Bulgarian Society at the Turn of the 21st Century – a Cognitive Challenge

30 Years after the Collapse of Communism

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Abstract

The goal of this introduction is to outline the general thematic and interpretative scene wherein the next eight authors will elaborate in greater depth on more concrete issues. That is why this text mostly aims to review and rethink the achievements and problems of the local understanding of Bulgarian society in the last decades.

Keywords

Bulgaria – social sciences – transition – Europeanization

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Today (the autumn of 2006), the comparison with Europe is reaching a point of paroxysm that reveals in particularly stark contrast both the chasms and myths accumulated in the past, and the long forward perspective.

AVRAMOV, 2007, 3:427

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1 Bulgarian Society: an Elusive Object of Study

1.1 *The Integrality of Society as an Epistemological Problem*

Having emerged in dialogue with the European tradition, Bulgarian social science has all too easily taken for granted that society is “out there at hand”. There are several reasons why this assumption cannot be accepted with certainty.

First, in the course of approximately half a century, we were building “the Socialist society” in direct competition with the “capitalist societies”; in the 1970s and 80s we were even referring to a “developed Socialist society”. The historical task of social engineering inevitably implies an integral object of construction and the reification of the ideological construct of “society”. At no time during the building process, however, was there any clear “blueprint” of this society (beyond the schematic outline of Party ideology with regard to industrialization, class structure, and the creation of Communist man – notions that are being reproduced to this day as structural topics of monographic collections about “Bulgarian society”). What society really is, and how it functions in our country, was not problematized by native sociology (despite the arm-chair speculations of members of the “Bulgarian school of sociology”, such as Zh. Oshavkov, St. Mihaylov, or V. Dobriyanov, who conjured up variants of “the sociological structure of society”). This omission was inevitable, for the conceptual and methodological superiority of historical materialism, the vulgar Marxist philosophy of history, was not to be put in doubt. It was assumed that historical materialism had already clarified these questions, and its clear answers must serve as starting points for the narrowly specialized competencies of sociological – preferably empirical quantitative – studies on separate questions, including the question of the “sociological structure of society” (Koleva 2018).

Second, our doctrinaire sociology borrowed its notion of society from Marx: he had achieved a dialectical conceptual representation of social life that was of an unsurpassed systematic character, for his time. Yet, he did so on the basis of the Hegelian premise that “only the whole has an essence”, and not as a result of any kind of empirical study of the concrete system of society, which historical materialism, otherwise, asserted declaratively. On the other hand, in the middle of the 19th century, social science had just established that society differed from the state, and it had yet to find out what society exactly was (Small 1905). This means that when Marx was thinking integrally about capitalist society, seeing it in the perspective of its historical self-negation through Communist revolution, he was witnessing too early a phase of the development of Modernity. That phase was primarily evolving within easily

recognizable national frameworks, and the complex internal differentiation of public activities was at an incipient stage. For instance, Marx saw the state as practically overlapping with the apparatus for maintenance of class domination (with nothing left outside). It was only in the second half of the 20th century that Habermas made civil society a distinctive object of study; still later, for Toffler, the “information sphere” would prove to be a system equal in importance to the “technosphere” (which includes production and distribution).

Hence, it is not surprising that even Ulrich Beck, an author who clearly aspires to sociological reflection, in building his concept of modern risk (arising from the combination of globalization with processes of uncognizable character), views society in a very uncommitted way as an arbitrary amalgam of all human relations within the provisional “space” between technology and nature (Beck 1998).¹ Let us not forget that Talcott Parsons, the firmest proponent of the detailed idea of society as a system, based his typology of the elements of social life upon empirical observations of his students’ individual activities, “proving” the system by functional homologies between those “elements” (Parsons 1970).

In brief, the concept of “society” does not have a universally accepted meaning; and even less is society universally assumed to be a systematic, sustainable whole – and, moreover, a whole with a recognizable identity within national boundaries.²

Today, freed of the need to “build society”, we are no longer hampered by an ideological canon. Hence, we can study the hypothesis of national society as an integral subject matter without taking it as a preliminary certainty. National social entities can be distinguished precisely in terms of the *characteristic structural connections and correlations between distinct processes maintained in a sustainable variety of patterns, despite the high degree of amorphousness and heterogeneousness of social life*.

This general epistemological question is particularly important for social sciences in Southeastern Europe, for whom it should be a priority to strive to understand and explain local social reality since, unlike in Scandinavian countries, which are predominantly typologically similar, in Balkan countries the

1 We come across cases of pretense to high critical sociological reflexivity also combined with a carefree attitude to society locally (Kabakchieva 2016).

2 In 1993, the newly created European Union declared its notorious Copenhagen criteria for membership, upon which its enlargement policy is based. It is worth noting that the criteria were formulated in such a way – conceptually and linguistically – that they expressed a view of society as an arbitrary *mixture* of political, economic, and legal considerations (Maresceau 1997). A policy based on such sloppy premises inevitably leads to the results we experience a quarter of a century later.

typological diversity prevails. This importance stems from the circumstance that Modernity, generally, tends to be universal: throughout the world, it simultaneously brings commercialization, urbanization, personalization, rationality, etc. (if we remain within the narrow frame of the classical liberal version of Modernity subscribed to by authors like David Apter or Peter Berger).³ By contrast, the belated, and hence very hybrid, forms of modernization⁴ typical for the countries in this region are rather different from one another, as are their current outcomes. Hence, it is the task of social science to identify the number and kinds of processes that – by their mutual interactions – define the recognizable character of enduring national situations.

1.2 *The Specific Lack of Social-scientific Knowledge: Fragmented Understanding about Bulgarian Society*

There are professional communities of social researchers in Bulgaria – economists, political scientists, sociologists, historians, etc. But there is no noticeable corpus of worthwhile professional research: the results offered to us are predominantly from small-scale studies that are often based on very vulnerable methodology, or studies proceeding directly from “common sense”. They either depict facts or use facts in order to share momentary moods or intellectual fads. Society may figure in the titles of such works, which are most often collections of papers, but it is not their object of study (Fotev 2009; [a team of authors from] the Open Society Foundation 2008; Topalova 2008; Mantarova 2006; Znepolski et al. 2009; Daskalov 2005, and many others). The reverse side of the problem is that social reality in this country is seen as undergoing all sorts of disintegrations: structural, institutional, political,

3 Modernity is a key perspective for understanding the history and present of Southeast European societies. Despite the overabundant publications on the topic of Modernity, the concept remains poorly understood. Modernity is the quality of a specific pattern of public life that engenders escalating social change and sustained and accelerated development. Hence, it is a capital misunderstanding to reduce Modernity to a set of *separate* social characteristics or a number of phenomena. In fact, it is a distinctive type of social order that engenders perpetual development through every one of its elements *simultaneously*, but *also* through the contradictions between, and within, those elements. This is exactly why the *interactions* among free market, liberal democracy, rule of law, civil society, and personalism (implying a culture of rights and freedoms and rational responsibility), which are specific to classical European Modernity, are crucially essential. We think about “national modern societies” not because they have evolved mainly within territorial borders, but because the specificities of the general pattern of these interactions of Modernity are always a product of peculiar national configurations with local historical roots. Hence, the more immature the national Modernity, the more important the historical diversity.

4 Modernization is the reform policy, usually, but not exclusively, state-led, aiming at making the local society capable of sustained Modernity.

demographic, and axiological.⁵ This impressive absence of contemporary Bulgarian society as an integral object in social-scientific literature merits special attention.

The fact that “society” figures in the title but not in the content of such works is due, first of all, to the paradoxical academic positioning of the social and human sciences. After decades of a state policy of marginalization of science and university education – most strongly felt in the social sciences – social research in our country understandably proves to be heavily dependent on the narrow thematic and policy priorities (for instance, the problems of Roma integration, educational reform, gender and social inequality, etc.) of foreign grant-awarding institutions (Deyanova 2000; Laverne 2010).⁶ However, a much graver form of dependence for research is the dependence on imported interpretative conceptions⁷ that follow transient fads.

Because of this fragmentation of the scope and parochial perspective of much of the research, works in the field of history appear as a welcome alternative due to their provisionally integrating narrative (Znepolski et al. 2009; Kalinova and Baeva 2011; Dimitrov 2001; Daskalov 1998). But the cleavage is

5 See, for instance, Hristov 2016, 2012, and the article by Slavov and Spasov in the thematic issue of the journal *Sociological Problems* devoted to the decade of our membership in the EU (2017), as well as Dimitrov 2009. Standing out as an oddity against this backdrop is the sketch on the general meaning of the course of events (collectively authored by Association for Social Investigations and Applied Research Practices) which represented an intellectual response to the fundamental crisis of local democratization (Dimitrov, G. 2001): the most successful government of the transition fell in 2001 under the pressure of unfulfilled expectations. Those disappointed found a new messiah in the person of the former tsar, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

6 The fact that social research is subdued to grant priorities is not a Bulgarian particularity: the situation has been typical for the social sciences in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of Communism (Avramov 2007).

7 The key shortcomings prevailing in local sociological literature – descriptiveness, direct importation of foreign conceptual schemes, partisan bias, and the dependence of interpretations on momentary moods or public scandals – are even more vividly present in political studies. Importantly, the cacophonous and amorphous nature of the very object of study is the cause for the persistence of these shortcomings and their greater prominence in Bulgarian political science. What Avramov says about the state of economic science is largely true for the whole field of social and human sciences: “Transition expert knowledge was gradually fragmented, privatized and politicized. Some of the new institutions (NGO, think tanks) have a potential to perform serious research, but the dominant trend transforms most of them into political mediators and/or ‘indoctrination devices’. They are typically producing ‘soft (minor) science’ of dubious quality, competing for networking rent and existing at the edge of consultancy business. As most of the projects are foreign financed, demand creates imported discourses and agenda.” (Avramov 2003: 33).

generally the same among historians, as well⁸ – they produce either catalogues of social fragments (Daskalov 2005) or in-depth monographic studies on the historical development of certain problems (there is a masterly combination of attention to detail and conceptual integrality in Elenkov [2004, 2008, 2013]), while they show, also, high professionalism in constructive dialogue with modern foreign achievements (Mishkova 2001; Gruev 2009), which brings them close to the best Bulgarian sociologists (especially the studies, exemplary in depth and detail, by Boyadjieva 2012; Ganev 2007, and also, to a high degree, Chalakov 2008; Kabakchieva 2001, etc.).

Standing lonely against this backdrop are two very important exceptions: the three-volume works by Ivan Hadjiyski and Rumen Avramov. The ground-breaking work of Hadjiyski, created in the late 1930s, remains unsurpassed in the depth, complexity, and originality of its conception. It traces the socio-historical emergence of modern Bulgaria, the detachment of which from a *supra*-regional market (after the Russian-Turkish War of 1877–78) brought about an imitative political life that was subordinated to moral-psychological constructs from the everyday world of most Bulgarians.⁹ In other words, what seemed like local caricatures – of both democracy and high culture – was in fact an expression of the very logic of the specific Modernity the young state was building in our country.¹⁰

Avramov's study is a monumental continuation of the same tradition. But as its emphasis is on later forms of social life in our country, it deals mainly with economic practices, with their pre-modern grounds, permanent crises, dependence on wide-scale corrupt processes, and constant external pressure towards reforms that provokes a diffused local resistance. The analysis displays and explains the persistent social and economic incapacity to reach a phase of

8 The studies quoted here are rare exceptions to the rule in historiography in our country. The rule is that "questions of theory and method are not of concern to contemporary Bulgarian historians. Not a single article on these issues has been published in scholarly periodicals during the 1990s. In addition, the principles of the professional canon, established at the end of the 1960s, have remained intact: the pursuit of objective historical truth with methods and means of historiographic research conforming to academic standards." (Elenkov and Koleva 2003: 184). An attempted frontal attack against this canon (Mishkova 2006) was met with complete silence by historians but with an invitation to dialogue by sociologists (Sociological Problems 2008, issue 1–2).

9 We should recall that, much later in the 20th century, the world public appreciated the novelty of Lucian Pye's research, which showed that Chinese politics is subject to local culture, and in even less developed countries (like Burma), the political process depends decisively on psychological preconditions.

10 See the broader and more detailed picture of the same processes everywhere in the Balkans in Daskalov and Mishkova 2013.

self-sustained growth. Avramov discusses the *long-durée* of Bulgarian quasi-economic history in terms of a sustained model of ever-recurring drama in the pursuit of reform under international pressure, a drama played out by actors and with resources (institutional instruments and cultural standards) provided by a local civilization¹¹ that is quite different from the West European ideal type of Modernity.

In this sense, it would be a demonstration of intellectual laziness to assume that there *is* a society in Bulgaria, but that its scientific interpretation only suffers from a lack of integral understanding.

2 The (Im)possibility of a Modern Bulgarian Society

2.1 *The Decomposing Chitin Shell of the Party-state*

A number of in-depth historical studies have convincingly shown that the process of etatization of public life in Bulgaria began as early as the 1930s, while the half century of Communism after that only radicalized the already existing tendency.¹² In the Central European countries, the construction of a Communist society represented an external interruption and deviation from the historical course of modernization that had begun in the old Habsburg Empire; by contrast, prior to Communism, there had been a kind of proto-Modernity, only, in our country (Hadjiyski, Avramov 2007, Elenkov 1998, 2013 Strashimirova 1992). Thus, the breakdown of the Communist experiment did not open an opportunity to revive a past modern society in Bulgaria. That is the main reason why, according to international comparative studies, Bulgaria continues to be the most centralized and etatized of all Central and East European countries. But the problem is that the Communist Party-state was in principle dependent precisely on the ubiquitous merging of the institutional apparatus with the Party, which at the same time leaned on its repressive organs (Vezenkov; Metodiev, in Znepolski et al. 2008). After the osmosis between the Party (which ruled by virtue of the Constitution) and the repressive state apparatus was cut off, the country was left with a state that was an enormous shareholder

11 Throughout the article, I adhere to the understanding of civilization and culture found in Norbert Elias's classical analysis (1994).

12 "Around the middle of the 1940s, Bulgaria was to a great degree economically and intellectually "pregnant with socialism [...]" (Avramov 2007, T.3 : 432). This view was elaborated earlier in *The Economic 20th Century of Bulgaria* (Avramov 2001) and became the basic message of the three-volume *Communal Capitalism*. The same general conclusion appears in studies on the cultural and institutional processes of this period (Elenkov 2013, 1998, cf. also, Vezenkov 2014).

in social life.¹³ However, once this state was deprived of the instruments with which to conduct effective policies, it became helpless, and was prone to facilitate the plunder of society by people from the former repressive and Party apparatus (Ganev 2007; Chalakov et al. 2008; Stanchev et al. 2004; Minchev 2015).

Under these conditions, representative democracy, which is normally a political instrument for the self-regulation of modern societies, cannot be authentic and productive (Krasteva and Todorov in this volume), because it is essentially not made to *create* that which is to be governed.¹⁴ Without a mechanism of responsible governance the tendencies of social decay begin to prevail.¹⁵ Most symptomatically, the article on contemporary political life in Bulgaria in this volume is titled “From Post-Communism to Post-Democracy” (Krasteva and Todorov). The formal plurality of political agents does not constitute an authentic democracy – lacking long term policy contents, party politics only appear as dominating social developments: political processes are not only corruption-laden, but they are subject to mass media distortions as well, while the media are themselves governed by both vulgar cultural standards and oligarch owners (Lozanov, Deyanova and Spasov 2000). The scandal far too easily substitutes the meaning of politics when the meaning is scarce and, subsequently, the general constituency a) retreats from political participation; b) is very volatile in its shifting voting preferences; c) supports a variety of blunt populist orientations;¹⁶ d) civil activism seems doomed to pour out into protest manifestations and is easily faked (Kabakcieva in this volume).

2.2 *Social Deconstruction as a Result of the Substitution of Social Change with European Integration*

Given the above premises, it is understandable that Bulgaria has found it difficult to part with its Communist legacy and the widely prevailing expectation that the state will take care of everybody. In this light, the political and

13 “The state (i.e., the authorities) is not only a biased and corrupt regulator, but also a vast market, investor, and employer.” (Avramov 2007, vol. 3: 449).

14 The leading political science celebrities were late by about 20 years in their bitter confession of the puerility of the utopian view they had propagandized in the early 1990s about the self-sustaining democratic transition to a consolidated democracy (Schmitter 2014; Carothers 2007).

15 “[...] *a process of decrease of the quality of democracy in Bulgaria, especially after 2009, evolves. [...] It is most vulnerable in regard of rule of law, political participation and political representation, political corruption, political culture characterized by the lack of democratic tradition and culture of compromise.*” (Kanev 2015: 15, author’s italic).

16 The populism prevails not only in the sense that the winning party is necessarily populist but, more importantly, that all represented parliamentary parties lean, more or less, towards it (Krasteva and Todorov in this volume).

economic crises of the mid-1990s, which brought the country almost to the brink of civil war in 1996, become intelligible. Under such conditions, it seemed the country's integration into NATO and the EU would bring a lasting solution to internal instability and lack of perspective. The problem is that the newly emerged European Union was relying on the experience of the European Economic Community, and its main aim was integration into a common market, conceived in a neo-liberal vein (Grabbe 2006; Ágh 2015). But post-Communist nations could not pass from state patronage directly to economic entrepreneurship, as they lacked the experience, culture, resources, or instruments to integrate themselves into such a European market. The result for many people was a fall in status and marginalization, which in turn led to widespread loss of interest in politics and susceptibility to nationalist-populist moods (Ágh 2015; Minchev 2015; Krasteva and Todorov in this volume). The access to EU funds further enhanced the clientelist mode of centralized state policymaking and the marginalization of civil society. Thus, the trend of social dissociation prevailed in many Central and Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria. Hence, the lack of an integral sociological concept of our society acquires a peculiar truthfulness.

2.3 *The Crisis of the Never-ending Transition*

At the end of the 20th century, many social researchers already directed attention to the greatly accelerated pace of history, to the escalation of social change (see the numerous works of A. Toffler, U. Beck, M. Castells). As unprecedented as it was, the collapse of the Communist camp (and of Communism within each of the “national barracks” there) was only part of this global acceleration of history. But does this mean that the fast-moving changes exclude the possibility that the national situations may have a specific character and that their *long-durée* pattern is not identifiable?

The particular problem here is that, due to the exceptionally severe issues arising from the “change of the system” in Central and Eastern Europe, public and scientific thought at the start of the 1990s was formatted by the metaphor of “transition” – the term leaned on the great motivating force of the expectation that after years of suffering and deprivation, we would reach the “promised land” (Carothers 2007). The term's importance at that time related to its mobilizing effect in terms of propaganda, not to its explanatory capacity. Hence, though it was easy to reject it as a scientific concept, each time interested public figures declared “the end of transition”, their statements seemed scandalous.

The cause of the scandal lay in the mismatch of meanings. By “end of the transition”, the public at large understood the advent of a new state of society,

recognized as “modern normality”: stable economic growth, accountable democracy, civil liberties and individual rights based on the rule of law, etc. All these were expected to lead to sustainable improvement of the quality of life. The course of events over the decades has demonstrated that this aim is an unattainable ideal,¹⁷ while the process of social change has simply exhausted itself. The pattern of life, perceived (in the 1990s) as “transition”, has crystallized into a constantly reproduced model of a wide range of social pathologies, including the dependence of business on corrupt state procurement, which permits irresponsible governance based on clientelism (Ganev in this volume). But the precondition for all this is the unaccountable judicial system, prone to corruption (Todorova in this volume), and the shrinking of individual freedoms, especially (but not exclusively) of freedom of speech (Ognjanova 2015; Spasov 2017). The outcome of these trends is the establishment of loutishness as a cultural norm, while their general result is that, demographically, Bulgaria is the fastest-shrinking nation in Europe. This is the paradoxical truth behind the mantra that “the transition has ended” – not because we have reached the destination we aimed for, but because transience/hybridity has become the status quo.¹⁸ The scandal is a result of the value clash between those who successfully accommodated to the new pattern and profit from it, and the majority, composed of those whose expectations were crushed, with both groups being right at the same time. Who would care about a society in terms of such sharp value controversies is a rhetorical question only. More importantly, the current Bulgarian social life is simultaneously characterized by diverging tendencies.

17 “The tendencies between 2011 and 2018 show that the catch up paradigm is perhaps changing, as many Central and Eastern European countries continue to advance in the ‘Economy’ category but have begun to backslide in the categories ‘Democracy’, ‘Governance’ and ‘Quality of Life’, as is the case in Hungary and Poland. Overall, the new EU member states are most successful in catching up in the ‘Economy’ category, and least successful in the category ‘Quality of Life’; many of them are not managing to transform their economic achievements into a better living standard.” (The Catch Up Index 2018 – Is it that hard? <https://osis.bg/?p=3139>, visited on 03.06.2018).

18 “Crises are by default temporary; the Bulgarian transition made the crisis itself permanent.” (Spasov 2000: 133). “Bulgaria will not *become* – it is a normal country, with the ‘normality’ of many other second and third-rate states.” (Avramov 2007, vol. 3: 464, italic R.A.). On the political aspect of timelessness beyond the turbulences of current events, see Stefanov 2015.

3 The Cognitive Approach to Societies in Southeast Europe

The above-mentioned social-historical preconditions determine to a considerable degree the typological particularities of social life in the countries of this region. Very schematically, we can generalize these particularities as a structural interweaving of the following trends, which derive from the high level of amorphousness and turbulence of current social life. These trends are:

- the strong influence of the historical past on the present: because only in a mature Modernity does the role of history diminish drastically;
- the particularly essential importance of culture, which impacts powerfully on both the economy and politics (making these seem irrational), while it is itself characterized by legacies, inner heterogeneity, permanent crises, contradictions, and political instrumentalization (Vasilev in this volume);
- the equally large importance of foreign influences – in the economy, politics, and culture (Bechev; Dimitrova in this volume).

In other words, due to the now-chronic weakness of the local economy, which ever fails to reach the stage of self-sustained growth, but also due to the historical past of contemporary Bulgaria, subjected to powerful external influences, Bulgaria's culture is a key determinant of the ongoing processes. Being internally differentiated and full of antagonisms (between high and low, between native and imported, etc.), culture is a substitute for the dominant moral-psychological factor of the time of Hadjiyski. It is now a crucial influence factor that effectively, though invisibly, blocks the attempts to implement reform policies and Europeanization (Dimitrov et al. 2004; Dimitrov et al. 2014). This is how this occurs:

3.1 *“The Long Arm” of History: due to Uncompleted Modernization*

Contemporary Bulgaria is not “a prisoner of its past”, as some authors tend to believe (Vesselin Dimitrov and Rumen Avramov figure prominently among many others), no matter how important *the path dependence*, in this case, is. Yet, Bulgaria's modernization is far from being accomplished and the economic advancement, starting from a dramatically low point, is, as G. Ganev demonstrates (in this volume), truly crucial both in terms of achievements attained so far and of their insufficiency as a predictor of future developments.

The weakness of economic development shows through in the fact that the monetarization of the economy was completed only at the end of the 1990s (Avramov 2007), and in the seemingly strange, un-European longevity of Communist-style institutions and mentality (in terms of values and behavior models). Economic weakness explains why social transformations started long

before 1989 (Avramov; Chalakov et al.; Elenkov), but also why, decades later, Socialism has been preserved in crucially important public systems, such as education, public administration, etc. The recent past is faring well in Bulgaria and, what's more, the Past in general enjoys high public approval, since this is how it was under the local form of Communist society. For the same reason, historians have traditionally played a privileged role in the cultural life of the nation, although, by contrast, the economization of social life in the last decades has led to a dramatic fall in status and prestige for the guild of historians and the intelligentsia in general (Daskalov 1998; Vasilev in this volume). Three aspects of the same process are mutually related and mutually enhancing: a) the influence of history on the present makes literature socially significant; b) for its part, the literature that feeds on history (for its plots, dramatic controversies, and collision of values) becomes of central importance; and c) the history of literature proves to be an identity-building and history-building factor. Symptomatically, social science is weak in Bulgaria, because, among others, it is losing in the competition with history and the arts.¹⁹ Related to this, the collision between the values of native-ness and European-ness is not negligible (Vasilev in this volume). Along with its other features, this collision is a form of clash between the ideologically sanctified "People" and the valuable, but weak and helpless individual person. This is the core turf for crucial, nationalistic transformations in current political life in Bulgaria (Krasteva and Todorov in this volume).

3.2 *The Particularly Significant Role of Culture*

In an age when studies on economic culture have gained mainstream status in economics, it would seem trivial to stress the importance of cultural determinants for economic developments. But the case of Southeast Europe is a peculiar one. Here, it is not a question of the widespread inclusion of cultural factors in economic practices, but rather of a disproportionate influence of very specific local popular attitudes, which stem from the underdevelopment of markets, of the financial sector, of contractual relations, of rationality and personal dignity, etc. On the one hand, this low culture creates its own vast market, making the vulgar tastes a public standard by penetrating the mass media and politics. But, on the other hand, the high culture is aggressively

19 In the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, there are 65 academicians, of whom ten work in the field of culture and the arts, three are historians, and *not one is a social scientist. The social sciences are excluded from access to the National Science Fund, because they are not part of the Fund's research priorities, in contrast with "the cultural heritage"*. This state policy is the *cause* of the character of social sciences in our country described above, but it is a *consequence* of the "import of ideas" and the prevailing lack of public relevance of social studies here – a relevance that is the source of their vitality in Western societies.

anti-commercial. This is visible, for instance, in the pretensions of the figures of “high culture” to the status of state-builders (and protectors of a vulnerable national pride), by which they try to secure themselves against the limited demand for their particular cultural products in the local markets (Vasilev in this volume).

Under this layer of elite cultural life, the prevailing poverty of the people reproduces two major phenomena. First, the large-scale marginalization of the citizens means that democratization inevitably transforms marginal subcultures into a dominant cultural norm.²⁰ Second, the common denominator among many of them is that this is the mass culture of a typically modern egoism (Hadjiyski). Until the “triumph of Socialism” in our country (1958), rural dwellers amounted to two thirds of the whole population, and the majority of them depended on non-market self-sustenance amidst a nearly total absence of hired employment.²¹ The need to survive makes all means seem justifiable, at least in the eyes of those trying to survive. But in recent decades, this attitude seems to have become a legitimate cultural norm, due to the combination of egoism with a value system based on “orientation to the self” in late/secondary Modernity (Beck 1998).

It is a task for the social sciences to demonstrate that the foundation of this mass attitude is multi-layered. Scholars look far back to the pagan core beneath the superficial Christianity of Bulgarians (Kabakchieva 2001; Strashimirova 1992; Daskalov 1998), a characteristic that was later compounded by the Communist authorities’ policy of vulgarization of the clergy (Metodiev 2010). Above this layer comes the amorality proper to Socialism, which results from the “policy of mass social corruption” (Znepolski), whereby servility and the eager hunt for personal benefit are presented as marks of the natural robustness of the Bay Ganyo²² element in our “national character”, which seems to explain the widespread persisting sympathy for this literary personage here.²³

20 “Paradoxically, today maybe, precisely the *chalga* and its concomitant phenomena are the most direct and widely established cultural manifestation of the democratic changes.” (Spasov 2000: 114). For more on the phenomenon of *chalga* see Vasilev in this volume.

21 Daskalov quotes data that, until the mid-1930s, hired labor in villages represented under two percent of all labor (Daskalov 2005). As Gruev notes, the subsequent drastic reduction of the rural population led to a “rustification of urban culture” (Gruev 2008). For more on the same topic see in Vasilev in this volume.

22 Bay Ganyo is a satirical literary character, extraordinarily popular in Bulgaria, from the end of the 19th century, who is an enterprising, adaptive, and unscrupulous lout.

23 For more on the question of the cultivation (through the Bulgarian Communist Party’s policy of management of social needs) of large-scale waste and appropriation of public resources, which determined and legitimized systematic corruption in the Post-Communist period, see Elenkov 2018.

This has become particularly important in the decades of post-Communist transition, after the collapse of state institutions that had maintained the conventional social integrity during the time of the regime. As a rule, under conditions of institutional helplessness/crisis, personal integrity (in the English sense of the word, which combines decency and integrality) becomes a key factor for the normalization of social life. At least in Bulgaria, this factor has been missing and, consequently, social cohesion is very feeble. Hence, the local civil society is characterized by weakness and deficiencies; manifests itself mainly in street protests; and, therefore, is easily falsified (Kabakchieva in this volume).

These conditions have two very important consequences. First, the social action of individuals, groups, or business and civil enterprises, generally, has a rather short horizon because, among other reasons, it is pursued in an environment that lacks authorities, and respectively, where no one assumes responsibility for the public results (the two shortages are mutually invigorating).²⁴

Second, within the coordinate system of these attitudes, literally anything seems possible. The fundamental structure of one's worldview is a bricolage, in which arbitrary elements, belonging to different orders of things, coexist easily – because the world is not assumed to have necessary internal structure and meaningful integrity.

On the other hand, this specific worldview and value basis give a fantasizing, literary, artistic quality to life.²⁵ I am not referring merely to the humorous side of the enduring Bay Ganyo response to encounters with Modernity, i.e. foreign values.²⁶ The fragmentariness of life induces an image-based mode of thinking, an imagination that rounds out and gives meaning to things not in terms of facts, structures, processes, and reasons, but through cultural resources like metaphors and “folk psychology”.

24 “Honor is lacking since *honesty* becomes scarce” (Mitev 2015: 83, author’s italics).

25 Kabakchieva sees the theatrical element as a distinctive political-cultural feature of the protests against the Bulgarian Socialist Party’s catastrophic governance at the end of 1996 and the beginning of 1997 (2001). Later, Smilov sees aestheticization in politics (2008). I think the specificity of this cultural response has deeper roots, and the further back we go in time, the deeper they are. That is why all 20th century literature – at first, the theatre, and then cinema – had an enormous influence on the self-consciousness of the public in Bulgaria. They were the “natural fountainhead” and resource for endowing with meaning: rather than being conceived by thought, the social life is experienced in aesthetic imagery (perfectly captured and immortalized by the works of Emir Kosturitsa). The complex multiplicity, ambiguity, and lack of differentiation of the processes in social life determines their being preferably articulated and co-experienced in artistic images.

26 The satire *Mission London*, exposing the mores at the Bulgarian embassy there, is the most viewed film in our country, with approximately twice as many viewings as the next film in the ranking of Bulgarian box office hits.

Hence derives the prevailing (irrational, not based on interests, not instrumentally rational, but value-rational) biographical-cultural basis for political preferences and behavior.²⁷ Thus, the frank remark, made by the most successful, longest-enduring in power Bulgarian politician, is only seemingly politically paradoxical: "I'm a simpleton, and you're simpletons, and we'll come to terms." The Bulgarian cultural life may seem over-politicized when looking at the last 30 years, but, more importantly, politics itself is heavily under the rule of mass media, not the rule of law, while the contents of the media performances are defined by the value preferences of a largely impoverished²⁸ population of which only about one fifth holds higher education degrees.

This is why a significant particularity of the national and regional situation is its strong dependence on import of ideas at all levels of social life – ranging from household management, through politics, and to esthetic and scientific practices. My stress here is not on the secondary quality of these value products, not on their imitative aspect, but on what Hadjiyski pointed out long ago: the impossibility for productive dialogue between this "import of ideas" and the local reality (Avramov 2007, vol. 3; Ganev in this volume). This is a problem that additionally alienates the importers from the real dynamics of social problems, and leads to their social-political marginalization (never forgetting, also, the factional clashes between adherents of rival ideas, none of whom can really prove the advantage of one's, purely accidental, choice of preferred foreign metropole – Berlin, Paris, London, Moskow).

3.3 *The Influence of Geopolitics and Foreign National Interests*

Hardly any serious social scholar in our country has failed to note the essential role foreign powers have played in the course of our history. The differences between authors are only in the angle from which they view the problem. In Avramov, the focus is on external pressure for economic modernization, and internal resistance to this pressure;²⁹ in Baeva, the stress is on the dramatic

27 Political affiliations are based on an ideological, quasi-ethnic identity, as P.-E. Mitev (1998) aptly put it.

28 Especially in 1990s – for details see Ganev in this volume. After a 20-year period of rapid economic recovery in the 21st century the livings standards are still below the level of 1970s, in comparative terms.

29 "Economic conditionality is the core of asymmetric (hierarchic) relations between the metropole and the peripheral (dependent) economy. To generalize in full, it embodies the 'cleft' between mentality and behavior in mature market economies and an economy in transition (whatever that means). All this turns economic conditionality into a particular kind of *culture*, and its clash with local reality into a series of *cultural shocks*. The basic formula of conditionality – 'money in exchange for reforms' – is an important catalyst of modernization. *The history of debt is at the core of the history of Bulgarian modernization*. [...] This process affects various layers: it puts its stamp on the procedures

magnitude of this influence; in Daskalov, the emphasis is on the fact that this strong impact is typical for small Balkan countries.³⁰ What is interesting, however, is that this influence – even today – is decisive, especially for the construction of political parties on the basis of shared ideology and for resource support (Todorov 2007), which would not be possible were it not for the internal political weakness of the local parties³¹ (Smilov 2008; Malinov 2010; Kanev and Todorov 2014). More broadly, beyond any party differences, Bulgaria is not so much an agent as foreign agencies' instrument in international relations and geo-strategical games, which substantially mold its inner course of socio-economic developments. Hence, Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the EC has decisive, long-term developmental consequences.

This brings us once again to the traumatic problem of cultural affiliation. Underlying this problem is the crucial interweaving of trends. It has proven impossible to uphold a consistent choice of foreign partners. For in every concrete case, the cherished values clash with the interests of a potential "significant other"³² – for instance, France flatters us (without much justification) that we are francophones. At the same time, it exercised continuing political pressure for us to shut down Block 3 and 4 of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant, because of concealed bank interests related to the structure of the regional electricity market. The same is true for other key countries: Greece, Turkey, Russia,³³ Germany, or even the US. This is the source of the continuing vitality of hostility between "-philes" and "-phobes", each side being unable to engage in a dispute based on strictly rational argumentation. This, in turn, provides fertile soil for nationalism as an ever-topical cause (Daskalov 1998: 282–3, 286)

of decision-making, on the 'material' sides of the economy, on the purely spiritual self-reflection and on the self-identification of the nation [...]" (Avramov 2007, vol. 1 : 538, italics – R. A.).

30 For details see Bechev in this volume.

31 "The lack of an alternative – real or imagined – puts an edge on competition between political parties in the field of unorthodox mobilization resources: nationalism, personal charisma, personal integrity, and anti-corruption. This is the fourth mark of frustrated democracy: political competition turns into an extravagant show aiming to attract the attention of the increasingly distanced and disloyal voter. The traditional mobilization resources of parties – ideology and political patronage – become increasingly limited" (Smilov 2008:37). More on this question and on the quality of democracy in contemporary Bulgaria in Kanev 2015, Kanev and Todorov 2014.

32 Cf. Daskalov 1998: 42ff.

33 Russian influence in our country is particularly significant, not only due to its roots in history and culture, but also due to the country's share in the Bulgarian economy – direct, through property or control, especially in the structure-defining sector of the energy industry (Bechev 2017).

and for the current political wave of nationalistic populism across all parties (Krasteva and Todorov in this volume).

4 The Provisional Integrality of the Picture

In brief, the general picture of the Bulgarian situation is centered on a peculiar statism: a large and super-centralized state, but weak when it comes to conducting policies. It continues to finance basic public sectors (the judicial system, the security system, public administration, education, etc.) regardless of the quality of their public results and without regard for the users of those results. Hence, the spiritless and passive attitude of the large number of private actors placed in a state of dependence on the state (Ganev in this volume). But also, hence, the particular importance of networks as the key to success in public activities (and not only economic ones) (Grabher 1997; Chalakov et al. 2008), as well as the shady component in all public spheres, including education, healthcare, and the mass media.

It is impossible for the rule of law to function in such a social system – not only because corporate or oligarchical interests actively stand in the way (Ognjanova 2015), but also, and especially, because law is able to exercise authority only with regard to contractual social relations, which imply the equal value, equal rights, and mutual obligations of the parties to the contract (Todorova in this volume). The fact that a considerable share of the economy is corporative – grey (approximately one third of the whole) or plainly criminal (Markova 2018) – is a consequence of this fundamental problem of social life, as well as of the weakness of civil society (Kabakchieva in this volume). The latter is neither an efficient corrective for politics, nor responsive to intellectual messages, be they ever so sophisticated (in values or concept) and deep in meaning. A clientelistic policy that cultivates dependent media (Spasov 2017) is merely a feature of the feeble democracy in this country. But these systemic preconditions for corruption have become normal in public life.³⁴ Even the judicial system, instead of being a central institutional instrument for fighting corruption, becomes a protected territory, and tool, of politically patronized corruption (Schönfelder 2005), and a compelling, and immoral, role model of

34 The periodical reports of Transparency International (<http://transparency.bg/bg/>) and the Center for the Study of Democracy (<https://csd.bg/bg/>) contain abundant information on this question.

institutional irresponsibility.³⁵ The tendency in question is even more vivid in the West Balkan countries (Elbasani and Šabić 2018).

In this context, the crisis arising from accession to the EU seems inevitable. When it became politically possible – in view of geopolitical considerations regarding European security (Katsikas and Siani-Davies 2011; O'Brennan 2006; Busek/Mikulitsch 2003,) – accession only laid bare the civilizational difference between the EU and Southeast Europe. Moreover, it enhances social disintegration instead of preventing it. This is because a) EU membership legitimates state redistribution of large financial resources,³⁶ b) it brings out the ambiguity of the idea of a unified Europe, c) it is a nourishing soil for culture-based nationalism. In this respect, there is no national uniqueness here (Mendelski 2016; Ágh 2015).

Against this whole background, it is very interesting to comprehend the remarkable economic progress Bulgaria has made in the last 20 years, despite the heavy blow dealt by the world recession after 2008. Especially important factors in this respect are: a) the dynamic changes at the macroeconomic level (Ganev 2017 and again in this volume) and b) the structural transformations and the differentiation of economic success (Bogdanov 2017). The academic task is to explain the relative sustainability of economic development in the last two decades, despite the tendencies towards social disintegration.

Two kinds of explanations for this important fact stand out – those that seem obvious, and those that are hard to analyze scientifically. Examples of the former kind are the Currency Board, which restrains political rapaciousness, at least to some extent; and the disciplining role of EU integration and its direct project-based investments. Examples of the latter kind of explanation are the sprouting of “authentic entrepreneurship” (Chalakov 2008); and the commenced repatriation of social and generational capital, which is able to realize itself in the now-open economy.

However, it will take time (most probably a long time in view of the strong, successful resistance of the status quo) for the eventual economic success to

35 One instance of ethnic minority problems, that of the Turkish minority, merits special attention because the Turkish case is a specific fractal of the whole. It is characterized by a strong dependence on the past (the repression suffered under the Communist regime in the 1980s), the close connection with the political interests/ambitions of Turkey, economic underdevelopment, on which the MRF party parasitizes, and profound clientelism as a foremost example of political corruption (Chalakov 2018; Markova 2017).

36 In recent years, EU funds account for 60 percent of direct foreign investments. The latter, according to data from the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, have decreased about tenfold during the first ten years of the country's EU membership. The resources coming from EU funds are the backbone of public investments in Bulgaria.

turn into a major structural tendency; a tendency that directly impacts on the scope, potential, and degree of constructive action of civil society; on the level of public expectations; and, therefore, on the quality of politics and the quality of our EU membership. Hence, what is a seemingly insignificant change – Bulgaria's future entry into the EU monetary union – will be a landmark event for this country (especially since the union has drawn a lesson from the irresponsible conduct of countries like Greece, Cyprus, and Italy).

To the best of our knowledge, next to Vesselin Dimitrov's history book on the uneven Bulgarian transition (Dimitrov 2001), so far only one volume of collected papers by insiders, in English, seeks more or less the same overall expert depiction of the integral complexity of post-Communist Bulgaria. Published initially under the editorship of John Bell in 1998 (Bell 1998), it was re-issued again in 2018, which is a sign of the academic relevance of that book. Hence, it is worth comparing the similarities and the differences between that book and the current academic project for the sake of catching a glimpse of the substantial restructuring – for the last 20 years – of the very society under scrutiny.³⁷

Both volumes pay due attention to political, economic, ethnic, cultural, and geopolitical matters. Importantly, the very order of item listing carries with it an implicit concept of the major elements or the priorities of social life. However, in Bell's volume there is an emphasis on social policy, but civil society is altogether missing. Religious issues are more broadly presented in the 1998 collection, while culture is selectively represented there by a narrow, arbitrary focus on developments in high culture only: *belle lettres* literature and cinema are discussed in particular detail. At that point in time, the prospects of EU accession did not deserve any special attention. Back then, the rule of law was a minute subtopic under the general discussion of the Post-Communist constitutional arrangements.

We assume that the focus shift is, at least, symptomatic of the transformations undergone by Bulgarian society and their academic conceptualization. Both volumes follow a deliberate and explicit (predominantly) descriptive approach. Any broad generalizations seem untenable. Yet, surprisingly, the current volume – which, presumably, deals with the advanced stages of societal transformation, because of which its character should be more definite – is far more frank in stressing the open-endedness of the subject matter – most explicitly in Ganev's article, but this is exactly the common flavor of all analyses that follow in this volume. What Bulgarian society is has yet to become clearer in the future; its current status contains a plurality of potentials.

37 As becomes clear from the very title of Bell's collection, it concerns the variety of aspects of the country but not the Bulgarian society as such.

5 A Horizon Instead of a Conclusion: the European Importance of the “Bulgarian Case”?

This overview of the Bulgarian situation has left many questions unaddressed – for instance, what was the influence of the wars in former Yugoslavia, in the Persian Gulf, in Kosovo, or what was the conscious personal political responsibility of local (and global) decision-makers? Both of these – the international context and personal leadership – are weighty factors in the context of amorphous social situations. But the most important question is that of the transnational relevance of the analysis of the local situation.

For more than a decade, the European Commission has maintained the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, which was initially created to help Bulgaria and Romania (for three or four years at most) make up for their lag behind the Central and Eastern European countries that had already become EU members. Based on its annual monitoring on the course of reforms, the European Commission sees the two countries as still typologically similar in their distance from the standards of EU membership. However, in the last two years, it has become evident that Hungary and Poland, countries that were considered “top of the class” in their EU integration, became the first to whom the safeguard clause provided by Art. 7 of the EU Treaty was applied, on the grounds of systematic breaching of the foundational values of the Union. What had, previously, seemed a local (Bulgarian and Romanian) exception has proven to be an early warning sign of the true problem of accession policy towards the Central and Eastern European countries; more than that, it has proven a symptom of the fundamental problems underlying the current pattern of European integration policy (Dimitrov 2019). We have no reason to believe that the situation in the West Balkan countries will be considerably more favorable. All this makes the scientific identification of typological similarity and national difference a crucially important task: the future of all European citizens is at stake.

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