

Nikola A. Venkov (Bulgaria)
University of Sofia
koliokoliokolio@abv.bg

**ASSEMBLING THE POST-SOCIALIST MARKETPLACE:
TRANSITIONS AND REGENERATION PROJECTS AT THE CENTRAL
PAZAR OF SOFIA¹**

Abstract: Drawing on an anthropological approach that binds the socialist, the early post-socialist and the contemporary consumer capitalist period in Bulgaria this article analyses transitions at a single urban site. Zhenski Pazar (Women’s Market) is the central marketplace in Sofia, a landmark of a century-long existence, where activities in the 1990s boomed alongside the collapse of socialist economy. By tracing the trajectories of its transformations from the 1970s to 2014 a portrait is constructed of a complex social world, deeply entangled in the dynamic political, social, economic, as well as discursive contexts of a post-socialist society. In a parallel stream, I track how those larger dynamics make some urban policies seem reasonable and others not. Since the late 1970s, a number of redevelopment projects for the Women’s Market were planned. Reviewing those plans allows us to see how over a short period of time dominant urban values and the ideals for a marketplace have changed many times over. Urban regeneration projects are contingent responses to the deficiencies of urban space, as subjectively perceived by the technocratic elites and hegemonic public opinion. I outline how as a result of this in the 21st century Sofia there is no place anymore for an urban space that caters to the needs of the poorest and the marginalised.

Keywords: Social history, Post-socialism, Socialism, Marketplaces, Urban regeneration, Urban planning, Urban marginality

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Introduction

The Women's Market ('Zhenski Pazar') is a lively, open-air, food and wares marketplace located in the centre of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. It is the largest marketplace in the city, occupying the same wide pedestrian alleys since 1910 (Georgiev [Георгиев] 1978). It is in a very central location, some 650m from the official governmental centre. In the 1990s, business at the market boomed and it became the main hub for shopping in the post-socialist city. It attracted a daily flow of visitors reaching, by some accounts, 1/5th of Sofia's population then. Although in the 21st century the attendance has been falling, in 2013, some 40 to 70 thousand people still pass through the market daily.² However more recently, officials, planners and citizens began perceiving the area as an eyesore, and from 2006 onwards plans for municipality-led redevelopment were in preparation. In September 2014 a new 'reconstructed marketplace' opened its doors. It was intended to trigger a process of gentrification and regeneration for this central city area.

This article reconstructs an outline of the social history of the Women's Market from the 1970s until its major redevelopment. It reveals how the marketplace is socially produced as being positioned in a hierarchical ordering of types of spaces in the city by analysing the shifts which took place within this positioning. As dominant values change and certain types of spaces become more desirable, others lose their standing in comparison, even if they didn't 'deteriorate' in reality practice. I argue that projects for urban regeneration are contingent responses to such changes.

In the critical literature processes of urban regeneration and gentrification are often described as the manifestations of the neoliberalisation of the urban economy and governance (e.g. Harvey 1989; Smith 2002). The close up look I undertake here allows me to show that the desire of officials and public alike for redevelopment of the street market arises in the dynamic context of a number of social transformations: from an evolving economic system and local class structure, to changing discursive contexts. Thus, my approach engages with to the proposal to study how "actually existing neoliberalisms" are established, always as partial adaptation and reorganisation of pre-existing diverse local legacies (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Wilson 2004).

By leaving aside considerations of agency in urban policies,³ I focus on the conditions of possibility for the actions taken towards the market. That is, I trace the shifts in the larger social systems and analyse how those make some

2 Information obtained from the market company management in 2012.

3 On this see previous publications of mine (e.g. Venkov [Венков] 2012; Venkov 2016).

values, goals and policies seem reasonable or appropriate and others not. Since the late 1970s, a number of redevelopment projects for the Women's Market were planned but not completed. Studying those plans allows us to see how over a short period of time dominant urban values and the ideals for a marketplace have changed many times over.

Ultimately, discussing the social history of this unique site in Sofia is a device for throwing more light on the large-scale processes of change taking place in Bulgarian society. A micro-historical perspective exposes the inadequacy of concepts for linear post-1989 'transition' to capitalism in Eastern Europe; instead plural 'transitions' of social reorganisation are revealed. What follows is a historical-ethnographic account that connects analysis of the socialist, the early post-socialist and the contemporary consumer capitalist period in Bulgaria by looking at a single urban site.⁴

The marketplace

The Women's Market is laid out along a wide boulevard flanked on both sides by the only consistently preserved historical cityscape in Sofia, early 20th century residential buildings. They were built/redeveloped throughout the decades following the establishment of the market, and integrate rows of storefronts along the entire length of the street. During this time living at the marketplace was prestigious despite the noise and the traffic: that's why buildings on the market street are architecturally more sophisticated. Mostly average to small business owners and merchants settled there. During the socialist period, the old bourgeois centre was poorly maintained and housing quality gradually declined (Hirt and Stanilov 2007). Deterioration of the building stock was further exacerbated by the economic crises of the post-socialist period.

Until 2006, the market comprised of four rows of permanent stalls and pavilions along the length of the pedestrian boulevard of about 600 meters. They effectively formed two tunnel-like alleys (Figure 1) where the passer-by would be solicited from all sides to buy fruit and vegetables, packaged and unpackaged foods, live fish, homemade or industrial food, pastries or barbecue, clothes, shoes, tools and replacement parts, craftsman wares, untaxed cigarettes, etc., etc. (and until the early 1990s – also live animals). In 2006 the municipality removed the outer rows of stalls that were stationed on the pavement just a metre from the buildings. The stores that were revealed behind them provided the new flanking for the central market isle until 2013.

4 There are parallels with Polese and Prigarin's (2013) account on the large marketplace of Odessa. A similar approach is taken in a study of the post-socialist economic activities at a single public square and transport exchange in Budapest (Bodnár 1998). It inspires the title of this paper.

The marketplace is run by a municipal company with its own executive director and staff, including a number of inspectors. The company statutes and performance targets are set by the city council. The company collects rent from the individual vendors, who (since 2005) compete through secret auctions for 1 year contracts on individual stalls, or otherwise pay daily fixed fee if they can find an unused stall for the day. Until recently a high degree of informality permeated all the formal arrangements. The degree of informal freedom vs. restriction has fluctuated widely throughout the years, depending on the whims of the management.⁵

Data collected as late as 2012 indicates that visitors come from virtually all parts of the city, despite competition with a dozen other district open-air markets, of thousands of green grocery shops, and, since the mid-2000s, the big chains of supermarkets. Interviews with 24 regular visitors to market, conducted at random at the nearby tram stop, returned 16 different city districts of origin (Figure 2).⁶ The majority of respondents reported coming once or twice per week. In 2012 the Women's Market still held considerable importance for a large part of Sofia's citizens, hailing from all over the city.

There are several reasons for the popularity of the market among its customers. The first reason they give are the low prices, typically half of those in their local marketplace or in the supermarket. Second, "you can find anything here", and especially unbranded products that are becoming harder to find due to the integration of Bulgarian economy in global trade. One informant described it as "a sort of shopping mall for the people":

It is a peculiar space in the city. Because when you go there, you can waste several hours. You might buy yourself a fish, you might buy meat, you might also a potato, maybe a pair of pants, curtains for your wife's desire, you might also get yourself a pair of shoes, and get yourself jeans as well. You can get everything! (Woman in her 60s, pensioner, living in the wider vicinity.)

Finally, a significant majority of the visitors are above 50s, and responses show that the market benefits from their established habits from the socialist era. They attest to having visited this market for grocery shopping since a young age, despite the long journey from the periphery of the city.

Most visitors come here with very utilitarian motives. On the other hand, fewer, and mostly younger people report that they 'enjoy' the place itself, because of a 'unique and colourful' atmosphere. They come to experience the market as a

⁵ Similar observations about the duality of formal and informal relations between officials and traders are noted by Semi (2008) in his study of a marketplace in Torino.

⁶ Sofia measures around 1.5 million residents. Reaching the centre from a peripheral district by public transport might require 40 min to an hour, not considering congestions.

spectacle, seeking here a lost authenticity or the exotic scenery. A response which is illustrative of this group reads:

In the moment you enter this market, you enter into some totally natural, unstrained, and at the same time, very artistic place. Because people here are very artistic, and your soul relaxes totally. Despite their commercial goals and aims, they do it in so unaffected and spontaneous way, that you start to feel a little bit more as being yourself, in comparison with the polished city beyond. And this charmed me very much! (Woman in her 30s; visits once a week or two.)

At the same time – unlike foreign backpacker tourists who also come to explore the site – visitors like these are fully immersed in the unglamorous activities like hunting for the lowest price or engaging in arguments with the vendors over quality.

Most Sofia citizens, including many of those who visit regularly, perceive the market as dirty, ‘gypsified’ and even ‘not a real market anymore’. It is true that the proportion of ‘authentic’ farmers selling their own produce has steadily fallen over the years (due to complex reasons) and reached an estimated 10-20%. However many of the other issues associated with the market have been present since the very first years of the post-socialist era and have, in fact, tempered down since then. The reasons for the market’s negative public image in the late 2000s should be sought elsewhere.

Shifts during late state socialism

In Sofia, the Women’s Market has always been known as the place of abundance and lowest prices, even in the socialist period. Although the distribution of goods at that time was organised through centralised state mechanisms, the fruit and vegetable marketplace permitted private activity, such as the direct sale of yields from so called ‘personal plots’ (Creed 1998: 94; Creed 1995). Elsewhere I demonstrate that contrary to claims that marketplaces were seen as problematic for the socialist regime because they opened space for private initiative (Kaneff 2002: 34-35) they were approached like any other socialist enterprise (Venkov 2017: 43-48). They were institutionalised as ‘cooperative marketplaces’, symbolically distinct from the markets of the previous era.

Initially, socialist authorities may have been willing to keep marketplaces because they compensated for the (not uncommon) shortfalls in the distribution system. However, it is clear that once marketplace trade gained institutional autonomy, its managers were keen to deliver on productivity and to expand its role in society, just like the management of any other socialist sector. State

managers boasted about the successes of marketplace trade in the press:

“At the moment we have 12 cooperative markets [in Sofia]. Just at the largest market,[the Women’s Market], the monthly turnover during the most intense season reaches around 30 million lv. On every such day 60 000 people pass through it, at the very least.” “The view here is that the cooperative market must be an aggregate shopping centre, where not only goods of trade are sold but also industrially made goods and foodstuffs, as well as fruits and vegetables...” (Excerpts from “Sofia’s markets [Софийските пазари],” *Sofia*, 1978. In Bulgarian.)

The shopping experience at the marketplace of socialist time was about buying freshly picked vegetables directly from village producers who were coming to the city for the day. That experience serves today as a reference point for the critical comparison with marketplaces of the present. Paradoxically, the utopian image of ‘the real marketplace’ (istinskijat pazar) for most citizens refers to a socialist past which is considered by researchers as one which was opposed to market relations in general and marketplaces in particular.⁷

The Women’s Market was consciously organised by the socialist administration to be a complex mix of state and private actors, market and non-market relations. Workshops and craftsmen from before WWII (tailors, shoe-makers, musical instruments, fountain-pen maintenance, etc., etc.) were preserved by the socialist regime, organised into ‘cooperatives’. The bourgeois-built storefronts were transferred to various ‘production cooperatives’ (state enterprises in the light industries) from Sofia and the countryside, so that consumer production could have direct sale outlets in the centre of the capital city. Free-standing trading was common as well (Figure 3). Various independent traders established themselves here making the market a place where one could find foods and gadgets unavailable elsewhere in the city. As early as the 1960s, the market administration was motivated to start expanding the market beyond the central isle of stalls and pavilions designated in the urban plan. Thus, the stalls lining the buildings, which in 2005-6 would be removed as ‘illegal’ after residents protests, were in fact placed there by the state, up to 50 years earlier (Figure 4).

By the ‘80s many peasants with entrepreneurial spirit would gradually withdraw their labour contribution in the village cooperative and orient their household economy entirely toward the private trade at the market. Some started settling for longer periods in the area around the market (renting an attic room in the vicinity, plus basements and garages as storage spaces) and, as resellers, started to organise a flow of agricultural produce from their home region. They were on the road to becoming the traders (buying and selling) that dominate the Women’s Market today. The small-scale entrepreneurship that was going to boom in the 1990s, was gaining traction well before 1989.

⁷ There is a parallel perception about the loss of the ‘real fruits and vegetables’ today (see Jung 2014), which were plentiful in ‘the real marketplace’.

In fact, a tendency for professionalisation of vendors was present from the very beginning of the socialist market. It resulted in a constant internal tension in the authorities' attitude towards private initiative, as the following publication in a municipal magazine testified:

Resellers of goods are not a rare phenomenon at the cooperative markets. These are the deeds of a not numerous group who are inclined to profiteering, against which the police and the market's management conduct a systematic fight. (From "The cooperative markets [Кооперативните пазари]," *Sofia*, September, 1966. In Bulgarian.)

Shifts in the early post-socialist years

In the early '90s, there were many converging factors which led to the rise of mass cross-border petty trading and a mushrooming of marketplaces (for other post-socialist countries, see Sik and Wallace 1999; Czakó and Sik 1999; Sword 1999; Kaiser 1997; Polese and Prigarin 2013; Cieślowska 2014). These include a shortage of consumer goods, large savings accumulated by the population during the socialist period, and the massive unemployment caused by the collapse of the planned economy. Many former clerks, teachers, state enterprise workers were forced to hastily learn new professions of a trader, peddler, cross-border contrabandist in order to survive (see Konstantinov 1996; Konstantinov, Kressel, and Thuen 1998; Kaneff 2002; Petrova 2010; for other post-socialist contexts: Williams and Baláž 2002; Hohnen 2003; Sasunkevich 2014). Streams of people continuously transported goods from marketplaces in Istanbul and Bursa to the newly emerging ones in Bulgaria. Large marketplaces emerged at urban peripheries as redistributive hubs, and at several key points along busiest transport routes (Dimitrovgrad, Ilientsi). Simultaneously, stalls spread to the inner city, with the busiest streets and piazzas transforming into new 'marketplaces'.⁸

The Women's Market preserved its position as the foremost hub for shopping despite the explosive growth of street trade all over the city. The pre-existing dynamics of the area motivated all kinds of entrepreneurs to set up shop here. A number of shifts occurred in that period: in the structure and the geography of trade, in the social background of shoppers and vendors, in the shopping experience itself, in the formal and the informal networks of power that define the market's operation and structuring. All these are deeply embedded in,

⁸ See Bodnár (1998) for a detailed description of these changes at a transport hub in Budapest. And this is how an architect from the old guard commented on the case of Sofia: "This was the time [of the mayor] Sofiyanski, who was conscious of the necessity to secure a livelihood for this entire population of ours that was left without employment. The street vendors, the trade – all this brought immense damage on the people's taste, for example. All this import of cheaply-made goods – the flooding with those things..."

and driven by societal changes far beyond the marketplace itself.

The words of one resident convey the atmosphere of the early '90s, when business was booming:

At that time the rent that we could ask for our apartment on the second floor was \$660. This was a lot of money back then. There were even people who wanted to buy it or rent it as a bank office! Today this sounds so insane. You see, there was a lot of cash in circulation and nobody knew then what was about to happen. This place made an impression with its concentration of people. So, if somebody had an idea that required the presence of many people, this was the place for him. (Man in his 50s, a resident on the market until 2000.)

The first Chinese, Vietnamese and Arab entrepreneurs quickly recognised the potential of the place for business and laid the ground for the multicultural character of the area today. Later, many Roma people found opportunities for economic survival in a context of unemployment and growing anti-Roma prejudices. They found a niche for self-employment as petty traders and vendors (see also Konstantinov 1994). Roma from all over Bulgaria started to settle in the neighbourhood.

The trucks of village cooperatives and the daily commuter villagers were superseded by families from the countryside camping weekly on the street to keep an eye on their goods. Gradually they would settle in the neighbourhood and professionalize as vendors. Thus, the market transformed from an opportunity for some additional income on top of a secure state employment to a potent ladder for social mobility for a populace that was otherwise undergoing a process of disenfranchisement (see Kofti 2018).

The scale of opportunity for economic mobility is related in the following story by a local resident-turned-vendor:

About the 90s I can give you two examples and I swear it is the truth, from first hand! There was one guy, Pesho the Gasket, he was selling gaskets – 1001 types of gaskets. He was selling literally on a small transportable table – rubber gaskets only! He bought probably two apartments from that rubber trinketry. Total nonsense really! But at that time there were no specialised shops and no chains at all. The other guy was a more educated man. He was selling roller bearings. Both were able to buy at least one apartment, and they were small vendors. A mad business it was! (Man, 40s, resident at the market and a vendor in late 1990s.)

These dynamics also stimulated the local representatives of municipal, police, health control, and other administrative authorities to build informal protections and oligopolies of power in order to tap into the monetary flows of

the place. The Women's Market became an iconic place for post-socialist Sofia, as it articulated the characteristics of the '90s in their most intense forms.

Both in the socialist 1980s and the Transitional '90s there were planning projects being prepared for urban redevelopment of the marketplace. Interestingly, both considered the market's function as a vital one and only sought to improve and intensify it. The socialist project ambitiously envisioned the construction of an underground level for warehouses, access and truck delivery, and a near doubling of the number of stalls and pavilions above ground. On the street flanks were to be built hotels to serve the traders from small towns and villages. In an interview about the new vision of the Women's Market one of the planners claims:

*If we want to preserve the old Sofia market, first, we shouldn't postpone the renovation too long anymore, and second, we shouldn't violate and alter its character and spirit. It is before everything else **a meeting place, a place for socialising**, and the richness of various activities there. Besides the shopping, it also makes our city centre diverse and makes people become attached to it. Here, in place of today's little kiosks and unbeautiful warehouses, in ten years we will need comfortable trade infrastructure for all kinds of goods, playgrounds for the children, a parking, nice venues, and so on. Here life shouldn't stop even at night – let's have a different working time and 24-hour shops not just for foods... (Женският пазар – преди, сега и след 10 години),” Sofia, March 1981. In Bulgarian, emphasis in original.)*

The profit-centred context of the 1990s gave birth to a design for ultra-cheap light-weight metal construction, which was meant to delimit and expand the middle isle of stalls. Many more stalls were to be packed in much more tightly under a common roof. Only one third of the project was realised (Figure 5), as the apportioned budgets didn't survive long enough.⁹ An additional two-story shopping centre building closed in the market from one end. Vendors didn't show any interest in renting shops in the closed space and eventually it was converted to headquarters for the market management.

The 21st century: shifts in perception

Since 2005 the Women's Market has gradually been reframed as a problem for the city. Policies slowly made their way through municipal administration that were aiming for curtailment of the market's petty trade function and transformation of the area into a pedestrian high street, middle-class leisure zone and a symbol for the Bulgarian capital city's "Europeanness". In

⁹ The renovated zone was later notorious among vendors, for the insufficient space for their customers to circulate.

a similar time period, the market's image of "Orientality"¹⁰ was constructed across Sofian society. This discourse is typically interwoven with that of the market as a zone of danger and crime, and, as under threat of "gypsification" (*tsiganizatsia*),¹¹ requiring urgent measures to combat. This is clearly visible in most media reports from recent years, in many of my interviews with Sofian citizens, as well as in statements by municipal officials. None other but the architect-general of the city declared: "Such an Oriental vista in the heart of Sofia is inadmissible."¹²

The project of 2006 for the market regeneration aimed to redeem the area. The vegetable and clothes stalls were to be replaced by benches and grass, fountains and artificial lakes, 'a street of restaurants' and more:

The redevelopment in preparation includes constructing a centre for shopping and entertainment, gardens, and greening of the entire area, which is today buried in garbage. The pavilions will be renovated while the unlawful stalls will no longer have a place at the market. The idea is that the most frequented marketplace in the centre of Sofia, would become suitable not only for hasty shopping, but for taking a stroll too. (Падение и възход на Женския пазар", Dnevnik, March 17, 2007. http://www.dnevnik.bg/print/arhiv_za_gradu/2007/03/17/319323_padenie_i_vuzhod_na_jenskiia_pazar/. In Bulgarian.)

The policy for redevelopment was not simply a top-down decision by a neoliberal city council seeking to marketise hitherto overlooked areas of the city. It was catalysed by a mobilisation of local home-owners who called for a taming of the market and demanded concern from the authorities about their quality of life as residents of the city centre. How then did local activists succeed in implementing their group interests into municipal policy? When in 2005 they met with the mayor Stefan Sofiyanski to state their demands for tightening control at the market, he reacted thus:

10 The uses of the epithet 'Oriental' link up precisely with the discourses deconstructed by Edward Said (1978). The colonial imaginary of the Arab Middle East seen as backward has been internalised in Bulgarian popular discourse since the 19th century. The ideal opposite is defined as 'Europe', and recently, often 'Germany', thus articulating a clear historical direction for the development of the national collective – as well as all its subprojects, such as urban transformations.

11 This colloquial word has the common meaning of 'acquiring Gypsy characteristics', employed to point to regressing cultural, moral and/or hygienic norms – a metaphor, which is part of a powerful pejorative racial discourse on the Roma minority in Bulgaria. More recently the word also acquired a literal meaning of 'a demographic overtake' by a Roma population. The two meanings could overlap, as in the case of the market.

12 From "Two rag markets to substitute for the Women's Market [Два бигака сменят Женския пазар]," *Standart*, September 27, 2008, <http://paper.standartnews.com/bg/article.php?d=2008-11-27&article=257297>, in Bulgarian.

Ah! You remind me of a couple of grannies – my secretary was alarmed by their energetic thrust to come in: “But what should I do with these??” [Then, imitating the grannies:] “Mr. Sofiyanski! We want the tram to be moved away from Graf Ignatiev, because the noise bothers us!” [Graf Ignatiev is a central street, known for its tramline.] (Story is recounted by said representatives of the home-owners, during one of my interviews.)

Even if the mayor had special interests in the irregularity of the marketplace, as the home-owners and many citizens think, this demonstratively overbearing attitude of the response shows how much out of place their desires looked like at the time: restricting the major marketplace of Sofia due to the locals' complaints was just as absurd, as stopping a busy transport link because of a few citizens' afternoon nap.

My argument is that at the time the market with all its human noise, crowds, disorder, smells, ethnic diversity, and, in general, *vigour*, was still a very integrated part of the city. As late as 2005, it was still a relevant notion that trade could not be subjected to strict order; that the authorities were helpless in the face of a sweeping tide of petty entrepreneurship and inventive energy across the city. This image has been readily used by officials over the years to justify half-hearted responses to complaint petitions by the residents. In those responses the market was presented as both a technical necessity of urban life and as something akin to an overwhelming natural disaster: the institutions are investing all their energy and resources to contain its side effects on the populace. A clear hierarchy of urban space underpins these formulations: one that puts environments of intensive trade and business first.

It is in this spirit that the executive director of the marketplace (who is appointed by the city council) justifies to a hostile journalist the expansive overflow of street vending:

*“We can't limit how far the stalls spread. Our inspectors write protocols for violations on a daily basis, but the vendors keep breaching the boundaries.” [And to a remark about the unbearable crowds at the market, he responds with:] “Do you want us to ban the people, who come from all over Sofia to shop here daily, from entering the market? Maybe we should introduce a checkpoints regime?” (Interview “Мъжки времена на Женския пазар”, *Trud*, July 30, 2005, in Bulgarian.)*

A specific hierarchy of urban space is also reinforced when the rights of the vendors are presented as equally significant to those of the residents. The vendors *belong to* the market place; they are seen as just as 'settled' there as those who have property in the neighbourhood. Officials justify taking into account the vendor's interests, because attempts for displacing them would lead to 'social tension'. After all, reducing the number of stalls on the street even by a few, still means closing down the businesses of citizens.

In contrast, the local residents are dealt with in a rather functional-managerial manner: as if they are also on contract as tenants of the marketplace. Just as every vendor gets distributed several square metres of space, an official response to the residents' petition stated that 'passages with sufficient width' have already been assigned to them to secure access to their buildings (pedestrian access only).¹³ The balance of legitimacy is constructed by seeing the residents as a few individuals who are opposing the needs of thousands of *productive* vendors.

In the period 2006 – 2013 many of these arguments became reversed (see also Eneva 2017). If before institutions pretended to be overpowered by the vigour of the marketplace, today they are busy moving, regulating, editing, transforming or shutting it down. Officials no longer talk about the social interest of the vendors, but instead about the rights of local residents (now *a social group* rather than individuals) for better quality of life. Once unknown shadows squeezing past the stalls to their home entrances, have become the public subjects that give opinion on the area in the news. On the contrary, the vendors have lost their attachment to the place where the market is located. From a 'settled' and collective group they have been transformed into rootless and mobile individuals, similar to the impersonal actors of neoclassical economics. Removing stalls is no longer a problem, because, as rational economic agents, they would simply hover to the other markets in the city, where they would compete for trade spots and succeed or fail based on their *personal* merits. The official is now absolved of responsibility about causing 'social strain'.

Mass media in the past saw the Women's Market as a place where the ordinary person could be found for an interview. Whenever 'the people's opinion' was called for, a TV crew would be dispatched to the Women's Market. Even the president of the republic in his electoral campaigns visited the market 'to meet with the People'. Today vendors are rarely interviewed for their opinion on national affairs; they have become objects to be depicted from a distance by the polemist's pen or the journalist's photo camera. The market as a window to Sofia's authentic everyday life has been replaced by two sets of images: a place of danger, crime and misery, and on the other hand, a scenery of exotic experiences, i.e. a target for the tourist gaze as well as the moral one.¹⁴ In both of these cases, whether as an attractive or an undesired space, the market has transformed from

13 Here I quote the official response letter of the mayor of the city district, 8 July 2005, held in the archive of the home-owners' association, access to which was kindly granted to me.

14 One of many examples of the journalist's indignant moral gaze: "Impudent traders of cigarettes offer their goods even at the fence of [the local church] Sts. Cyril & Methodius, from which two weeks ago a wonder-working icon was stolen. Pick-pockets, cigarette-sellers, pimps and prostitutes regularly roam around the garden of the temple of God." ("The illegal goods at the markets – the new 'Corecom' [a luxurious goods store of socialist time] [Нелегалните стоки по пазарите - новият "Кореком"]," *24 tchasa*, July 15, 2013, <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=2147562>, in Bulgarian.) Although prostitution is a recurrent trope, in fact, no such services are peddled at the market. Street

an ordinary part of Sofia, in fact, the *most ordinary* one where ‘the representative’ Bulgarians are found, to one that does not belong in the Bulgarian city.

The underlying structural shifts

By applying a sociologically informed perspective, we will see how the shifts in perception discussed so far arise from a number of more fundamental shifts in the economy, structure and politics of Sofia’s society. The slip of the Women’s Market to a position of stigma in the urban order started only in the 2000s even though much of what was seen as issues of the this urban site has been in evidence since the beginning of postsocialism. Moreover, these issues have been subsiding ever since. The street swindlers of the early years are long gone. Pick-pocketing has fallen to next to none. At night the market is dead quiet, while camp fires on the street have become unthinkable. In 2006 the city council voted for the removal of nearly 500 stalls, two thirds of the market’s volume, which led to a dramatic reduction of the hustle and bustle (Figure 7). Yet, the social de-valuation of the area has intensified ever since, engendering a palpable ‘public need’ for urban transformation.

Since the late 1990s Bulgarian economy has been picking up. A growing acceptance for the country in the global economic system, and thus, an influx of foreign investments and outsourcing companies, has created widening employment opportunities for a new consumer class. The first international chain store risked entering the post-socialist landscape in the year 2000 (the wholesale shops ‘Metro’) and others followed suit a few years later, heralding a major restructuring of retail (Tasheva-Petrova 2016). In 2006 the construction of shopping malls began. As places of consumer culture were sprouting up many of the spontaneous marketplaces on Sofia’s streets were reduced in size, regulated or straight out eradicated by the authorities.¹⁵ The Women’s Market began to look more and more like the odd man out, a true remnant of the atmosphere of ‘the Transition years’.

However, Bulgarian society did not improve economically as a cohesive whole. It was in fact a process of stratification, with large demographics remaining untouched by the economic pick-up: the senior citizens, low paid workers, Roma, and most of the people living outside the largest cities. Although turnovers at the market were hit hard in the mid-2000s by the competition of ‘the modern’ supermarket chains (the volume of visitors halved, to less than one hundred thousand per day), the Women’s Market had found a stable niche as the only remaining area catering to the needs of these poorest groups in the Bulgarian

prostitutes and an outgrowth of bars and strip clubs are located on a main boulevard nearby – for the simple reason that most of their customers come by car.

¹⁵ This is a process going on throughout the country. See for example work about the largest redistributive hub near the Turkish border (Petrova 2010; 2011).

society among others.¹⁶ This is fortunate for the poor of Sofia, as the cheapest area in the city was not displaced to the periphery and continued to be at the central hub of a public transport network that provides comfortable, affordable and egalitarian access from all parts of the city (cref. Figure 2).

Instead, it started transferring the characteristics of the periphery to parts of the city centre. As Bulgarian society differentiated, those who could join a consumer capitalist lifestyle moved out to shop in other everyday geographies of the city. As another type of shopping experience gradually became habitual for them, the market looked more and more unpleasant with its intense mode of personal communication and risk that one could be exposed to aggression, deceit or simply impoliteness, and especially, to personal encounters with Roma or with Bulgarians of low social status. At the same time a newfound consumer confidence and re-emerging middle class sensibilities allowed those citizens to begin making claims on norms that should be valid across the city – even for urban spaces they themselves did not use.¹⁷

I argue that similar factors contribute to the belated reaction of local residents against the market. They mobilised as a group only in 2005, and this is the period when they produced a powerful perspective on the market as a problem (see Venkov [Венков] 2012; 2012a). In the early period, the frustrations they suffered from at the market were simply part of the overarching crisis of the post-socialist collapse.¹⁸ Only in the 2000s, the changing state in other parts of Sofia gave them the resources to formulate an alternative vision for urban life.

A third factor for the change in fortunes of the Women's Market is the large-scale shift in the field of politics. While the typical city administration of

16 Catering not only to economic needs, but to various social and psychological ones, as the marginalised found there an accepting community.

17 The most extreme negative depictions of the market in online forums are often coupled with admission that the author does not use that space: “The Women's Market is the most disgusting place in Sofia. I don't set my foot there. They must do away with it. If they want marketplaces, they should do them like in the white countries. Those who sell, must clean after themselves. At our markets it is such filth that one feels sick when he wants to buy something.”; “I haven't gone there for years, but it is enough that one passes by the corner to see what a rag market it is, with knickers, socks, beggars and prostitutes.” (From user comments under the online article “They are making the Women's Market a pedestrian zone with flowers and benches [Правят Женския пазар пешеходна зона с цветя и пейки],” *News.bg*, February 21, 2008, http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_37610921, in Bulgarian.)

18 This hypothesis is supported by analysis of the archive of complaint letters sent by local residents to the authorities. This archive was collected by the home-owners association and I was kindly allowed to scan it. Among a dozen of independent complaints from the time before the association came together, there are only two protestations that questioned the established order at that urban space *as a whole* (with dates respectively in 1993 and 2002). The majority of letters address concerns about individual stalls obstructing a resident's specific property or business.

the post-socialist years would be quite unresponsive to civic discontent, in 2006 a newly founded political party won the local elections with a strong stance about delivering active policy-making. For the first time it sought to capitalise on the popular desire to leave behind the ‘chaos and decay’ of the 1990s.¹⁹ This new political actor pledged a forward-looking style of municipal government that included investment in city development and rhetorics about concern for ‘the quality of life’ of citizens. This intervention permanently reshaped the discourses present in the political field of Sofia.

The new discourses privilege different types of urban spaces, which cater to the construction of ‘the citizen’ as a consumer of good life in the city who merits services for a middle-class demand. Renovation of most parks and public squares and the expansion of transport infrastructure became the main axes of investment, thus hinting that high public visibility of projects was the main priority. My interviews with city councillors showed that their current vision for city governance incorporated strands of neoliberal discourse along with electoral populism. Marketplace sites, being still non-privatised municipal property, were mainly seen as an opportunity for an ambitious city council to intervene in urban space to ‘add value’ for an ideal middle class voter. Thus, spaces of trade and business remain privileged but it is a new type of capitalist subject that captures the heart of the city councillor now, shopping malls and higher-class pedestrianised streets go on carrying the torch of commercialisation.

The final design

By 2013-2014, when the redevelopment project was realised, a better appreciation of the old building stock in the neighbourhood had evolved and the modernist design of the 2006 project was toned down by adapting it to a human-scale and the use of natural looking materials (c.f. Figure 6 and Figure 8). The appreciation of open-air trade by city officials also evolved, as now they aspired to see in Sofia organic ‘farmer markets’²⁰ and ‘authentic crafts’ fairs. The area was once more re-imagined, this time as the ‘most historical part of Sofia’.²¹ Despite its substantial refashioning the new pedestrian zone is seen by politicians, planners and media as “the oldest marketplace in Sofia, renewed and modernised, in order to finally

19 Post-1989 Bulgarians had cultivated an entrenched feeling of social decline and civilisational break-down as a result of the general withdrawal of regulative control coupled with drastic public disinvestment and the privileging of the boom of private and informal initiative over previously established moral codes (see Venkov 2016, ‘Post-socialism and conspiracy as a stereotype’).

20 There is a lexical opposition between the old-style peasant ‘villager’ and the young middle class returnee ‘farmer’.

21 In fact, the market’s impact on the neighbourhood image has prompted private property developers to largely skirt this area, while devastating the other nearby areas of old city texture in few short years.

showcase its traditional spirit”.

As a result of the redevelopment, many of the people who had found work and survival at the Women’s Market dispersed, most of them migrating to Western Europe (Germany, Belgium, Malta, etc.). The groups of vendors and shoppers shrunk but their social composition did not change significantly, as the expected surge of higher class residents and businesses didn’t materialise.

Conclusions

The Women’s Market is a long-standing urban site of trade and it is often portrayed as a self-contained phenomenon, an enduring vestige of the past. Here, by tracing the trajectories of its transformations in just the last four decades I arrive at a narrative of a marketplace in constant change. I show that despite the richness and resilience of this complex world of human interaction it is in fact transformed by shifts in any of the larger contexts it is placed in – political, social, economic, as well as discursive.

I show that the processes of change are multilayered and far from the caricatured depictions of the postsocialist period. They diverge from both the popularly imagined unidirectional process of a ‘(failed) transition’ to Western capitalism and from the academic paradigm for a neoliberal onslaught on the social state. A micro-historical approach makes boundaries, such as the years 1989 or 2007 (the year Bulgaria joined the European Union), more ambiguous. In particular, it emerges that the restructuring of the state planned economy by active small-scale entrepreneurship was an ongoing process before 1989 and that the disciplining of this same entrepreneurship by Bulgaria’s (partial) integration in the 21st century global economy took place through multiple avenues.

I find it useful to think of the Women’s Market as consigned to a position in a socially constructed and hegemonic ‘hierarchy’ of urban spaces.²² Some types of space are privileged as desirable and others are seen as marginal. A notion of hierarchy emphasises that spaces are perceived in relation to each other, and changes in some parts of the city can contribute (in complex ways) to re-evaluation of other parts. Here I tried to show that shifts in the perception of the Women’s Market often might have less to do with changes in the market space itself than with re-formulations at other points of the urban hierarchy. My aim has not been to explore in full the social mechanisms impacting this positioning, but to point out the significance of non-local and ever-changing relations of

²² I see this device more as a heuristic one. Varzonovtzev attempted to actually chart such a hierarchy by mapping the perceptions of university students on Central Sofia (Varzonovtzev [Варзоновцев] 2002). There the north zone of the centre, to which the Women’s Market area belongs, was described as ‘the unseemly hind parts of the city’ (ibid., 125).

power, prejudices, special interests, hegemonic discourses.

Urban regeneration projects are contingent responses to the deficiencies of urban space, as perceived by technocratic elites and hegemonic public opinion. They are implicitly based on the social construction of ordering of spaces and their properties, and this poses a problem of good practice in design and planning. As the Women's Market was slipping downwards in a changing order, the need for its redevelopment arose as means to restore it to a higher position that befits its central geographical location.

After comparing projects for transformation from four different decades it becomes apparent that in each case planners envisioned those features that would raise the status of the space according to the dominant and contingent values of the moment. Projects were designed to expand and improve a traditional shopping experience (in the 1980s, by supporting amenities for both vendors and visitors); to intensify volume and profit-making without regards to the quality of experience (in the 1990s, by packing a maximum density of stalls); to create an urban space for relaxation, one suitable for socialising according to middle class sensibilities (in the 2000s, by introducing gardens, cafes and fountains); or to design experiences of authenticity (in the 2010s, by staging a historical town, fairs of national crafts, and organic farmer's markets). One may expect that if a project for reconstruction is planned again in the 2020s, it would strive to highlight precisely the multicultural character of the area, which is currently put under attack.²³

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²³ There are already signs for that. In 2014 the Women's Market was selected as one of the locations to represent Sofia to the international jury for the European Capitals of Culture. On that occasion a project publicising ethnic restaurants around Sofia, "Multi-Kulti Kitchen", was showcased, with the lunch buffet for the jury delegates delivered by Arab, Turkish and Kurdish establishments from the nearby area. While present in the newly 'reconstructed', empty market space the jury was accompanied by a Gypsy musician playing the violin. He was, however, not in any way related to the local area but a renowned musician commissioned especially for the event. Invited to present was even an artistic project undertaken by the present author as a measure of resistance to the redevelopment ("The Unseen Women's Market", <http://jenskipazar.eu>). By 2014 it was seen by the administration as a suitable memento about the market's colourful history.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: The fruit and vegetable alley of the market, 2011. (Photo: The author.)

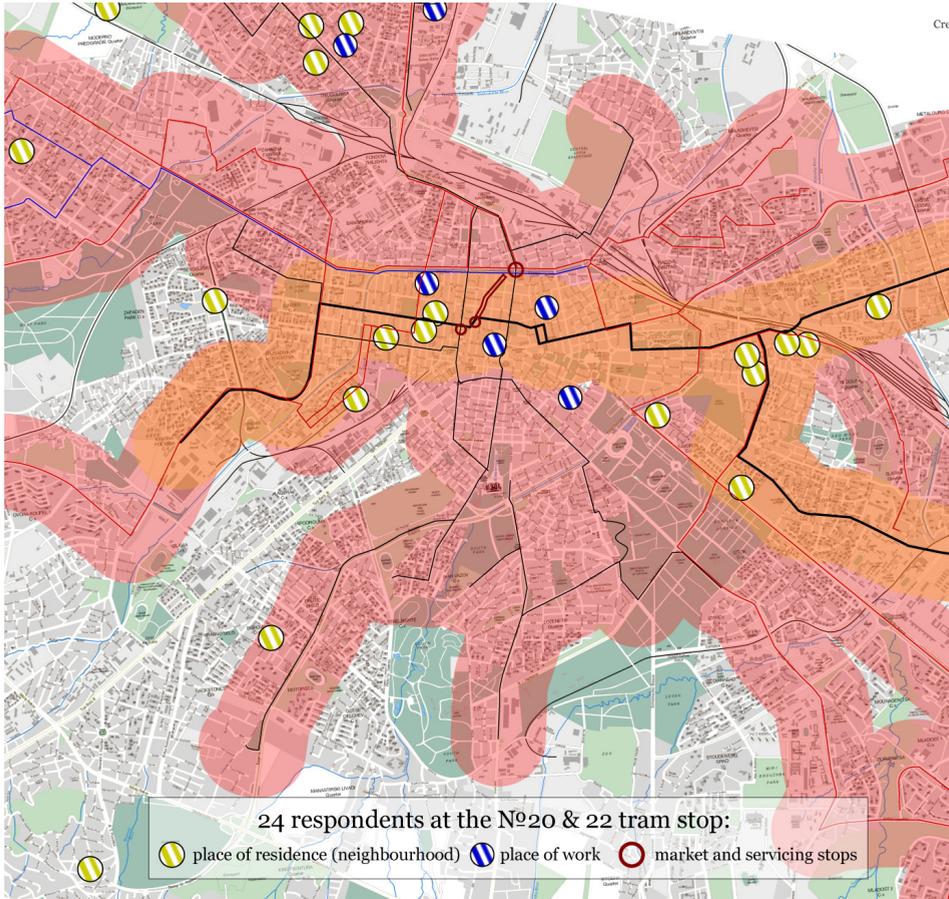


Figure 2: Map of the public transport providing direct access to the market in 2012 (pink & orange area; dark red line – the market). Survey of 24 commuters at the tram stop for lines 20 & 22 (black line) showing neighbourhoods of origin (blue and yellow striped circles). (Graphics: The author.)



Figure 3: The bustle at the Women's Market in socialist times, as documented by official state photographers, in 1963, 1970 and 1969, from left to right. (Photos: Central State Archive, 720, 5.)



Figure 4: The Women's Market in 1969: stalls on the sidewalk, while outlet stores of 'production cooperatives' are visible behind, in buildings with residential flats from the 1910-1940s. The commercial sign on the right reads 'Ready-made clothing'. (Photos: Central State Archive, 720, 5.)



Figure 5: The 1990s redevelopment of one third of the Women's Market, with new stalls and a metal roof structure (on the right side; by arch. Rositza Nikiforova), and still with additional 'illegal' rows of stalls (on the left). (Photo: panoramio.com, March 2007.)



Figure 6: Conceptual design for redevelopment of the Women's Market from 2006, arch. Rositza Nikiforova. (Graphics: The architect's personal archive.)



Figure 7: Vendors attempt to continue working after the removal of the stalls they were previously renting, 2006. (Photo from “Gypsies occupy the europroject for the Women’s Market [Цигани окуїраїї евроїроектїа за Женскїя їазар],” Noshten Trud, May 5-6, 2006.)



Figure 8: The final project for the Women’s Market, arch. Rositza Nikiforova and arch. Ivo Pantelev, 2012. (Graphics: ADA Ltd, <http://ada-bg.com/bg/projects/175>.)



