



Societies around the Black Sea in the Mirror of Literature, Music, and Arts



University of St. Gallen

Center for Governance
and Culture in Europe

CENTRE
FOR ADVANCED
STUDY



Organized by the Center for Governance
and Culture in Europe (GCE-HSG) and the
Centre for Advanced Study Sofia (CAS)

Dates:
14.–17. September 2025

Locations:
Centre for Advanced Study Sofia,
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Toplocentrala Centre for Contemporary Arts,
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The annual GCE conference shall explore the ways in which societal transformations of the 20th/21st centuries are reflected in the literature, arts, and music of the countries around the Black Sea. These cultural forms serve as both mirrors to the changing dynamics within society and powerful tools for understanding deep-rooted shifts in cultural, political, and economic landscapes. Historically, culture has been a decisive factor in the nation-building processes for the countries in our focus, especially where and when state institutions were lacking. The critical role of works of art in shaping and reflecting societal consciousness is particularly evident in the wake of historical upheavals, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rise of nationalist movements, and ongoing struggles with democratic development. Literature, music, and visual arts are not

merely products of their time but also function as sites of resistance, reflection, and (re-)invention of national and collective identities; in some cases, they may even serve as triggers for change.

The planned conference aims to shed light on how the cultural manifestations of an era reflect its social conditions, peculiarities, and developments. Special attention shall be given to transnational entanglements: Are there cross-border contacts and influences, and are they of a more harmonious-accommodating or more divisive-disruptive nature? Could the Black Sea region be described as a cultural area? Are dominant narratives confirmed or challenged? What new voices are emerging today, and how are they taking issue with the contemporary context? What can scholarship tell us about all these questions?

Program

14. September 2025

Arrival of participants

15. September 2025

9.30–10.00

Introduction by Ulrich Schmid
and Diana Mishkova

10.00–12.00

Panel: Trauma and Its Reflection in Contemporary Eastern European Literature: Autofiction and Autobiographical Writing

This panel will examine how contemporary Slavic authors explore the theme of trauma through autofiction and autobiographical writing. These literary works, which focus on personal stories, provide a unique lens for understanding the intersection of memory, identity, and suffering. Authors in the Slavic world have increasingly turned to autofiction as a method for grappling with the legacies of war, political upheaval, and societal transformation. By blending fact and fiction, these works challenge traditional storytelling boundaries, offering intimate reflections on the psychological scars that shape both individual lives and the collective consciousness. The panel will examine how these literary strategies reflect on personal trauma while engaging with broader cultural and historical contexts in the post-socialist space.

- Iryna Yakovenko, “Traumas of War and Displacement in Autobiographical Writings of Olena Stiazhkina and Stanislav Aseyev”
- Angel Igov, “The Roots/Routes of Autofiction in Today’s Bulgarian Literature”
- Alexander Meienberger, “Embodied Wounds: Illness and Personal Trauma in Contemporary Russophone Autofiction”

Moderated by Ulrich Schmid.

12.00–14.30

Lunch

15.00–18.30

**Art Panel: A Day of Conversations
& Screenings at Toplocentrala**

The Day of Conversations & Screenings, organized within the framework of the conference, aims to facilitate a critical examination of recent transformations in the socio-political, ecological, and cultural landscape of the region, approached through the analytical and expressive capacities of visual art. The consequences of military conflicts, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the structural dynamics of late capitalism constitute the focal points of the proposed series. Activities around the proposed topic will consist of presentations and film screenings, followed by a discussion to wrap up the Day.

- Lexi Fleurs, “Mafia Baroque in Paradise”
- Neda Genova, “Politics of Surfaces”
- Nikolay Karabinovich, “The Last Artwork About The War”

Moderated by Alexander Meienberger.

18.30–20.00

Welcoming Cocktail and Dinner

16. September 2025

9.00–11.00

Panel: Post-imperial Literatures in the Black Sea Area

The countries in this region have distinct literary traditions that reflect their histories, languages, and cultural values. Literature serves as a means to document historical narratives, folklore, and societal changes. Themes of shared history and common experiences, such as Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, Soviet influence, or post-communist transitions, might create points of connection. How does

literature relate to the heritage of the empires that once shaped the region?

– Nadezhda Alexandrova, “Ivan Vazov’s Recollections from the Ottoman Past – Istanbul, Bucharest and Odessa between personal memories and collective imaginary”

– Ahmed Nuri, “Black Sea as Collective Memory and Literary Imagination in the Politico-Cultural Networks and Writings of Turkish Communists”

– Petar Dobrev, “Black Sea Pirates in Bulgarian Historical and Literary Memory”

Moderated by Diana Mishkova.

11.00–11.30

Coffee Break

11.30–13.30

Roundtable: Literature in the Black Sea Area – Relations and Translations

Translation in general plays a critical role in sharing literary works across borders. Translations of selected books by single authors have helped to make (parts of) the “smaller” literatures accessible and famous internationally: Authors like Georgi Gospodinov or Mircea Cărtărescu have gained acclaim through translations into English, French, and other “global” languages. But what kind of connections and resonances are there between the literatures of the countries around the Black Sea, despite the linguistic barriers that have traditionally made this challenging? Is the situation different nowadays from the one a century, or a few decades ago? What is the impact and role of translations within the Black Sea neighbourhood?

– Liliana Corobca, Moldovan scholar and writer, based in Bucharest

– Tamta Melashvili, Georgian writer and scholar, Tbilisi

– Svetlozar Zhelev, director of the Bulgarian National Book Center, Sofia

Moderated by Katharina Biegger.

13.30–15.30

Lunch

15.30–17.00

Panel: What about Music? Does Music Tell Us Something about Society?

Not much is generally known in other parts of Europe about the musical life in the countries around the Black Sea. How does it sound, how was it shaped, how has it reflected and reacted to political requirements, to societal conditions and individual challenges of the last century? In earlier epochs, diverse musical cultures must have existed around the Black Sea, based on distinctly different musical traditions. Has 20th century modernity, with its concomitant political and social transformations, brought about a unifying development here – or has a diversity of musical styles and preferences remained an expression of deep-seated cultural (national?) differences?

– Alexander Jakobidze-Gitman, “Revaz Gabichvadze’s Hamlet and the Politics of Style: Between Moscow Endorsement and Local Opposition”

– Anastasia Nabokina, “Tracing Choreographic Traditions: Soviet Roots and Modern Expression in Nukri Maghalashvili’s Hamlet (2015)”

– Thorsten Gubatz, “I never wish to be easily defined”. Societal transformations of the 20th and 21st centuries as reflected in the contemporary classical music of Romania and Moldova

Moderated by Ulrich Schmid.

18.30–20.30

Dinner

17. September 2025

Departure of participants

Trauma and Its Reflection in Contemporary Eastern European Literature: Autofiction and Autobiographical Writing

Iryna Yakovenko “Traumas of War and Displacement in Autobiographical Writings of Olena Stiazhkina and Stanislav Aseyev”

With the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, war subjects and combat themes have come to the forefront in Ukrainian literature in recent years. The “military” literary turn began with the Russia’s invasion of Donbass in 2014 and was marked by the publication of nonfiction and historical fiction about the occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the Russian Federation and its instigated separatists. The portraiture of the aggression was started in the war novels *The Orphanage* (*Internat/Інтернат*, 2017) by Serhiy Zhadan, *Point Zero* (*Tochka nul’/Точка нуль*, 2017) by Artem Chekh, and since then continued in numerous fictional and factual accounts, ego-documents and war poetry. The paper proposal analyzes autobiographical war prose of Stanislav Aseyev and Olena Stiazhkina, Donbas-born Ukrainian authors, who have been writing chronicles of the invasion since the beginning of the war in 2014. The research addresses the memoirs of imprisonment *The Bright Path: The Story of a Concentration Camp* (*Svitlyi shlyach: istoriya odnogo kontstaboru/Світлий шлях: історія одного концтабору*) and *In Isolation* (*V izolyatsii/В ізоляції*) by Stanislav Aseyev, who spent 28 months in “Izolyatsia”, a secret prison in the occupied Donetsk. I analyze literary narratives of torture and incarceration in the counterplay with the photographic images that supplement the English translation published under the title *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*. Through the lens of trauma studies, I also investigate the book of memoirs *Ukraine, War, Love: A Donetsk Diary* by Olena Stiazhkina, who portrays day-to-day developments of the Donetsk occupation, displacement, and wartime experiences of 2022.

Angel Igov “The Roots/Routes of Autofiction in Today’s Bulgarian Literature”

Autofiction as a genre label has rarely been applied to Bulgarian literature; it is only recently that critics and researchers have taken up this perspective. The paper will explore the relevance of the term and suggest certain directions for further research, discussing the relation between home-grown manifestations (“roots”) of autofiction and direct or indirect “routes” of importing the genre from elsewhere. Either way, the texts on focus have all been published around the turn of the millennium or later: works by Vera Mutaftchieva, Georgi Gospodinov, Kalin Terziyski, Emanuil A. Vidinski etc. While their critical reception and literary status may differ considerably, the paper will demonstrate characteristics connecting all of them to the field of autofiction, trying to outline the specificities of this as yet unacknowledged genre in contemporary Bulgarian literature.

Alexander Meienberger “Embodied Wounds: Illness and Personal Trauma in Contemporary Russophone Autofiction”

The present study explores the representation of personal trauma caused by illness in contemporary Russophone auto-fiction. Turning to the analysis of intimate, corporeal experiences—specifically, the author’s own illness or that of a close loved one—the text moves beyond collective or historical trauma to focus on this central narrative axis. The present study draws on recent autofictional works by authors such as Oksana Vasyakina and Egana Dzhabbarova to examine how illness becomes a site of meaning-making, identity negotiation, and narrative structure. The analysis situates these texts within the broader tradition of testimonial and confessional writing, while attending to the specificity of the post-Soviet cultural context, where illness is often entangled with questions of visibility, gender, memory, and care. A close reading of narrative voice, temporality, and metaphorical language reveals how personal suffering—frequently silenced or medicalized—is reclaimed through literary form as an act of resistance, mourning, and self-definition. The paper’s central argument is that Russophone autofiction offers a distinctive perspective on the intersection of the medical and the literary, emphasizing the intricate ways in which bodily vulnerability influences narrative, subjectivity, and authorship in the contemporary Slavic literary landscape.

Art Panel: A Day of Conversations & Screenings

Lexi Fleurs “Mafia Baroque in Paradise”

“Mafia Baroque in Paradise” explores the visual language of post-communist oligarchic aspiration through the lens of a kitsch, excessive aesthetic known as mafia baroque. This presentation examines how fake Renaissance castles, gold-sprayed plastic ornaments, and bombastic architecture reflect a culture obsessed with status and fantasy—a desperate attempt to mimic Western grandeur without historical or cultural roots. Focusing on Sunny Beach, Bulgaria, as the epitome of this phenomenon, the talk presents a critical visual analysis of structures that aim to impress but ultimately lack authenticity or meaning. These spaces, adorned with cheap replicas and hollow symbolism, serve as mirrors of socio-economic transformation, insecurity, and identity crisis in post-communist societies. Through a curated selection of images and architectural critique, the presentation reveals how mafia baroque embodies the paradox of paradise built on illusion.

Neda Genova “Politics of Surfaces”

What does it mean to examine post-communist politics through the prism of the material and semiotic transformations and modifications of surfaces? A rethinking of surfaces as dynamic and complex sites opens a path for a detailed study of their crucial role in the governing of post-communist urban space—but also of the forms of subversion that can be discerned through interventions on and with surfaces. In this talk, I will share some of the research that went into my monograph, *Politics of Surfaces* (Goldsmiths Press, 2025), which explores a set of surfaces in Sofia: Wall, Monument, Electricity Boxes, Memes, and Paving Brick. In doing so, I am interested in not only demonstrating the stakes of their politicised understanding as complex spatio-temporal objects, but also in rethinking of some of the presumptions about the post-communist condition such as its apolitical character

Nikolay Karabinovich “The Last Artwork About The War”

Karabinovich presents an audacious cinematic statement with his latest work, boldly claiming it to be the final artistic commentary on war. The film adopts an unconventional narrative framework, unfolding within the intimate confines of a psychoanalytic therapy session.

The protagonist, a lost soul seeking answers, becomes the reluctant patient whose dreams center on therapeutic completion and personal liberation—metaphors that mirror Ukraine's struggle for freedom from occupying forces in this seemingly endless conflict. The therapeutic dialogue gradually transforms into absurdist theater reminiscent of modernist dramatic traditions.

Through their exchanges, the therapist and patient weave together personal trauma, historical memory, and political reality, creating ambiguous visions of victory and liberation that remain tantalizingly out of reach. The film questions the very nature of triumph itself.

The word “victory” carries multiple meanings—from Soviet automobiles and naval vessels to airlines, abandoned villages, geographic locations, Antarctic research stations, and consumer products—suggesting that victory's definition remains as complex and elusive as the liberation both the protagonist and country desperately seek.

Post-imperial Literatures in the Black Sea Area

Nadezhda Alexandrova “Ivan Vazov’s Recollections from the Ottoman Past – Istanbul, Bucharest and Odessa between personal memories and collective imaginary”

Beside his innovations in the realm of Bulgarian poetry and prose in the late 19th c., the acclaimed Bulgarian intellectual Ivan Vazov (1850–1921) was also known as a traveller and admirer of nature. His collection of travelogues includes reminiscences of his visits to Istanbul, Bucharest, and Odessa. When traveling to these cities in the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c., he usually recalls past events from Ottoman time. Ivan Vazov becomes sentimental when sharing his memories of his first visits to the cities. His recollections of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul are combined with a certain orientalist perspective towards the city. His observations of the Bucharest survey critically the urbanization process of the Romanian capital. Odessa, in turn, provides the creative environment for the birth of the first Bulgarian novel “Under the Yoke”. On the whole, my presentation aims to explore Ivan Vazov’s insights on the transformation of the image of Istanbul, Bucharest and Odessa from a post-imperial and nationalist perspective.

Ahmed Nuri “Black Sea as Collective Memory and Literary Imagination in the Politico-Cultural Networks and Writings of Turkish Communists”

This paper explores the multifaceted role of the Black Sea as both a site of collective memory and a space of literary imagination within the politico-cultural networks and writings of Turkish communists from the 1920s to the 1960s. Beginning with the legacy of Mustafa Suphi—whose 1921 assassination in the Black Sea became a foundational trauma for the Turkish left—the analysis traces how writers such as Nazım Hikmet, Vâlâ Nureddin, Sabahattin Ali, and Fahri Erdinç variably represented the Black Sea as a metaphor of exile, struggle, and revolutionary longing. These authors, historically embedded in communist networks across the Black Sea region—from Batumi, Trabzon, and Sinop to Constanta, Varna, and Sochi—articulated diverse literary imaginaries of the region that reflect both personal and ideological experiences shaped by imprisonment, exile, and

socialist internationalist affiliations. Drawing on memory studies, literary criticism, and the sociopolitical history of the Cold War, this paper examines how the Black Sea emerges not only as a symbolic and literary geography but also as a transnational site of leftist solidarity, and loss in the Turkish context. Ultimately, it situates the Black Sea as a fluid, politicized archive in Turkish communist writing—a contested space where ideology, memory, and literature converge.

Petar Dobrev “Black Sea Pirates in Bulgarian Historical and Literary Memory”

Albeit barely researched in Bulgarian historiography, the phenomenon of piracy was anything but unknown in the Ottoman Empire, and its manifestations on the Adriatic coast have attracted considerable attention. My paper shifts the perspective in that it will collect and analyse information on piracy along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, and present its subsequent representation in Bulgarian historical and literary memory. To what extent were the Bulgarians involved in such practices, and to what extent can piracy be distinguished from brigandage or attributed to some type of revolutionary activity? Were there personalities and events that remained for a long time in public memory? Did they fit into the prevailing heroic narrative of revolutionary struggles? Does the theme of piracy, as presented in the Bulgarian literary tradition, correspond in any way to historical reality? To answer all these questions, I will use sources from Bulgarian ethnography, folklore, memoirs and literature.

Roundtable: Literature in the Black Sea Area—Relations and Translations

Liliana Corobca: During a literary residency in Austria, I participated in a ‘Danube Festival’, on which occasion I realised that the Republic of Moldova is one in the chain of countries with access to the Danube (and implicitly, to the Black Sea area). I then discovered that two neighbouring countries, Bulgaria and Romania, share the longest border on the Danube, have over 400 km in common, but are united by only two bridges (there was one so far). For comparison, the city of Budapest alone has 9 bridges over the Danube. Can culture, in such situations, build symbolic bridges between countries, generations, civilizations? Of course, for smaller countries, especially, but not only, literature becomes an act of cultural diplomacy. Book reviews, launches, discussions, festivals and meetings with foreign audiences becomes a source to familiarise readers with the country you come from, with all kinds of general or specific aspects. Literature also has the merit and possibility of bringing into international discussion uncomfortable, avoided subjects (such as censorship), forgotten (such as the deportations of populations after World War II) or subjects approached from a less common perspective (the phenomenon of migration is frequently approached in literature, but the perspective of children is a lesser-known aspect, usually surprising for countries flooded with migrants). In my presentation, I would like to make brief references to *Kinderland* (the most translated book I’ve written), *The Censor’s Notebook* (Winner of the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize 2023), and *Too Great A Sky* (EBRD Literature Prize 2025 shortlist).

Tamta Melashvili: The Black Sea area is defined more by its turbulent past and complex geopolitical present rather than by its rich but often mutually obscured cultural landscapes. Historically a marginal sea surrounded by empires and later post-communist nation-states, the Black Sea region remains a space of limited literary interaction, where writers and literatures from the neighboring shores rarely engage in a dialogue with each other. My presentation will explore how regional literatures and translations have the potential to serve as both cultural mediators and tools for imagining the Black Sea as a cultural area. For this, I will analyze the current regional literary and translation connections and

discuss already existing initiatives and engagements, like NEC Tandem Fellowship (since 2022) and Geschichten vom Schwarzen Meer – Black Sea Lit project of Goethe Institute (2023, 2024). I will do this from the perspective of a Georgian writer; I will briefly overview the local literary scene focusing on translations—what is being translated from the region; analyze how translational gaps mirror broader geopolitical disconnections; and suggest how these gaps can be filled through festivals, residencies or collaborative art projects so that regional connectivity, horizontal relationships and diversity of the voices are prioritized and shared historical and current experiences are emphasized. The central question will be: In a region shaped by fragmentations, how can literature and translations not only transfer texts, but help imagine the Black Sea as a shared cultural space?

Svetlozar Zhelev: Fifteen—or even ten—years ago, the idea that a Bulgarian author could win the International Booker Prize would have seemed unimaginable, especially given how rare it was to see Bulgarian books published in English. Thanks largely to the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, which facilitated creative writing seminars and fostered connections with the international literary world, Bulgarian literature gradually gained visibility, culminating in the success of Georgi Gospodinov and Angela Rodel with *Time Shelter*—a true “black swan” event: unpredictable, impactful, and, in hindsight, the result of persistent effort. Despite progress, literature from Black Sea countries remains underrepresented across the region, with few translations and limited mutual recognition among neighboring nations. The launch of the Black Sea International Literary Festival in Burgas, which brings together authors, publishers, and translators from across the region, marks a hopeful step toward greater literary exchange. The ongoing popularization of national literatures requires the combined efforts of individuals, institutions, and NGOs—but with steady work, a richer and more empathetic literary landscape in the Black Sea region is within reach.

What about Music? Does Music Tell Us Something about Society?

Alexander Jakobidze-Gitman “Revaz Gabichvadze’s *Hamlet* and the Politics of Style: Between Moscow Endorsement and Local Opposition”

Georgian composer Revaz Gabichvadze (1913–1999) composed the music for the ballet *Hamlet* at the commission of renowned dancer and choreographer Vakhtang Chabukiani (1910–1992). The 1960s witnessed a surge of interest in *Hamlet* across Soviet theater, reflecting a growing fascination among the public and intelligentsia. Amid this wave, Gabichvadze and Chabukiani’s *Hamlet* (1971) stood out as a notable success, with productions staged not only in Tbilisi but also in Moscow and Rostock (East Germany). This paper explores how the music for *Hamlet* reflects broader efforts of Georgian composers to transcend the ideological confines of socialist realism and the symbolic ethnicity imposed since the Stalin era. Juxtaposing fragments of Gabichvadze’s score with both the mainstream music of Soviet Georgia and Dmitry Shostakovich’s score for a film adaptation of *Hamlet*, I will show how the composer seeks an aesthetic alternative to two dominant traditions: the pathos-driven dramatism focused on psychological portraiture, and tone painting aimed at evoking exotic environments—whether a distant past or a foreign culture. The paper also addresses a paradox: while Gabichvadze’s compositional style was endorsed by the Moscow leadership of the Union of Soviet Composers, it provoked sharp antagonism within the Georgian compositional establishment.

Anastasia Nabokina “Tracing Choreographic Traditions: Soviet Roots and Modern Expression in Nukri Maghalashvili’s *Hamlet* (2015)”

This paper uses the example of the ballet *Hamlet* (2015), produced by the Georgian choreographer Nukri Maghalashvili at the State Opera House of Mersin in Turkey and featuring the original music of Revaz Gabichvadze (1971), to explore the genealogy of ballet traditions from the Soviet era to contemporary forms of international artistic collaboration. This production is particularly notable for its use of choreo-

graphic tools originally developed for plotless ballet to convey a theatrical drama based on a complex and tight plot development. While Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* centers on psychological conflict between individual characters, Maghalashvili’s choreographic interpretation deliberately distances itself from individual expression. Instead, it draws on the aesthetics of collective movement and the tradition of mass dance. The analysis of Maghalashvili’s choreographic techniques will be accompanied by a historical overview of Soviet and Georgian ballet, providing broader cultural and stylistic context for this distinct production.

Thorsten Gubatz “I never wish to be easily defined”. Societal transformations of the 20th and 21st centuries as reflected in the contemporary classical music of Romania and Moldova

Human beings exist in an interplay of freedom and determination. Hence, developing a stable identity that, as any sound identity, is always engaged in interplay with other identities, is not an easy thing, neither for individuals nor for collectives. How do members of a nation develop their respective national identity? How do artists develop their individual or collective styles, and how may they interplay or not with phenomena of national identity? – In this presentation I will take a look at several lives and works of composers on both sides of the river Prut—that is, in Romania and Moldova—, before and after 1990. This will reveal a landscape of split and multiple identities, of split and multiple artistic styles—a complex of stories of success and frustration, of fragmentation and recombination, of eclecticism and the quest for the essential.

Participants

Nadezhda Alexandrova is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Slavic Studies at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria. Her interests are focused on Ottoman and Balkan literature and culture from the 18th and the 19th c., on history of emotions, women’s history and reception studies. She has published two monographies—the first of “the woman question” in Bulgarian periodicals of the 19th c., and the second of the novels about janissaries, spread during the Tanzimat in different languages across the Ottoman empire. Lately her research is devoted to the Christian-Muslim relations in the late 18th and the beginning of the 19th c. in Central and Eastern Europe. She is the vice-president of The Bulgarian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, and an associate member of the Center of Advanced Studies in Sofia, Bulgaria. She is also at the editorial board of several publishing series—“Women Writers in History” at BRILL, “Studies on Philosophy, Intellectual History, Arts, Sciences” at BREPOLs and the Serbian journal “Knjiženstvo”.

Katharina Biegger completed her studies of philology, education, and folklore at Zurich University with a dissertation on the early-modern polymath Theophrastus Paracelsus. She has working experience as a university assistant, translator and academic administrator. For many years, she was involved in the management of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin - Institute for Advanced Study. Since 1994, she has been collaborating with (mostly South) Eastern European colleagues in diverse projects and programs, but especially with the New Europe College in Bucharest and the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia. Recently, she has also been connected to the Viadrina Center for Polish and Ukrainian Studies.

Liliana Corobca is a Moldovan-Romanian writer and scholar. After studies at the Moldova State University and the University of Bucharest, she received her PhD in philology (2001). She holds the position of expert researcher at the “Institute for Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile” in Bucharest, and has published in various academic formats, particularly on censorship. With her novels she has earned international acclaim; her books have been translated into German, Italian, Serbian, Slovenian, and English, and she was invited to writer’s residencies in Germany, Austria, France, and Poland.

Petar Dobrev was born in Varna in 1985. In 2013 he received a MA in History at the Faculty of History, Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski”. In 2016 he became an Assistant Professor of Contemporary Balkan history at the Department of History of Byzantium and the Balkans at the Faculty of History, Sofia University. In 2019 he received his PhD with the dissertation: “The Holevich Family—Agrarian Capitalists in the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria and Romania (19–20th c.)”. His research interests include the social history of the Balkans, agrarian history, history of Dobrudja and the history of the leftist movements in the Balkans.

Lexi Fleurs is a contemporary artist working in film, painting, performance. Her practice is mainly research based. Lexi’s works are part of the collection of MAMCO Geneva and International House New York. She holds an MFA from SVA NYC with a Fulbright scholarship and a BFA from HEAD Geneva. Lexi Fleurs works as a freelance war documentalist and has been documenting the war in Ukraine (mainly Donbas) for the past one year.

Neda Genova is Lecturer in Digital Media in the department of Film Studies, University of Southampton. She’s interested in opening spaces for collaborative, experimental publishing practices that traverse disciplinary boundaries in art, activism, and academia. Her research is situated at the intersection of cultural, media, and post-socialist studies, and has been published in journals such as *Time & Society*, *New Formations*, *European Review*, and others. She is the editor of ‘Post-Communist Grounds. In Search of the Commons’ (Institute of Network Cultures, 2025)—a collection of interventions seeking to explore and activate practices of commoning in post-communism in a range of genres and media forms, with a specific interest in developing experimental aesthetic practices. Neda is a member of the editorial collective for Bulgarian-language journal *dVERSIA*, which publishes critical Left analyses of contemporary politics, society, and culture.

Thorsten Gubatz studied philosophy, German literature and Roman Catholic theology in Constance, Pittsburgh, Freiburg im Breisgau and Münster. In Freiburg he earned his philosophical doctorate on "Heidegger, Gadamer, and the Turin School" (published in 2009), in Münster he earned his theological doctorate with a thesis on composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann as a religious artist (forthcoming). From 2008 to 2016, he lived in monasteries, first as a Cistercian, then as a Benedictine brother. So far he has published three books and many essays, reviews and encyclopedia articles on philosophical, theological, and artistic subjects. He plays the clarinet, being the dedicatee of several compositions, and since 2023 his own compositions have been performed at international festivals of new music in Moldova, Romania and across Europe. Gubatz is an honorary member of the UCMM (Union of Composers and Musicologists of Moldova). He maintains a YouTube channel where he presents mainly contemporary music, especially from Romania and Moldova (www.youtube.com/@Tetsugakusha75).

Angel Igov is the author of three novels, *Particulate Matter* (2017), *The Meek* (2015) and *A Short Tale of Shame* (2011), two collections of short stories, *Encounters on the Road* (2002) and *K.* (2006), and the academic study *Flags and Keys: Poetics of the Epigraph* (2022). *The Meek* was nominated for seven national fiction prizes in Bulgaria and won one of them, the Hristo G. Danov award. Its translation into German by Andreas Tretner was nominated for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize and shared the International Literary Award of the House of World Cultures in Berlin (2020). *Particulate Matter* was nominated in the Novel of the Year competition. Igov teaches English literature and translation at Sofia University. He used to be a literary observer for a number of print and electronic media. He translates prose and poetry from English. He was awarded the Krustan Dyankov Grand Prize for Translation in 2016 for his translation of *The Collector of Lost Things* by Jeremy Page. In 2018, he won the Special Prize from the same competition for his translation of *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. Igov was a visiting researcher at the University of California Berkeley on a Fulbright grant in 2011; in 2022 he was among the resident writers of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. In 2023 he was a Landis & Gyr Foundation Fellow at the literary residency in Zug, Switzerland, where he worked on translating selected poems by Seamus Heaney.

Alexander Jakobidze-Gitman has been a research fellow at the University of Witten/Herdecke since 2013. His articles have appeared (or are forthcoming) in journals such as *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, *History of Education*, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, *Configurations* and *Journal for Interdisciplinary Music Studies*. He is the author of the monograph *"Rising Phantasms: The Stalin Era in the Post-Soviet Cinema"* (2015). His current research interests are musical thought in early modern Western Europe and musical discourse in the Cold War Eastern Europe. An accomplished pianist, he is also giving lecture-recitals on topics such as "Why Vladimir Lenin was always Happy to Listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata*" or "Music in late Stalinism". Jakobidze-Gitman is a member of the Society for Interdisciplinary Musicology and the Gesellschaft für Musikforschung (GfM). In 2017, he became a research fellow at the University of Sheffield.

Nikolay Karabinovych works across various media such as video installation, performance, sound, and sculpture. In his artistic practice, Karabinovych addresses complex social (hi)stories, particularly those from the expanses of "Eastern Europe" combining them with personal family narratives. In his work, which questions notions of identity, belonging and exclusion, the artist often refers to music, which plays an important role in his practice. He revisits epochal songs, genres and personalities and uses their ability to illuminate a different era in a different climate or socio-political arena. In 2020 he graduated from the Higher Institute for Fine Arts (HISK) in Ghent. Karabinovych was an assistant curator of the 5th Odessa Biennale. In 2022, 2020 and 2018, he was awarded the first PinchukArt-Centre Prize.

Alexander Meienberger is a researcher specializing in Eastern European literature from the nineteenth century to the present, with a focus on contemporary Russian and Russophone literature. He is a postdoctoral scholar at the University of St. Gallen and the Executive Director of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe. His research examines cultural identity, historical and social influences on literary expression, and the intersection of literature, medicine, and the humanities. He explores contemporary narratives of illness, health, and the body, analyzing how modern authors engage with trauma, care, and medical discourse within broader socio-political contexts.

Tamta Melashvili is a writer, based in Tbilisi, Georgia. She is known for her sharp exploration of gender, power relations and social struggles. Her writing has earned some of the major awards including Georgian Saba Prize and German Youth Literature Prize and has been translated into multiple languages. Her last novel *Blackbird Blackbird Blackberry* was adapted into a feature film, premiered in Cannes Festival in 2023. Beyond literature, Melashvili has been active in academia and social activism, with a background in gender studies and strong commitment to women's rights.

Diana Mishkova has specialized in modern and contemporary history of Southeastern Europe. Having taught at the History Department of Sofia University and a number of European and US universities, since 2000 she has been the director of the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia. Her areas of research and publications include modern and contemporary history of Southeastern Europe, history of nationalism, national identities and identity politics in Southeastern Europe, modernization of the European peripheries 19th – 20th centuries, history of historiography, intellectual history, conceptual history.

Anastasia Nabokina – researcher and academic teacher at the Anthropology of Literature and Cultural Studies Department at the Faculty of Polish Studies, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland. In 1996–2010 principal dancer at the Teatr Wielki—Polish National Opera in Warsaw. Author of the book *The Desire to Dance. The Art of Movement in the culture of the Russian Silver Age and its Psycho-analytic Contexts*, Warsaw 2023. Head of two research projects Polish National Science Centre, the scholarship holder of the Minister of Education and Science of Poland. In 2025, the holder of the scholarship of the Heinrich Hertz-Stiftung at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum.

Ahmed Nuri was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia (CAS) from 2024 to 2025, where he explored Turkish literary and print culture in communist Bulgaria (1944–1969) through extensive archival research. He earned his PhD in Literary Studies from the University of Amsterdam in 2024, with a dissertation on modernity, the tragic, and parody in 20th-century Turkish fiction. He also holds an MA in European Studies from Lund University, Sweden. His research interests include exile literature, Cold War studies, non-Western novel theory, world literature, and cultural encounters between Turkey and Scandinavia. In addition, Ahmed Nuri has worked as a freelance editor, specializing in coffee table art books and, more recently, academic publications focused on literature translated into Turkish.

Olga Nyagolova is the office manager at the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia and the local coordinator of the event. Although her formal education is in the arts, she is now working in the NGO sector with a focus on the humanities and social sciences.

Ulrich Schmid is Professor of Eastern European Studies at the University of St Gallen in Switzerland. Prior to his current position, he held academic positions at the Ruhr University Bochum, the Institute for Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Bern, and the Slavic Seminar at the University of Basel. He has also been a guest researcher at the University of Oslo and a visiting fellow at Harvard University's Slavic Department. His research interests span a wide range of topics, including politics and media in Russia and Eastern Europe, and Eastern European literature and culture.

Iryna Yakovenko is Associate Professor at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Ukraine, and a Fellow of Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship at New Europe College, Bucharest, Romania. Since she received her doctorate in 2004 from Kyiv National Linguistic University, Iryna Yakovenko has been teaching courses on world literature, the history of American literature, and critical readings of contemporary anglophone prose. Yakovenko's research interests encompass American ethnic literatures, Ukrainian diaspora studies, and ecocriticism. Her publications explore African American women's poetry and the Black Arts Movement, ecofeminist writings, and anglophone prose of Ukrainian American and Ukrainian Canadian writers. Previous research fellowships include the 2014 Study of the United States Institute on Contemporary American Literature (University of Louisville, USA) and research grants from the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Free University Berlin, Germany (2018, 2022, 2023).

Svetlozar Zhelev is the director of the Bulgarian National Book Center at the National Palace of Culture, and an expert in the Bulgarian literary field. As a former publisher, TV and radio host, he was a board member of the Bulgarian Book Association from 2006 to 2010, and president of the jury for the "Translations" program of the National Culture Fund from 2018 to 2020. In June 2024, he organised the first Black Sea International Literary Festival in Burgas, with authors, translators, editors and literary agents from Türkiye, Georgia, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria.



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