХ ПРОСТОРАХ УКРАЇНИ

**Вступ.** Модерністські монументальні мозаїки як невід'ємна частина радянської культурної спадщини наявні в усьому урбаністичному просторі України. Переважно їхня цінність як об'єктів культурної спадщини досі не визнана, крім кількох винятків. Багато творів монументального мистецтва вже втрачені, а деякі залишаються під постійною загрозою. Вразливе становище модерністських мозаїк потребує ретельного перегляду політик пам'яті в Україні загалом.

**Мета статті** – дослідити можливість застосування теоретико-методологічної бази студій пам'яті для аналізу соціо-культурної цінності радянських монументальних модерністських мозаїк у контексті їх руйнування внаслідок комерціалізації та декомунізації публічних просторів у пост-соціалістичних містах.

**Дослідницькі завдання** – вивчити статус модерністських мозаїк у сучасному українському дискурсі збереження спадщини та концептуалізувати їх у межах студій пам'яті.

**Методи.** тематичні дослідження, нарративний і текстовий аналіз, інтердисциплінарне поєднання культурології та студій пам'яті. Застосовано поняття "культурної пам'яті", синтез концептів "постпам'яті" та "місце пам'яті".

**Результати.** Створені українськими художниками-монументалістами радянського періоду модерністські мозаїки глибоко вкорінені в міське середовище. У межах студій пам'яті модерністські мозаїки цілком можуть слугувати "місцями пам'яті" радянського періоду, тим сприяючи його переосмисленню й у подальшому формувати цілісний образ міської пам'яті та інклюзивну політику пам'яті в Україні.

**Висновки.** Теоретико-методологічна база студій пам'яті видається належним інструментом для аналізу соціокультурної цінності монументальних мозаїк. Існує потреба в продовженні досліджень у межах зароджуваного поля досліджень та в його подальшому залученні до розвитку дискурсу збереження української спадщини.

**Ключові слова:** радянський архітектурний модернізм, монументальні мозаїки, культурна спадщина, політика пам'яті, "постпам'яті", оспорювана спадщина.

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