

## Article

# A Relic of Communism, an Architectural Nightmare or a Determinant of the City's Brand? Media, Political and Architectural Dispute over the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów (Poland)

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**Abstract:** This article deals with the issues of architectural elements of public space, treated as components of art and visual communication, and at the same time determinants of the emotional aspects of political conflicts, social disputes, and media discourse. The aim of the considerations is to show, with the usage of the principles of critical analysis of media discourse, the impact of social events, political communication, and the activity of mass communicators on the perception of the monument of historical memory and the changes that take place within its public evaluation. The authors chose the method of critical analysis of the media discourse due to its compliance with the planned purpose of the analyses, thus, providing the opportunity to perform qualitative research, enabling the creation of possibly up-to-date conclusions regarding both the studied thread, and allowing the extrapolation of certain conclusions to other examples. The media material relating to the controversial Monument to the Revolutionary Act, located in the city of Rzeszów (Poland), was selected for the analysis. On this example, an attempt was made to evaluate the mutual relations between politically engaged architecture and art, and the contemporary consequences of this involvement in the social and political dimension.

**Keywords:** media discourse; visual communication; city brand; public space; socialist art



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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary public space consists of many evolving elements, generating differentiation of its participants' opinions on these components. The problem connected with the presence of relics of past events in socio-political life has remained, and sometimes still remains, visible in all European post-Soviet countries. Politically engaged socialist realist architecture, monumental buildings, and monuments are still present in the life of many communities, thus, arousing a feeling of sentiment among a part of the society or aversion and sometimes even hostility among other members of the society.

Politics, as the art of resolving public disputes and the ability to manage common issues, should release these social tensions. This applies especially to the area of art, which by definition should be primarily an aesthetic element of public space, and not a tool of propaganda or political disputes, although this is a rather impossible aspect of art theory as such. In practice, art is closely related to the reality in which it arises, with all its consequences. This article, based on the analysis of a specific case study, presents the role and place of a monument as an element of public space architecture and a subject of a political dispute. Its main goal is to show, based on the principles of critical analysis of media discourse, the impact of social events, political communication, and the activity of

mass communicators on the perception of the monument of historical memory and the changes that take place within its public evaluation.

## 2. A Monument as an Element of Public Space Identity

The contemporary world being based on constant change takes into account the transformation of public spaces in the sphere of its transformations as well. The public space is not a mere collection of buildings, more or less sensibly scattered within the urban structure, a specific web of thoroughfares and various historical artefacts and monuments of cultural heritage. The space of a place also has functions unrelated to the processes of urbanization—it constitutes a specific background for social interactions of local communities and is an element of their identity. This identity is shaped by space and its constituent elements, creating and created by places important both from the perspective of the experiences of individuals as well as larger communities. There is no doubt that the constituent elements of space create its cultural landscape (Rembold and Peter 2011). However, how can the question about the contribution of the geographical location of a specific space to the cultural identity of a community, especially in the context of mobility and the global world be answered? (Gupta and James 1992). As T. Burdzik (Burdzik 2014) rightly points out, space is not a set of elements devoid of social significance (Dowling 2009; Paasi 2004), but should be treated as a social territory because people share it together (Paasi and Eeva-Kaisa 2008). During the time of contemporary transformations of the surrounding environment, often resulting from changes in the needs and lifestyle of inhabitants, symbols related to the changes have been appearing in the city space. In order to strengthen the ties of residents with the city and create a sense of identity, both references to the past and elements pointing to the present are necessary.

Public spaces and places are representatives of contemporary cities and constitute a specific stage for the public life that takes place there. Identity is a peculiar relationship between the surrounding environments perceived by a person, together with its historically and culturally layered elements: content (culture, tradition of a place) and form (architecture, urban plan). The sense of separateness important for identity is based on numerous factors differentiating a given community and the space it inhabits (Koziański 2013). The identity of a place is built through tradition and other historically conditioned factors. It assumes both the existence of meaning and a continuous process of recreating and reinterpreting (Kotarski 2017). This building of identity through tradition and continuity ascribed to a place is the creation of immutability in time, building a connection between the past, present, and a more or less predicted future. The valuation of space in terms of identity refers not only to widely promoted places and structures of memory, the most important elements constituting collective memory, but also to places of less importance for the general public (Haupt 2016).

Monuments are places where memory and history meet, i.e., where memory turns into history, and vice versa—history captured (present) in a monument has a stimulating effect on memory. Their creation was determined by the need to preserve in collective memory, to overcome the fleetingness and fear of oblivion, but the materialization of this need, taking the physical form of a statue or obelisk, already functions as a testimony to the past. Due to this specificity, monuments are situated “between stories that are told (stories) and stories built on the basis of documentary traces (history)” (Ricoeur 2012). Monuments and the space around them are places of remembrance that cannot be reduced to topography (Nora 2012). Monuments most often seem to be quasi-inanimate objects that function passively in a public space. However, they can constitute the main point of reference during celebratory rituals or spontaneous meetings of urban communities, which with their help fulfil the need for public experiencing of emotions related to, for example, a sudden tragedy. Monuments play an important role in constituting a sense of community or belonging to a specific group of people who, when coming to the monument, demonstrate the fact that they share similar values (Praczyk 2012).

The disputes that have been held in the area of erecting or dismantling monuments actually mean conflicts over the demonstration of a given vision of reality, with which those who fight for the monuments identify themselves. Consequently, the monuments have always been fought for and are to exist in public discourse. Being public in this case is being visible (Warner 2002). The existence of the monument in the urban space gives it a rank, but at the same time inscribes it in the public culture managed by the state and serves the reproduction of values that are commonly recognized as right. The functioning of monuments in this area means that they are marked as very official and serve as the embodiment of an idea that they support or as an illustration of a political choice (Hołda 2013).

Art in a public space plays an important role in creating the identity of a place, which can be both static (such as monuments, statues, sculptures and paintings) and dynamic (happenings, temporary installations, and ambient marketing activities). Through the appearance and content of public space, it is possible to inform space users about historical phenomena, facts, and events, broadening knowledge, socializing, educating, shaping attitudes or changing the preferences of recipients (Harteveld and Hendrik 2019; Duque 2014; Gawroński 2013).

Stimulating urban space increases the importance of places as centres of knowledge, culture, and tourism. Monuments become the same means of communication and their task is to arouse the audience's desire to stop, reflect, and feel interaction with the creator and the work. Generating such feelings requires, however, the awareness of the creator of the monument about the message conveyed in the monument, and at the same time, the limitations resulting from the features of the space, and being able to choose an appropriate place for his/her or influence (Merrifield 1996).

Contemporary creation of urban space, taking into account monuments and the presence of other works of art in public space, involves, among others, the use of various forms of artistic installations that may go beyond the scope of sculptures or other small architecture objects. The works of artists are usually realized in a space already developed in some way and adjust to the given spatial conditions, or even follow them (Cil and Seval 2018; Bottinelli 2017). The sculptures in the city's landscape may become a stimulus to increase the intensity of tourism. Monuments and commemorative plaques have a specific tourist value, so they should also be included in tourist routes in cities.

### 3. Monuments as Political Relics of Socialist Realist Art

The doctrine of socialist realism, existing since 1934, first in Soviet art, and later also in other socialist countries, formulated not only a new program for the development of civilization, culture, and science, but also new postulates for cities, which were to constitute the spatial framework for the activities of the working and agricultural classes (and the intelligentsia derived from them), moving to a leading social position in the new socialist world. The aim of the postulates concerning urban planning, for which the indicator was the Communist Manifesto, was the planned, well-thought-out, and fundamental reconstruction of political, social, and economic life, in accordance with the needs of proletarians (Kwiatkowski 2018).

Thus, the socialist realist urban concept was to deal with both modelling space and directing the way of life of residents (Tandarić et al. 2020; Dostalík 2020; Urban 2020). In the public space in Poland, thirty years after the political transformation, the following elements of the past history can still be found: monuments of brotherhood in arms and a revolutionary act, including numerous tanks, cannons, and other military objects; monuments commemorating figures or events related to the history of the development of the communist movement; decorative elements presenting Soviet symbolism within war cemeteries or memorial sites; street names under the patronage of activists of the communist movement or which refer to the development of this movement (Kałużna 2018).

The symbolic, though very real, cleansing of the public space of the signs of USSR domination in Central Europe took place after the fall of communism, in the early 1990s.

On the one hand, it was typical of revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary movements and was very often carried out by an enthusiastic crowd as part of social campaigns to recall the symbolic destruction and tearing down of monuments by the Romanians, the Polish people, or the Czechs.

On the other hand, the multidimensional changes in the cultural landscape were a deliberate action by state and local authorities implementing historical policy projects aimed at de-sovietisation of public space in the Eastern Bloc countries in Europe. The scope of this process also included the use of empty monument pedestals and the identification of new heroes whose history was the basis for building new stories and narratives about the collapse of the former system (Vodotyka 2017). The issue of de-communization of the public space concerned basically all countries of Eastern Europe—the only differences were the status of these countries before the collapse of the USSR, cultural, geographic, or political proximity to the Soviet Union, and nowadays—the nature and scope of international agreements regarding the protection of memorial sites signed by the state and the Russian Federation (Kałużna 2018).

The efforts to perform de-communization of public spaces in particular European countries took various forms. For example, in Poland, there has never been an initiative to create a place where the “unwanted” monuments would be placed. The situation was different in Budapest, where the Szoborpark—Memorial Park—was created and still operates, or in Sofia, where the Museum of Socialist Art is opened. These are places where monuments were collected in the post-war period, presenting both Soviet leaders and domestic communist activists. They are educational, but also commercial, due to the revenues from ticket sales and the sale of commercial souvenirs (McKenzie 2011).

One of the key fields of influence of historical policy is public space, which is perceived by actors of historical policy as a vehicle of memory and forgetfulness. The analysis of public space indicates the content that has been selected by the actors as the most important. In democratic conditions, public space often becomes an arena in which various visions of history compete in public. Various forms of commemoration in public space—monuments, memorial sites, commemorative plaques, and monumental architecture—constitute a form of political expression and a demonstration of political power.

Material commemorations connect history and politics, legitimize the chosen political position, so the vision they communicate must be in line with the political position represented by a given actor. The role of historical politics in supporting and legitimizing the authorities through actions in the public space can be observed particularly clearly at the time of political changes. The demolition of old monuments and the funding of new ones are just one of the many practical solutions available to actors of historical policy. In this case, in a symbolically cleansed space, the newly founded commemorations are to manifest a specific vision of the past, accepted by the authorities, and on this basis create the identity of future generations. The strength of the impact of commemorations lies in their simultaneous rooting in the past and the focus on the future (Tatarenko 2019).

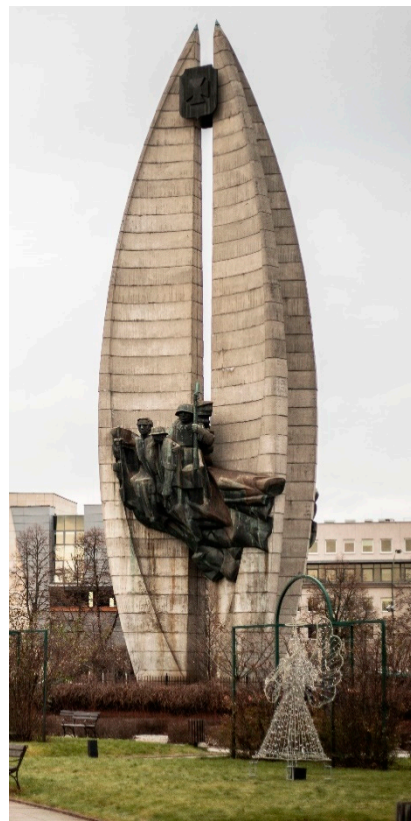
#### **4. The History of a Monument to the Revolutionary Act**

The Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów is also called the Monument to the Revolutionary Fights and, of course, concerns the fights fought in the Rzeszów region. The monument belongs to the group of more recognizable monuments in Poland, mainly due to the fact that from the very beginning it aroused numerous controversies and various associations. The need to build it was noticed by Władysław Kruczek, who in the 1960s was the first secretary of the local cell of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) in Rzeszów. At that time, the ideas of high-ranking communist party officials were picked up and implemented relatively quickly, and so was the idea.

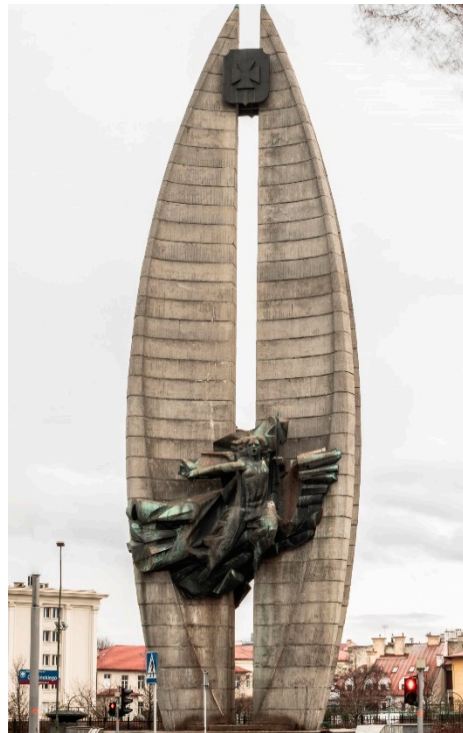
In 1967, the Social Committee for the Construction of the Monument to the Revolutionary Act was set up. It undertook the task to commemorate, in a symbolic way, the revolutionary acts and uprisings in the area known as Rzeszów Land with an appropriate monument. The first decision made by the Committee was to entrust the execution of the

monument to Marian Konieczny, an experienced artist, professor and the Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. A design team was formed under the supervision of the main artist, and in 1968 it presented two concepts for the monument, from which the final choice of the concept to be implemented was made. At the site of the future monument, due to the marshy ground, several dozens of about 10 m long reinforced concrete piles were impaled, they were to constitute a safe foundation for the monument.

Today, these concrete piles make it impossible to remove the monument (an act postulated by its opponents) without any problems. On the foundation of the monument there are two stylized laurel leaves composed of 37 pairs of elements of a total height of about 38 m (Figures 1 and 2). Two sculptures made of copper sheet were attached to them at a height of about 8 m. One depicted “Nike”, the goddess of Victory (Figure 3), and the other—a symbolic system, including a worker, a peasant and a soldier, which was to symbolize the revolutionary workers and peasants’ alliance (Figure 4). Below, at the feet of the figures, there is a metal matter, symbolizing the banner of the revolution. The time from conception of the monument to its final execution was very long, because the enormous metaplastic sculptures made in the studio of professor Konieczny in Kraków were installed on the monument at the turn of 1973 and 1974. The sculptures are so monumental that you can enter them through a special hatch located in their outline.



**Figure 1.** Monument to the Revolutionary Acts in Rzeszów—Eastern side. Source: created by author—Łukasz Bis.



**Figure 2.** Monument to the Revolutionary Acts in Rzeszów—West side. Source: created by author—Łukasz Bis.



**Figure 3.** Sculpture “Nike” on the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów. Source: created by author—Łukasz Bis.



**Figure 4.** Sculpture “Workers and peasants’ alliance with soldiers” at the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów.  
Source: created by author—Łukasz Bis.

The symbolism of the three figures: a soldier, a peasant, and a worker indicates that it is a revolution that was implemented by the Polish Workers’ Party and its heir, the Polish United Workers’ Party. From the point of view of historical evaluation of the revolution, the agricultural revolution was unsuccessful because the communists failed to collectivize the countryside. It is a monument typical of the communist era. According to the program assumptions of the ideologues of the people’s power representatives, the social and political revolution could be implemented due to the fact that the “liberation”, the fraternal army of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was stationed on the territory of the Republic of Poland. The manifestation of this fact is the soldier’s helmet on the monument, which is closer in its shape to the standards of the Soviet army than the Polish army. The figure of the peasant placed on the monument refers to agrarian values in the opposite way. The essence of various currents of agrarian thought is the claim that agriculture and the countryside are a specific socio-cultural system that cannot be reduced to other areas of production. On the other hand, according to the Stalinist vision of the socialization of agriculture, the collectivization of agriculture was to finally solve the agrarian and peasant

question in the countries of people's democracy by bringing the peasants to the position of agricultural workers. The communists did not succeed in bringing down agriculture in Poland. Therefore, the Monument to the Revolutionary Act can be considered, in retrospect, as a specific symbol of the defeat of the Stalinist revolution in Poland (Chrobak 2015).

Four marble plaques are placed at the base of the concrete leaves that make up the main skeleton of the monument. Two of them contained the inscriptions by the then president of the Polish Writers' Union in Rzeszów, Zbigniew Domino: "YOUR HEROIC ACTION", "IMMORTAL FAME—OUR ETERNAL MEMORY", and "IN HOMAGE TO THE HEROES OF THE REVOLUTIONARY FIGHT FOR THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND—THE SOCIETY OF RZESZÓW LAND."

In the spring of 1974, the monument was almost ready. It was decided to unveil it on the first of May that year, symbolically adding splendour to the Labour Day celebrations. For almost 30 years, the main ceremonies, oaths, awarding orders, and other state and party events took place at the monument. In front of the monument, parades and demonstrations were organized on May Labour Day celebrations. To this day, it is the focal point of the city, with the potential for orientation in space and being a symbol—a determinant of the city's brand (Gawroński 2009), but also a common place for young people to meet, as well as organize spontaneous protests on various issues.

Since the political transformation, the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów has been a bone of contention between the city's inhabitants, the local community, politicians, and public officials. As part of the de-communization activities, it was not decided to demolish it, although discussions on this topic are still ongoing. In order to soften the revolutionary and communist significance of the monument, in recent years additional two shields with the coat of arms of Rzeszów in the form of the Maltese cross have been installed on it.

## 5. Critical Discourse Analysis—Methodological Conditions

The concept of media discourse falls within the scope of a broader terminological complex in which the concept of discourse plays a superior role. Due to its polymorphism, it is defined in many ways. Discourse is a confrontation with a specific topic, which takes the form of statements and various texts, concerns smaller or larger groups of society, reflects the knowledge and attitudes of these groups towards this topic, as well as actively influences them, thus, influencing the social reality in the context of this topic (Gardt 2007).

Discourse reflects social reality, but also shapes it. The media, both traditional and new, play an important role in this process. By creating conditions for public discourses, the media play the role of their producer and conveyor. The media discourse, on the other hand, is a set of methods of intentional, nonaccidental use of language to communicate information, opinions, values, concepts, and views of the media on various topics (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2006).

The interpretation of the concept of discourse within the social sciences depends on the theoretical paradigm within which discourse is considered. For the positivist trend, discourses function as "frames" or "cognitive schemas"—in this approach, they "serve primarily to intentionally shape commonly shared images and meanings in accordance with the defined goals" (Stamou 2018; Jalbert 1995). The purpose of the analysis of discourse understood in this way is to verify to what extent discourses become a tool for producing social reality. The realistic approach, on the other hand, focuses on the relationship between language and power—it looks for a relationship between the structure of texts and the social structure (Cicourel 1980).

Media discourse is at the centre of interest of media scholars, linguists, political scientists, and sociologists. The adopted optics differs from different research approaches. The studies on media within the theory of social communication focus on assumptions that interpret the essence of media and the principles of their functioning in the life of societies, while linguists take as a starting point media statements and the ways of conceptualizing specific components of the world (Bloom 2014).



Research on discursive communication, without taking into account extra-linguistic conditions, was initiated by structuralism and F. de Saussure, who formulated a thesis that a language should be considered in itself. In discourse analysis, however, it is about finding a field, largely nonlinguistic and intermediate between the system and the text, and determining the norm of verbal behaviour, which consists of techniques of building a statement in a specific communicative situation, accepted in a given culture. In a mediated society, media discourse is most often encountered. Understood in this way, the discourse is related to the essence of media communication, i.e., the one in which media is used in the process of transmitting and receiving information. It is then called mediated communication.

Therefore, an absolute condition for qualifying a given statement in a wide range of media discourse genres is its appearance in the mass media (Carvalho 2008). Contemporary mediatization of communication is sometimes perceived analogously to the previous, revolutionary reevaluation, which was the transformation of the original, oral modelling system into a writing system. This should allow for fundamental changes to the existing classifications and typology of language varieties, taking into account the dichotomy that is emerging today in terms of distinguishing its varieties: media and non-media.

Discourse analysis in its critical aspect focuses in a special way—apart from the very semiotic layer of a language—on the external aspects of the message that embed it in social reality. Contextual transmitting and receiving conditions determine both the final (effective) shape of the message itself, and the scope and strength of its impact. Due to the contextual “perceptual structure”, each message is included in the category of an open work due to the contextual “perceptual structure” of the meanings constructed in the context of the social and contextual involvement of the language message (Eco 2008). Thus, both sides of the communication act are responsible for the final shape of the message (including the transmitting and receiving interpretation) and its impact on reality.

Critical research on discourse deprives every message of ideological innocence and assigns it (unconscious and/or implicit) evaluation related to the abuse of power, social domination and the introduction and perpetuation of inequalities (Van Dijk 2015). Critical discourse analysis refers to domination and social power related to privileged access to desired resources and services. The related discourse tools that naturalize the social order, including social inequalities are also explored (Van Dijk 1993).

The discursive image of the world is a discursively profiled interpretation of reality, which can be summarized as a set of judgments about the world, about people, things, and events. It should be emphasized that as a representation of knowledge—it is linguistically constructed, negotiated on the basis of emotional or rational arguments and distributed in the media (Warnke 2009). The linguistic and media construction of the discursive image of the world means that facts are hidden under the slogan of the fight for the truth, while the truth is not an ontological phenomenon here, but only a discursively negotiated one. This is a risky and debatable statement, but the recent history of Poland and the current political events in this country may favour adopting such a position. This position is largely based on the concepts of Foucault (Foucault 1968), who places a strong emphasis on the historicity of discursive configurations (discourse is a kind of historical a priori), and his vision of history is in contrast to the traditional one based on the idea of continuity.

The analyses presented later in the article are based on the examples selected from the daily monitoring of the printed and online press. The period from May 2016 to September 2020 was monitored. It included regional and local press titles (which resulted from the specificity of the analysed topics) and was extended with additional Internet searches based on keywords resulting from the presented content. The choice of the research period (2016–2020) was not accidental. It refers to the new legal situation in Poland, under which the monuments glorifying the past communist system should be demolished by law. The regulations in this area came into force in 2016, which consequently resulted in a lively discussion about the current state and the future of monuments on a much larger scale, polarizing local communities. According to the methodological principles of

critical discourse analysis, the selection of sources for analysis was not representative. The presented conclusions result from qualitative analyses, which are reflected in the research objectives and the characteristics of the method—the analysis of media discourse.

## 6. Leave It or Demolish It?—Media Discourse Analysis

The discourse analysis will be used to reflect on the history and future of the controversial monument—an architectural symbol of communism, but also a contemporary marketing symbol of the city of Rzeszów. It is a case study defining the scale and scope of the media discourse on political, artistic, historical, and social issues, as in these areas, the Monument to the Revolutionary Act plays a particularly important role. The authors of this manuscript are, however, most interested in the political discourse taking place in the media sphere, which is part of the public communication system. It contains more or less official statements of politicians about the mapping of the further fate of the monument.

The second area is the public debate on the monument, presented in the media, and carried out with the participation of the inhabitants of the city and the region, social activists, and journalists. It should also be emphasized that the involved media discourse on monuments and the controversy surrounding the regulation of memorial sites are not specific to Poland, but occur in many post-Soviet countries. The specificity of the countries of the former Eastern bloc is building their new identity in the shadow of “relics of the epoch”, an example of which are the “monuments of gratitude” (Mytych 2018).

Monuments should not be demolished. Due to the fact that the monument will be demolished, we will not change history (Kobiałka 2016)—said the press spokesman of the president of Rzeszów in 2016. It was an official comment of the local government authorities to the idea of the director of the Podkarpacie branch of the European Centre for the Prosecution of Communist and Fascist Criminals to demolish the most famous and recognizable monument in Rzeszów. “The Great Battle for the Monument to the Revolutionary Act. Politicians: leave, change symbolism, destroy”—this is how one of the most important daily newspapers in Rzeszów described the public mood in 2017 (Kruczek 2017).

The dispute over the monument’s future has been going on for almost 30 years. Supporters of leaving it in the city landscape emphasize that it does not pose any threat, because it is difficult to consider it as an element of promoting the past totalitarian system. Enriched with modern symbolism (the city’s coat of arms), it is the most famous symbol of the city, through the prism of which Rzeszów is recognizable both in Poland and abroad. From a marketing point of view (Gawroński et al. 2021), if you do not have a better symbol, you should leave the one that has become a permanent part of the city’s history. The opponents of the monument raise various arguments to justify the decision to demolish the monument.

Politicians representing anti-communist views emphasize that in the early 1970s, an employee of the party history department of the Polish communist party (PZPR) committee prepared a list of events testifying to the achievements of the proletarian revolution in Rzeszów and its vicinity in order to substantiate the erection of the monument. The vast majority of the events, whose commemoration was supposed to be the monument in Rzeszów, concern the activities of communists, Bolshevik agents (Communist Workers’ Party of Poland, Communist Party of Poland, Communist Party of Western Ukraine, and Polish Workers’ Party), the extreme left-wing of the socialist movement, communist militias, and power organizations of People’s Poland (Terczyńska 2018).

In the years 2017–2018, the topic of the possible removal of the monument from public space becomes particularly topical, up-to-date, and catchy, because an additional argument for opponents of post-communist symbols of architecture and art is the law prohibiting the promotion of communism. The Institute of National Remembrance (Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation—a state office with research, educational, archival, and investigative and lustration powers) leaves no illusions, and its

historians clearly define the statue as a symbol of the criminal system and glorification of the communist system.

Therefore, in their opinion, the monument should be removed. The subject is then dealt with not only by the local and regional, but also national, media. The “Battle for the monument in Rzeszów” profile appears in social media, where there is a social discussion on arguments and invectives, but also where the public fundraising for saving the monument begins. “This is the second coat of arms of Rzeszów”, “The symbol of Rzeszów”, and, “The hallmark of Rzeszów”—some residents claim (Błażejowski 2017).

“The monument is a symbol of revolutionary struggles in the Rzeszów region, it is a dominant form in the panorama of the city centre and towering over the monuments of old Rzeszów” (Majka 2004). Indeed—the monument topographically marks the centre and is a landmark for drivers entering the city, while symbolically it is still, despite other architectural structures and many new investments, a symbol of Rzeszów.

The political dispute over the fate of the monument was fuelled by the so-called communization law, which requires that buildings, monuments, and streets that had previously been named after patrons associated with Poland in 1945–1989 and communism should be removed from the map of Polish cities. Political discourse is conducted mainly in the media, which makes it a public discourse, engaging residents, and outside observers of the dispute. In 2018, the media reported that the provincial construction supervision, as a result of the de-communization law, requests the city authorities to remove the monument. In his decision, the building inspector points out that although the monument does not have any inscriptions indicating that it commemorates the Red Army, it is clear from many documents that it is called the Monument of Gratitude to the Soviet Army. Therefore, it commemorates the army of the communist, totalitarian state that was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and, thus, should be liquidated (Gubernat 2018).

For several years, the Institute of National Remembrance has consistently held the position that the monument “honours the memory of all those who contributed to its creation in the historical narrative of People’s Poland, constituting a de facto a monument to the history of the communist movement in the Rzeszów Province” and, therefore, should be demolished. There is still little knowledge among the inhabitants of the city that the revolutionary act commemorated by this monument also included, among other things, the bloody consolidation of the people’s power after 1944 and further violent acts of crime and lawlessness (Ławnicki 2017).

If a legal act were to decide about the fate of the monument, then, according to the amendment to the de-communization act, the Monument to the Revolutionary Act should have disappeared from the public space already in March 2018. According to the Act, the obligation to remove the monument rests with the owner or perpetual usufructuary of the property on which the object is located—in this case, the authorities of the Order of the Bernardine Fathers, because currently the order belongs to the square on which the monument is located. The situation of the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów is unprecedented. It is the only communist monument in Poland, and perhaps in the world, that belongs to monks today. However, the most unusual thing is that although no one actually argues that the monument was built years ago as a symbol of communism, today many of the city’s inhabitants do not want it to be demolished. Moreover, many declare that they are ready to defend it—reported the local daily in 2018 (Mach 2018).

Opinions appearing in the media refer also to the high cost of demolishing the monument (approx. EUR 200,000), which neither the monks (the monument is located on their property), the city authorities, residents, nor the national authorities want to cover. The Bernardine Fathers do not comment on the matter, precisely because of the high costs of demolishing the monument, which would have to be covered by them directly or by the faithful gathered around the church. Why should we, the faithful, follow the concept of the party in power? A conflict between the party and the Church broke out in Rzeszów, the media reported (Różańska 2018).

The Monument to the Revolutionary Act also raises numerous aesthetic controversies. Due to its shape, it has names and nicknames that have become much more rooted in the consciousness of the local community than its official name. They are often obscene, because the avant-garde shape resembles female sexual organs for many people. Hence, the term “Big Pussy” is in common use (also in journalistic materials and Internet users’ comments). After 1989, there were ideas for the commercialization of the monument by using it as an advertising space, building a climbing wall on it, or producing souvenirs related to it (Różycki 2016).

In the meantime, as part of local initiatives, one of the Rzeszów foundations applied for the monument to be entered in the register of monuments. “The Foundation refers to the opinions of authorities in the field of art, collected signatures of support for entering the monument into the register of monuments among architects, town planners, art historians, conservators and academics, professors and doctors from the Jagiellonian University, the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, the University of Warsaw, University of Rzeszów and Rzeszów University of Technology, as well as representatives of artistic circles (including painters, sculptors, poets, actors), directors of cultural and art institutions, museum workers, and residents. Because only an entry in the register of monuments would guarantee the monument a protective umbrella”, argued the defenders of the monument through the local press (Mach 2019).

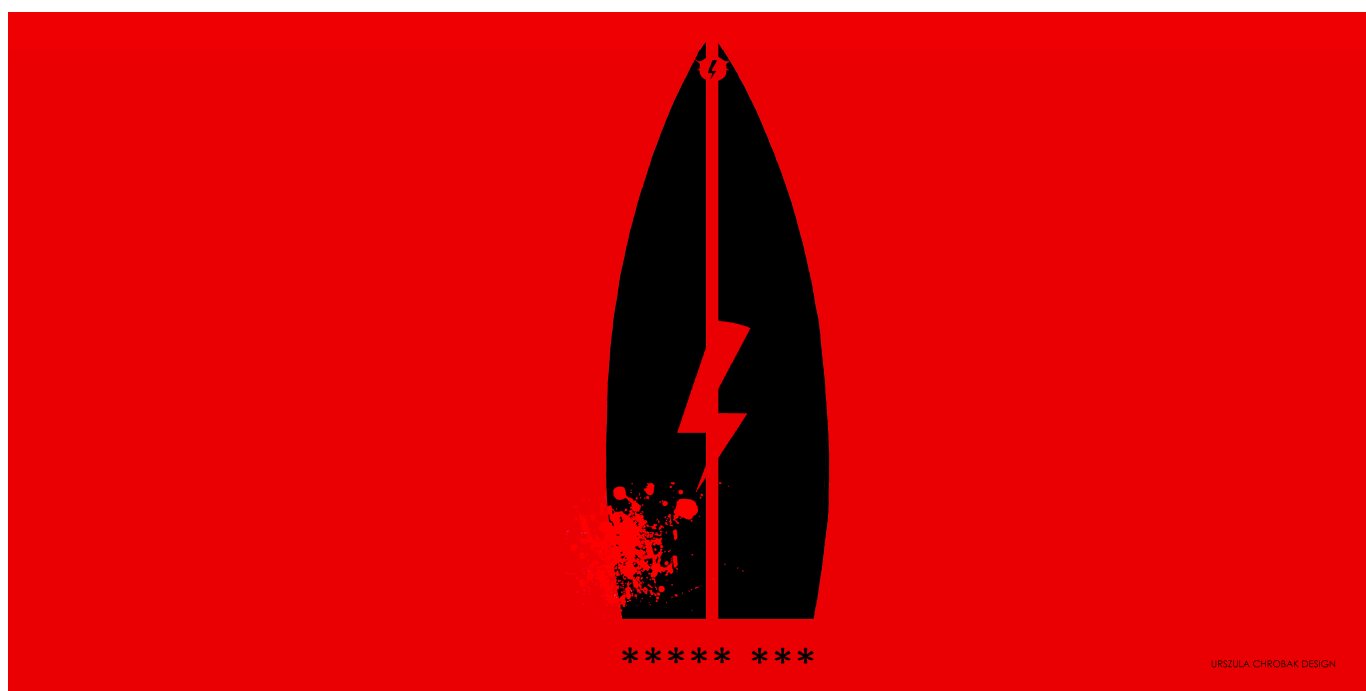
Journalists have also repeatedly commented on the fate of the post-communist monuments in the press. “Demolition always has the same effect: an empty space is left and after a year no one remembers what happened here. A properly described testimony of totalitarianism is better than a nice square lined with pansies” (Jarecka 2007). Bearing in mind that discourse has the power to legitimize power and socialize society, other examples can also be used. Moreover, its author—professor Marian Konieczny—has been trying to protect the monument: “I think that it has become so well established among Rzeszów residents that there would be lack of it,” he said. The public debate in the media clearly shows the division into a voice inspired by the historical policy of the party in power (Law and Justice) and supported by the opinions of representatives of the Institute of National Remembrance, as well as voices of objections expressed by the local opposition politicians actively defending the monument and by a large group of Rzeszów residents.

Although it has been over 30 years since the political transformation in Poland has taken place, protests and happenings are still organized at the Rzeszów monument. A musical picnic was organized under the name #PomnikMaZostać (#Monument must stay). “What if Parisians decided to demolish the Eiffel Tower? A pile of wire. It’s neither pretty nor useful. Or better—if the Romans had decided to demolish the Colosseum. It is, after all, a relic of the Roman Empire. After all, people were brutally murdered there. And the people of Rzeszów want to demolish the most recognizable symbol of this city because it is associated with communism. Communism sucks, and so does any regime that dictates what to think. What if the tone, meaning and symbolism of the monument were changed?”—one of the finalists of the program “The Voice of Poland”, who performed during the picnic, wrote on Facebook. During the event, over 1,000 signatures in support of the monument were collected (Mach 2018a).

The new wave of the media discourse around the Rzeszów monument took place in 2020. In Poland, autumn this year was dominated not only by the events related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by the nationwide women’s protest, known as the Women’s Strike. In several hundred cities in Poland, demonstrations by many thousands demanded the loosening of restrictive abortion regulations, as a consequence of the judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal declaring the performance of abortion in terminally ill foetuses contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Protesting women, and with time men, despite the restrictions resulting from the pandemic, organized spontaneous protests, gathering in the most characteristic places in Polish cities.

As reported by the local press, “the famous monument in Rzeszów slowly became a symbol of the ongoing strikes against the ban on abortion in Poland.” The monument was

given a new name—Monument of the Women’s Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów. Although, under this slogan, it could only be found on Google Maps for one day, the action provoked the question: should this name not remain forever? (Kołodziejczyk 2020). The monument quickly became not only a strategic meeting point for demonstrators, but also an eloquent symbol of the protests. It has appeared on banners and posters, as well as in press materials and on social media. It also became a kind of a logo of the “Women’s Strike” protest in Rzeszów (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Graphics symbolizing the women’s protest in Rzeszów in 2020. Source: Urszula Chrobak Painting, <https://www.facebook.com/urszula.chrobak.painting>.

A separate discussion in the regional media concerned the idea that appeared in 2020 in the minds of people trying to protect the monument from demolition. At the end of August, the project “Recovery and revitalization of the Monument to the Revolutionary Act” was submitted to the Rzeszów Civic Budget. Two years ago, residents, including councillors, members of the Social Committee for the Purchase of the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów had a similar idea. At that time, the monks—the Bernardines—were not interested in selling the monument. In the project submitted to the Civic Budget, it was assumed that its implementation would cost the city slightly over PLN 100,000. Consequently, the city would take care of the maintenance of the monument and the surrounding area. The project was not included in the group of investments to be financed in 2020, however, numerous opinions from local politicians appeared in the press about the continuation of efforts in this area. Many city councillors want this monument, so important for the image of the city, to become the city’s symbol again (Kołodziejczyk 2020a). There are many indications that the current social and political events are constantly rewriting the history of the Rzeszów monument.

## 7. Conclusions

Art and architecture have always been an important element of the propaganda influence in totalitarian and authoritarian systems. Its reminiscences are also present in contemporary urban conditions, social events, and media discourse carried out with the use of mass communication. In Poland, even 30 years after the political transformation and the country’s entry into the path of democratization of social and political life, it is

still impossible to sort out the issues of historical remnants of the former system. In 2016, the Polish parliament adopted a de-communization act, which stipulates that the names of buildings, streets, and squares cannot commemorate people, organizations, and events symbolizing communism or another totalitarian system, and all symbols of these systems in public space should disappear. It was the strongest factor influencing polemics about the fate of controversial monuments with a turbulent history.

This article, which is a specific analysis of the case study of the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in Rzeszów, shows how difficult it is to solve the problems of this type of architectural works in the realities of a country with a communist history. As the analysis of the cited examples shows—each time the inspiration to take up the topic and engage the public in a public discourse is generated within the framework of political discourse (legal regulations, official positions, and statements of officials and politicians), it is then taken up by mass and social media generating interest in social and specific media discourse. This has a social impact, reflecting the importance of a monument or other architectural element within a public space for a given community. Sometimes this element also takes on a new meaning in the context of current political and social conditions.

Media discourse dealing with the connection between architecture, art (with a ballast of unfavourable, or at least ambiguous historical associations), and current events as well as the identity of places and local communities, inherently evokes spontaneous and emotional comments. In the case of Rzeszów, there are additional arguments that go beyond the sphere of confronting political views with assessments of historical events. Aesthetic and promotional conditions also play an important role, because the described monument has, without doubt, a high promotional potential and is one of the marketing symbols (perhaps the third most recognizable) of the city. This results in the necessity of a multilayered insight into the issue as the consequences of the potential decisions about monument's future may also be of an image and mercantile significance.

Despite strict regulations, not all communist monuments have disappeared from Polish cities. Even the Institute of National Remembrance, an institution that should monitor obeying the law and the implementation of anti-communist law, does not know how many monuments there are. The law does not impose an obligation to keep a register of objects listed in the Act, so there is no unit or numerical list of objects praising the Red Army and the communist system. The difficulty in measuring the scale of the phenomenon also lies in the fact that with regard to some architectural symbols, there is a dispute about their real relationship with the communist system. The Russian embassy in Poland keeps its own statistics on the liquidation of monuments to the Soviet Army in Poland. According to it, in the years 2016–2020, about a hundred of such monuments disappeared, while there are still about 130 monuments of gratitude in Poland, excluding the symbols placed in the Red Army cemeteries. The example of a monument in Rzeszów and its presence in the city's public space is, therefore, not unique, although the nearly 40-m giant is one of the most vivid and well known examples of the remnants of bygone times in the entire country. On the other hand, several hundred monuments, plaques, and other forms of commemoration did not survive the last purge in the city space. The discussion about the further fate of this type of monuments is still ongoing and despite the thirty-year period of writing the new history of Poland, it still engages both the older and the younger generations of Polish people in the dispute.

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