The Spectre of Normalization

*Groups of visitors, school excursions, tourists are strolling around, the bombastic Stalinist style facades of the VDNKH Moscow pavilions that in Soviet epoch used to represent the accomplishments and progress of national republics as well as various fields of socialist economy. The famous former Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy of USSR that after the collapse of Soviet Union was turned into a huge market space after the new policy implemented by Russia aimed to consolidate former Soviet republics in the frames of new economic and political bloc was converted back to its former representative function. Although beyond the dramatic view of the facades and well-groomed lawns and flower beds of the park most of the pavilions remain empty, locked, dilapidated and the only element that creates a sense of former unity are the records of late Soviet (from 1950s-1980s) mainstream music loudly, broadcasted non-stop on the territory of colossal expo park .*

After almost 3 decades lasting turbulent evolution of post-soviet nations that had quite divert histories and logics of development, which still need to be explored and compared, these days it is possible to follow a certain common dynamics in the political, social and cultural processes in those societies of striving towards deliberate or unconscious radicalization of power. Though the political vectors of that “power” could be different and sometimes opposed, the logic of their orientations in a paradoxical ways intercross at a certain common objective/desire for “normalization”. The neoliberal dream that came to substitute the centralized planned economic system, socialist principles related to nonhierarchical societal organization, property, distribution of public wealth, space, culture and education, etc. ripped up the collective consciousness of late soviet society that had been already confused in between principles of building an alternative social order and their actual materialization. Collective discontentment related to the hypercapitalist reality became the reason of either undifferentiated nostalgic references or obsessional demonization of the Soviet past. Those trends in a most explicit ways are being manifested in the symbolic, imagery and architectural transformations in urban contexts of post-soviet capitals balancing in between intended tactics of carrying through political constructs and denial followed by unconscious replications of old ideological iconography stuffed with a new content. Following the general trends in post soviet capitals it is still possible to notice not only specific common aesthetical preferences towards neo-imperial – neo-stalinist style in architecture but also retreat to the negation of the modernist core of the common historical background by denying the modernizing and emancipatory potentialities of socialist society and emphasizing the suppressive colonizing aspect of Soviet system. Parallel to the tendentious annihilation and degeneration of the modernist architectural heritage in those societies the neo-stalinist style is being rehabilitated in new architecture through the refined reproduction of notorious Stalinist aesthetics (like Triumph Palace in Moscow or new Governmental House in Yerevan). On the other hand, there is also another strange practice of ruining Stalinist period buildings and then reconstructing them back (the story with famous Shchusev’s Moscow hotel). The only important distinction that can be traced in those reconstructions is the attempt to perfect the aesthetics of those buildings by applying more austere rhetoric and extinguishing the ideological duality of Stalinist style, which from the nowadays position could be considered as the main cause that was weakening the authoritarian essence of soviet classicist architecture and undermining the “normality” of social order.