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**Post-communist Gates:
The Causes and Meanings of Walled-off Residential Spaces in Sofia, Bulgaria**

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the social causes and cultural meanings of a relatively new trend in East European urbanism—the proliferation of walled-off or gated residential spaces. Case study research was conducted in fast-growing neighborhoods of the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, where the trend has become extremely prominent in recent years. Research methods included: standardized survey with a random sample of neighborhoods residents; in-depth interviews with select sample participants; in-depth interviews with local architects, urban planners and sociologists; and a photographic survey. As hypothesized, the research found that residents of walled-off spaces choose this lifestyle for a variety of reasons well known to scholars of gated residential communities around the world. Motivations include fear of crime and a desire to protect privacy. More broadly and perhaps more interestingly, however, the research found that the trend of walling-off reflects an overall decline in appreciation of shared, public spaces throughout the city and perhaps even a crisis of the very idea of a benevolent public realm.

Research topic

My research investigates the causes behind the sudden proliferation of gated urban spaces in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. For anyone familiar with Sofia, as well as with other East

European cities, the proliferation of gates and other physical barriers throughout the city is a novel, if not a shocking trend. Although some cities in the region, especially those which were for centuries part of the Ottoman Empire (e.g., Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia and Tirana), had a tradition of building walled-off residential compounds, such traditions virtually disappeared through the 20th century, when these cities were incorporated into independent European nation-states. During the five communist decades, gated residential spaces were virtually unknown; they were reserved only for exclusive government complexes. The official policy of communist governments was to provide mass housing in large multi-family buildings located amid vast green spaces. These spaces were common and accessible to all residents. There was little room for privacy in these communist-era residential districts, aside from the privacy that existed in one's own apartment. Regardless, the vast open places of the communist estates are not to be necessarily criticized. In fact, it can be easily argued that such spaces provided opportunities for vital shared experiences—one good reason why designing them was an integral part of the modernist design tradition which dominated world architecture through the 1970s.

The end of communism in 1989 brought about a major reversal in residential development traditions throughout Eastern Europe. As state and municipal governments virtually withdrew from the production of housing, most newly built residences became the product of private builders. Single-family homes with private yards, which were virtually forgotten in large cities during communism, became the new norm for all who could afford to build them, at least in Sofia. Today such new homes are commonly surrounded—whether individually or as part of a group—by two-meter-tall stone or brick walls. The walls are often “decorated” with a variety of additional security devices, such as alarm systems and video cameras. New multi-family buildings are also often gated. Even those leftover from the communist era, which usually house lower- and middle-class residents, are locked-off and have full-time guards in their entrance halls. The trend toward walling-off has spread to commercial complexes as well. In Sofia specifically, Western-built hypermarkets and business parks are typically private or semi-private fenced-off spaces accessible only through controlled entrances.

My research poses the following questions: What caused this shift in building traditions? Why do people feel the need to separate themselves from their neighbors by building a variety of visible and invisible barriers? Does the shift in building styles represent a new relationship between people and the spaces they inhabit; does it reflect new values, new social norms and new ways of life?

Contribution to fields of East European studies, urban sociology and urban geography

I assert that the answer to the last question is affirmative: yes, new spaces represent new social norms and new cultural values. New urban forms and new architectural styles are never a trivial matter. As Lewis Mumford once noted, they represent “in legible form, the complicated processes and changes that are taking place in civilization itself.”¹

In the context of post-communist Sofia, I hypothesized that the extraordinary proliferation of gated residential spaces is a reflection of a number of new concerns shared by many urban citizens, such as concerns over growing crime and unrest. These concerns are of course not unique to Sofia: we find them wherever we find gated urban spaces all over the world, in North

¹ *The Culture of Cities*, 1938 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World), p. 403.

and South America, in Africa and Australia, in Europe, East and West, especially in cities with stark social polarization, where the co-existence of rich and poor does not proceed always peacefully. There is a fast burgeoning international literature on gated communities, a literature which has firmly demonstrated that the search for safety is one of the main motivations of upper- and middle-class residents of gated urban spaces.

This literature has also shown, however, that gated spaces have symbolic meanings. Not everyone can afford to live in them; they are a scarce good. Living in a gated community or even in an individual, fenced-off single-family home is an undeniable statement of one's social privilege. Whereas both motivations—fear of crime and a search for high social status—have been noted in the international literature, I hypothesized that they appear in post-communist Sofia in an exaggerated form. This is first because crime skyrocketed in Sofia during the 1990s to levels hardly known in the city's recent history. And second because Sofia went from being a relatively egalitarian city² to one that is sharply divided by class. Until 1989, it was hardly possible (or desirable) for anyone but the highest government officials to accumulate substantial material wealth, let alone flaunt it in public by living in an expensive home with tall gates. Yet, egalitarianism in communist Bulgaria, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, was subtly resented. When communism ended and the new economic order presented select few with opportunities for fast enrichment, the pent-up desire to show off the newly accumulated material objects, whether clothes, cars, or homes, quickly erupted. This behavior is well-known to post-communist sociologists, geographers and anthropologists. Some have argued that the flamboyant display of material wealth plays a key role in constructing the cultural identity of the post-communist newly rich.

Finally, my research touched upon the broader issue of whether people in post-communist societies (i.e., in societies which went through mass upheavals through the 1990s, and in which trust in public institutions and a common good has reached dismal levels) choose to live in explicitly private, gated compounds partially as a reflection of their low appreciation of public space and low trust in others. In other words, I hypothesized that along with the other two chief motivations (fear of crime and search for high social status), gating has something to do with the perception of a failing public realm.

Policy relevance

Gated spaces present a telling story about cultural values in post-communist settings. They are a spatial trend with potentially dangerous implications for civic life. If the epidemic spread of gated enclaves represents, as I believe this research demonstrated, the material rejection of shared city space, then the trend threatens the very notion of *civitas* or shared community life.³ Much has been said about nation-building in the post-communist Balkans. Perhaps more must be said about city-building, which may be the basis for building stronger civic ties and thus may not be very different from "civic-building."

Research methodology

² Although communism did not fulfill its promise of full equality, it managed to mitigate social differences at least to an extent.

³ See for example Edward Blakeley and Mary Gail Snyder, 1997, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution and Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy).

There were four methods of data collection: 1) standardized survey with residents of select neighborhoods where many gated homes are located, 2) in-depth interviews with residents, 3) in-depth interviews with experts, and 4) a photographic survey.

- 1) The survey was conducted among a random sample of neighborhood residents generated from a full list of neighborhood addresses. This survey followed up on an earlier survey conducted in 2006-07. However, the new survey had additional questions targeting specifically the residents' motivations for living in gated spaces and their views on the importance of public spaces. There was also a group of questions measuring their opinions of the threat of crime, the importance of social status, and the extent to which they trust various public institutions and other people in general. The questions on trust (e.g., *Do you think that most people can be trusted?*) were similar to those used in the World Values Survey.⁴ Four hundred standardized questionnaires were completed in total.
- 2) Out of the four-hundred respondents who completed the standardized questionnaires, twenty were selected to represent a variety of social backgrounds and a variety of opinions on gating. Eighteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted.
- 3) Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven experts, including architects and real estate developers with experience in constructing gated housing. These were chosen via the reputational method.
- 4) A photographic survey was undertaken in the selected neighborhoods (including many of the houses where interviews were conducted) in order to enrich the research with visual representation.

Summary of preliminary research findings⁵

As expected, I found that the proportion of gated housing in the select fast-growing neighborhoods of Sofia was very high. Nearly all (ninety-eight percent) of all homes in the area had some sort of fencing, although only in about a third of the cases the gates represented substantial physical barriers which blocked the view to the homes almost completely (i.e., these were typically two-meter-tall gates made of solid materials such as bricks, stone and others). In about two-thirds of the homes, respondents had at least one device restricting outsiders' access such as a video camera or an alarm system, and/or had a security firm subscription or an individual security guard.

Subjects' views on crime were rather bleak. Thirty-eight percent reported that they or members of their families have been a victim of crime in the recent past. Fifty-one percent agreed with the statement that life in the neighborhood is "generally unsafe" and fifty-six percent reported that they are either very concerned or somewhat concerned that they may become victims of crime in the future. A strong majority (about eighty percent) felt that it is very important to protect the privacy of one's home (many of these respondents shared that they had lived in one of the communist-era housing estates in the past and were glad to have moved to areas where they could have a single-family house with a private and fenced-off yard). Perhaps predictably, appreciation of public spaces was relatively low: only about a third of the respondents said they

⁴ The World Values Survey is the most comprehensive survey of political and socio-cultural change conducted regularly by an extensive network of social scientists worldwide.

⁵ These observations are based on data from the first 250 questionnaires; the rest of the questionnaires have not yet been entered.

liked to stroll in public areas such as parks and plazas, whereas nearly forty percent said that they disliked such activities. Overall, subjects reported that they trust their immediate neighbors (two-thirds responded to the affirmative). However, when asked whether they trust most people, only twenty-percent said “yes,” about forty percent replied “somewhat,” and thirty-five percent said “no.” Trust in public institutions was alarmingly low: only six percent of subjects believed that public institutions can be trusted, nineteen percent thought they can be somewhat trusted, and seventy percent believed they cannot be trusted at all.

The survey showed that the gates, combined with various other security mechanisms, are perceived as an important crime deterrent. Three-quarters of respondents shared that improving security was an important factor in choosing to live behind gates. About two-thirds claimed that the gates were an important factor in protecting their household’s privacy, and fifty-five percent reported that they had chosen to live behind gates at least partially to reduce exposure to the public spaces outside their homes.

Overall, this preliminary review of the survey data confirms most of the research hypotheses: indeed, gating along with other measures to reduce outsiders’ access has become a prevalent phenomenon (at least in the selected neighborhoods of Sofia), fear of crime and search for privacy play an important role in residents’ decisions to live in a gated environment, and appreciation of public spaces is relatively low. When all data is entered, further analysis will be conducted to determine the statistical significance of the results and assess which variables—which social characteristics and which views—increase the likelihood of living in a gated residential space (the most likely method will be a logistic regression). Yet, some variables appear to stand out right away. For example, gating is strongly associated with household income (i.e., predictably, wealthier households are more likely to live in gated compounds). Having low trust in others also appears positively correlated to gating.

The semi-structured interviews with select residents highlighted some nuances of the decision to live in a gated residential environment, which are harder to capture in a standardized survey. For instance, although in the survey less than a third of respondents acknowledged that increasing their social prestige in the community had anything to with their decision to live in a gated compound, the more subtle presence of this motivation was detectable in many in-depth interviews. Some interviewees expressed a surprisingly direct link between their decision to fence-off their homes and their negative views of public spaces and public institutions. Others shared their nearly paranoid suspicion of outsiders “peeking in” their property. The excerpt below is a good illustration:

Everybody needs protection here. We have been robbed twice already. And people often stop and tried to peek inside. Often they try to talk to me and get inside the yard and talk more. Sometimes they tell me some very long and sad story and ask me for money. Other times they just come and seem to begin telling me the most random story about this thing or another and then I am afraid they are just gauging the house and making plans to return and rob it. So I used to let people in at the beginning but now I normally don’t. So if you hadn’t showed me your business card and had not explained to me about the survey, I may have not let you in either, even though you don’t look like a criminal... But I don’t like the constant peeking, no. And if I had no gates, I certainly would build them. And then, as you can see, absolutely everybody here has gates. They are different types of gates but they are gates nonetheless. So if I decided to have no gates, I will stand out, and then an even greater number of people will stop to peek in, even if they do it just out of curiosity to see what kind of a strange person decides to live without gates.

Suggestions for future research

In the future, I plan to expand the geographic scope of my research. Thus far, I have focused on a few neighborhoods in Sofia, which are not necessarily representative of other parts of the city. Other neighborhoods may reveal other aspects of the phenomenon. For example, in the areas where I investigated, the majority of homes are gated individually or as a small group. The homes are typically constructed by small building firms. Elsewhere in the city, however, another trend is emerging—that of very large gated communities constructed by Western real estate development firms. These larger compounds house many foreigners, including diplomatic staff, and include a number of shared quasi-public facilities such as sports complexes. Such gated communities are much closer to the gated communities typically studied in the Western literature.

In an effort to strengthen the comparative aspect of my research, I have also started collecting data on a similar topic in select neighborhoods of the Serbian capital in collaboration with colleagues from Belgrade University. I hope to be able to replicate the research in the Romanian capital of Bucharest as well.

Aside from expanding the geographical scope of the research, I believe it is very important to strengthen the depth of analysis by relating the current findings to other facets of post-communist urban restructuring. The gating trend is only one aspect of the ongoing aggressive privatization of space in post-communist cities; other phenomena with similar underpinnings include: the privatization of green spaces, which are taken over for private construction purposes (this is often done illegally), and the building of exclusive suburban enclaves where public access is extremely limited.

Recommendations for the policy community

The findings are relevant to the American and domestic (i.e., Bulgarian) policy communities. They highlight several unfortunate aspects of post-communist urbanization such as the physical degradation of public places and the epidemic growth of explicitly private spaces. To an extent, such issues can be mitigated by stronger urban planning and greater investments in the public infrastructure. It is not hard to argue, for example, that if public parks would be better maintained, appreciation of public space would likely improve. The issue of how to reduce crime (which would likely alleviate people's fears and thus reduce their urge to obsessively surround themselves with private security mechanisms) is of course harder to tackle. Yet the Bulgarian government has a long way to go in this direction and it is not surprising that the European Union has recently made the release of some of its structural funds to Bulgaria dependent on improving the Bulgarian judicial system. But perhaps even more importantly, the findings are suggestive of the culture of aggressive individualism (if not nihilism) which some scholars have identified as integral to the post-communist condition.⁶ Overcoming such culture and building values of trust—in others and in public institutions—are prerequisites for the development of functioning democracies and strong civil societies. And achieving this is a much harder and more elusive policy task.

⁶ See for example Oleg Kharkhordin (1995), *The Soviet Individual*, in *Featherstone, Lash and Robertson (eds), Global Modernities*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.