

Constituting the Image of Europe in the Post-Socialist Period in Bulgaria

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The concept of “European identity” can be discussed in its geographical dimensions, as well as from a historical, cultural, economic or political point of view. In some instances, the geographical belonging to Europe does not fully coincide with the awareness of a cultural and/or political European identity. Like their predecessors from the late 19th century, the Bulgarians of today, after the end of socialist regime, live with the feeling of being “isolated” and “forgotten” by the rest of the European continent. While in the late 19th century the concept of Europe was used synonymously with “civilisation” and “modernisation”, today it is associated with the overcoming of the closedness and the social deformations of totalitarian rule. But the Bulgarians’ concept of Europe is still vague and abstract. This vagueness of the image of Europe turns “the European card” into a ready tool and argument in the political struggle between main political actors. The very possibility of using the concept of Europe as a strong political argument, however, indicates that the image of Europe is positive and has a high position in the value system of the Bulgarians of today.

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The concept of “European identity” can be discussed in its geographical dimensions, as well as from a historical, cultural, economic or political point of view. In some instances, the geographical belonging to Europe does not fully coincide with the awareness of a cultural and/or political European identity. In certain periods of its history, Bulgarian society has given food for thought along these lines.

A “supranational” identity of any kind among the Bulgarians can rightfully be considered to have appeared in the second half of the 18th century, i.e. in the period referred to in historiography as the “National Revival” and after. Without exaggerating the closedness of feudal society, one cannot deny that it was particularly strong under the conditions of the lack of Bulgarian statehood in the five centuries of Ottoman rule (14th–19th century). In the National Revival Period (as well as in the Middle Ages) the Bulgarian people defined their own identity by their belonging to the Orthodox Christian religion (Kosev 1993: 270).

In the 19th century, the conviction spread among the educated elite that had emerged in the early 19th century that their country was isolated and “forgotten” by the world. This conviction was shared by intellectuals of neighbouring countries. The endeavour to “take Bulgaria out of obscurity” (Aprilov 1841: 91, 93) was common both to Vasil Aprilov, one of the pioneers of modern education in Bulgaria, and to the Russian scholar Jurij Venelin (Venelin 1829; Dinekov 1990: 78–79). “For us Bulgaria of today is a closed book with uncut pages”, Stanko Vraz, a Slovenian man of letters, stated in his article “Bālgarski narodni pesni” [Bulgarian Folk Songs] (Vraz 1847: 37).

The motif of the “forgotten” and “unfamiliar” Bulgaria persisted in later periods, as becomes evident in the debate on the “Veda Slovena”, a folklore collection considered to be a mystification which, however, found broad response among linguists and historians in various European countries (cf. e.g. Leger 1875) in the 1870s. Somewhat later, Ivan Šišmanov, the

founder of ethnology in Bulgaria, called “Veda Slovena” “the first Bulgarian book, which succeeded in arousing a lively interest among the European scholarly world in Bulgaria and in its past” (Šišmanov 1925: 33).

To what an extent is the conviction of the Bulgarians that their country is isolated and forgotten justified, and how is it reflected in their attitude to “the external world”, i.e., to Europe? The lack of information about a country that up until 1878 had not figured on the political map of Europe is easy to explain. Does this mean, however, complete oblivion for Bulgaria? Some data indicate that although deprived of statehood during Ottoman rule, “the non-existent Bulgarian kingdom was part of the European political world” (Georgieva 1993: 313). At different periods Hungarian or German rulers claimed the title of “tsar of Bulgaria”; in the 17th century, in his capacity of “tsar of Bulgaria” the German Emperor Ferdinand III insisted that Pope Alexander VII appoint a cardinal protector of the kingdom of Bulgaria at the Vatican; in 1656 Cardinal Colona was appointed to that post. The Russian Tsar Ivan IV Vasilievich-Groznyi (1533–1584) followed the same line of conduct, by also adding “tsar of the Bulgarians” to his title (*ibid.*, 314).

But isolation was not total. Despite the hardships during the period of Turkish rule, contacts with the “external world” did not cease. Vera Mutafčieva’s deliberations seem convincing in this respect: “No matter how hampered, the spirit of the New Time infiltrated Bulgaria. It came by way of contacts with Bulgarian clergymen or merchants who travelled beyond the frontiers of the Empire. Initially, they had the closest relations with Serbia and Wallachia, and from the 16th century on, also with Greece, Russia, Austria. [...] But most essential for the intellectual growth of these brave travellers were their impressions from another world, lighted by spirituality, rich in developments and personalities. [...] It was probably then that the Bulgarians started to awaken in the 17th and 18th century: by making comparisons. This gradually became accessible to increasing numbers of them, who went beyond the frontier and their poverty, as well as beyond their dread of Ottoman omnipotence. The Bulgarians learned

how to trade, and they travelled to Central Europe, as well as to Russia. On their way back they took knowledge and news, along with books and prints. They also brought tools, architectural models, objects of everyday life, elements of painting” (Mutafčieva 1993: 211).

Evidence of the interest and contacts of the 19th century Bulgarian with the world outside can also be found in literature. The novelette “Čičovči” [Uncles] (1884) and the novel *Pod igoto* [Under the Yoke] (1894) by Ivan Vazov, written shortly after the gaining of national independence (1878), recreate the atmosphere of the 1860s and 1870s; in the small cosmos of their characters there is place for comic and naive comments on the European policy and for fierce disputes on the topical political developments in Europe of that time.

It is obvious that in Bulgarian political and cultural history evidence can be found both of its “isolation” and of its “openness”. But how did this feeling of distance between Bulgaria and Europe come about, a feeling that paradoxically came to the fore directly after Liberation, i.e., together with the establishment of full-fledged relations with the rest of the world? This distance is evident to this day even in the everyday discourse of Bulgarians who speak of Europe as of something they do not belong to. A similar attitude is characteristic not only for the Bulgarians (Kelbečeva 1998: 21–25), but also for the other peoples in the Balkans (Herzfeld 1995 [1998]: 8–15), and it becomes evident both in phrases such as “I’m leaving for Europe” (Roth 1992: 12) and in travel agents and newspapers advertising “Buses to Europe”. The first part of the satirical novel *Baj Ganjo* by Aleko Konstantinov (1895) describes the hero’s travels abroad under the symptomatic title “Bai Ganjo Sets Out for Europe”. Apparently, the incongruity between such phrases and geographical reality never confused the members of Bulgaria’s intellectual elite, to which Aleko Konstantinov undoubtedly belonged. This incongruity even infiltrated scientific terminology where, for example, a certain period in the development of Bulgarian literature is referred to as “Europeanisation”. The term is associated with the first half of the 20th century and indicates the overcoming of narrowly national subject mat-

ter by Bulgarian poets and writers and the adoption of modern philosophical trends and ideas (Igov 1993: 152–153).

Underlying the ambivalent nature of the Bulgarians' European identity is probably not only the peripheral location of the Balkans in Europe (cf. Roth 1992), but also a recognition of cultural differences. In the second half of the 19th century, the concept of Europe began to be used as synonymous with the concept of "civilisation" which, in turn, included the understanding of "modernisation" as an antipode of the traditional "patriarchal" way of life (Bajčinska 1997: 56). It is noteworthy that "civilisation", or "Europe", caught the attention of the Bulgarians first of all through their external, formal imitation of western and central European clothes and style of conduct (cf. Roth 1995: 245–260). This is evidenced by works of Bulgarian literature such as Dobri Voinikov's play "Krivorazbranata civilizacija" [The ill-understood civilisation] (1871) (cf. Penev 1978: 65–73). The way in which the characters of the play speak about Europe is symptomatic insofar as "Europe" is equally unfamiliar to those who want to imitate it and to those who renounce its values, i.e., modernisation. In another drama, "Poevroejčvaneto na turčina" [The Europeanisation of the Turk] (1880), Voinikov again treats the problem of unsuccessful Europeanisation (modernisation), this time with reference to Turkey and the Turks (cf. Teodorov 1896: 227; Penev 1978: 65). Petko R. Slavejkov, one of the most prominent writers of the Bulgarian Revival Period, devoted his drama "Malakov" [Malakov, a kind of crinoline] (1864) and some of his poems to the same topic (cf. Penev 1978: 459–461).

In short, the distance that the Bulgarians have since the 19th century placed between themselves and Europe as ("the other"), is determined by the recognition of cultural differences. In the socialist period, the differentiation between "us" (i.e., the Bulgarians) and Europe was not at all obliterated, but was only superseded by the opposition between "us" and "the West". In accordance with the same "anti-geographic" logic, the latter concept also included countries like Japan. In other words, in the cognitive map of the Bulgarian, the civilisational differentiation was substituted by a political one.

"The collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe has led to decline and fall of the conceptual geography based on East vs. West, with implications for both parts of the continent. Political borders and blocks have disappeared, but national, ethnic, cultural and social differences are still at work. Today we can observe on the one hand a new symbolic geography in Europe, but on the other we are witnessing how old lines of demarcations are revitalized, how different cultural imaginations of Europe are politically instrumentalized, and how political conflicts are being culturalized. A new Europe is emerging, but behind this imagination we have to face old problems and unsolved conflicts from the past" (Niedermüller & Stoklund 2001: 3).

Since the fall of the "Iron Curtain", the ideologically motivated isolationism of Bulgaria is being replaced by new opportunities of travelling that are, however, restricted by the tough realities of a foreseen but unexpectedly harsh economic crisis. Though for different reasons, for most Bulgarians the sources of information about Europe remain indirect, i.e., mostly the mass media. In other words, almost the same factors as a hundred years ago again make the image of Europe fairly vague and marked by prejudices. This is so in spite of the fact that political pluralism and a free press have made all kinds of objective information about the other European countries available for everyone. In addition, the concept of Europe has, for the first time, gained real political meaning and has become an argument and a means of political gameplaying.

The vagueness, which continues to characterise the concept of Europe in the thinking of broad circles of Bulgarian society, has proved quite convenient for the emergence of two different kinds of its political use (about similar use of "Europe" in Romania, see Verdery 1996: 104–131). In accordance with political developments in Bulgaria, the concept acquired two meanings. As early as in 1990, on the basis of the opposition communism vs. anti-communism, two opposed political forces emerged as the main actors on the political arena, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), heir to the Bulgarian Communist Party, and the right-wing Union of Democratic Forces (UDF).

In its search for a new, more attractive identity, the BSP split into various inner factions, one of which called itself "Road to Europe. Social Democratic Platform". The metaphor in that name indicates an (unsuccessful) attempt at formulating political ideas and goals, at becoming committed to the values of West European social democracy which the east European communist parties had once deserted. But the name also gave expression to the old Balkan complex of inferiority, of backwardness and detachment, and the public response showed that it was perceived precisely in this sense.

In the same period of 1990–1991, a statement by a political leader, which provocatively paraphrased the name "Road to Europe", gained great popularity through the mass media. Ahmed Dogan, the leader of the "Movement for Rights and Freedoms", a party of the ethnic Turks, claimed that Bulgaria's road to Europe went through the Bosphorus. It was another geographical absurdity, which, however, claimed that Bulgaria's political integration into the European structures was inconceivable without a political and economic rapprochement with Turkey. The manipulative intention was obvious and unsuccessful, but it is noteworthy that again the concept of Europe was instrumentalised for other political goals. After the failed putsch in Moscow in August 1991, the "Road to Europe" deputies left the parliamentary group of the BSP, which eventually led to the dissolution of the faction. The name "Road to Europe" was not forgotten, however, and was later to come to a second life in the Bulgarian political arena.

The elite of the other major political party, the UDF, uses the concept of Europe in a narrowly political sense, i.e., meaning only the countries of the European Union and NATO in accordance with the party's goal of Bulgaria's integration into the European structures. Actually, the UDF's understanding of Europe is extremely narrow and diverges even further from the geographical concept of Europe.

It is very important, though, that this ambivalence is characteristic of the way in which the Bulgarian media construct the image of Europe. The analysis of the two Bulgarian newspapers with the highest circulation, *Trud* and

24 *Časa*, shows that all articles dealing with Europe are dominated by a small range of topics. The articles on specific problems in individual European countries are usually of an informative nature, and those on Germany dominate quantitatively. The publications dealing with the structures of the European Union and NATO are often not signed but are editorials, i.e., anonymous, and are obviously taken from the foreign press. Here the lack of clarity is the greatest, apparently due to carelessness and inadequate professional standards; in many instances, the information is even incomprehensible and meaningless.

The articles dealing with anticipated or received aid for Bulgaria or for the countries of the former Eastern Bloc are more numerous. What is interesting here is that the topic of "aid from Europe" is not represented as humiliating¹. The fact that this topic is characteristic not only of the period directly after the fall of the socialist regimes in Europe (1990–1991), but continues to be relevant even under the very different conditions later, is very symptomatic of Bulgaria. In the same manner, articles about the lack of information about Bulgaria in Western Europe or the restrictive measures taken by these countries with regard to the flow of illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe, the customs barriers to Bulgarian goods continue to appear in the newspapers². Very often the titles are manipulative and misleading and carry an implication opposite to the content of the article itself.

It is obvious that the Bulgarian press chooses topics and imposes suggestions which are less informative about developments on the European continent but rather reflect the problems of Bulgaria itself. In other words, the media image of Europe is largely framed and narrowed down by domestic problems³, so that in the end the treatment of "the European topic" is only a reflection of Bulgaria and its old socio-psychological stereotypes. To be more precise: the subject of "aid" is obviously only a reflection of the social infantilism of the socialist period that has not been outgrown (cf. Benovska-Säbkova 1995: 166), and the topic of the "forgotten Bulgaria" reiterates the old inferiority complex. The subject of travel restrictions has

acquired greater acuteness after the signing of the Schengen Agreement, and in the summer of 1998 it created a new uproar in the Bulgarian political and media discourse, which will be dealt with later.

The vagueness and the imposition of national “frames” to the building of the media image of Europe can, to some extent, be explained by the scarcity of first-hand information and personal impressions in the journalistic community. With the exception of the media elite, which is often linked to the “special services” of the past regime, the overwhelming majority of the journalists have received their degrees and studied foreign languages in their home country; due to the restrictions brought about by the crisis, they travel abroad little or not at all. As a consequence, informative, explanatory materials about the European integration processes are almost absent from the Bulgarian press. The vast majority of the population, including the intelligentsia, can hardly differentiate between, for instance, the Council of Europe and the European Union.

Since 1996, the Bulgarian parliament has proclaimed its intention to lead Bulgaria into the “European structures”, but it is probably clear only to parts of the political elite, what changes an eventual integration will bring to the everyday life and culture of the people. As a consequence, the lively political debate about the integration into NATO (overexposed in the media) provoked a very negative reaction and grumblings among the rural population (about similar split between the elite and rural population in Romania see Verdery 1996: 127). In view of the daily struggle to scrape a living and for physical survival, this subject seemed far too abstract.

What can we expect then of the consciousness of the masses? My personal estimate is that for broad sectors of the Bulgarian population “Europe” is associated mostly with the misty idea of Western Europe, of high living standards, but also of cold rationality. But this does not mean that the Bulgarians do not consider themselves to be Europeans. In the same way as in the past, the ambivalence of their sense of belonging to Europe proceeds rather from the recognition of the civilisational differences.

The political events of the spring of 1997 gave rise to a new discussion of the attitude to Europe. For the new UDF government, “Europe” is an integral part of its political arsenal, but also the newly founded *Evrolevica* Party [European Left] succeeded in winning parliamentary seats in April 1997. Its elite consists mostly of former top crust BSP members, and its programme attempts to combine a left-wing orientation with a positive attitude to the country’s integration into “the European structures”.⁴

In the summer of 1998, a letter of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave evidence of a new type of political manipulation of the subject of Europe. The letter was addressed to the embassies of the signatory countries of the Schengen Agreement. It insisted that measures be taken to facilitate the procedures of granting visas. This letter, as well as a few newspaper publications on the subject of “queues in front of the embassies” or “corruption in getting visas” prompted vigorous attacks on the part of a group of left-wing parties against the ruling right-wing UDF party. Against this background, accusations were exchanged between the *Evrolevica* that claimed that the government did not respect European regulations and standards, and the UDF, that “representatives of the *Evrolevica* slander the country in the Council of Europe”⁵.

The political competition with “Europe” as its target further escalated in the summer of 1998. The term “Europhobia” was put into circulation and was ascribed to those in power. On August 27, 1998, *Trud* carried an article by Krăstjo Petkov, leader of the party of the United Bloc of Labour and former head of the biggest trade union in Bulgaria, under the heading “We are falsely accused of being bad. From Europhobia to Euroutopia it turned out it is just one step”. The article presented no evidence of any “Europhobia” but gave occasion to an editorial comment which said: “It is high time that someone and some of those guilty for the current crisis in our relations with the external world bear responsibility and get off the political stage.” It is an unambiguous example of the familiar ploys of the political game: a presentation of pragmatic political goals (ousting from power) in regulative “wrappings” (concern for good

relations with Europe), and b. search for political resources outside the direct arena (cf. Bailey 1990: 136–140). In other words, the foreign policy argument was utilised for domestic policy purposes.

But why “Europe”? In this case, the alleged “drifting away from Europe” was a symbolic argument in the political game, and under the present situation of a currency board in Bulgaria real (i.e., economic) arguments are few. Apparently, the concept of Europe is utilised by Bulgarian politicians sufficiently vaguely and abstractly in their struggle for identity and a face of their own. The above-mentioned political ways of using the concept of Europe were revived in 1990–1991 and again in 1997–1998. The paperwork battle around the fabricated “Europhobia” is but an episode in the activities of left-wing politicians. This is evidenced by the extensive presence of the “European topic” in the press; in *Trud* alone, eight articles were devoted to this topic in August 1998. But also right-wing politicians use “Europe” as a symbolic argument. In September 1998, Prime Minister Ivan Kostov said that “if we want to be Europeans” Bulgaria has to sign the convention on minorities. At that same session, “the European topic” was naturally present most elaborately in the speech of a representative of the European Left.

The invented “Europhobia” has been forgotten soon. But the significance of “Europe” as symbolic capital within political competition has increased. The topic of both, “Europe” in its political meaning, and “European” as cultural symbol of being “modern” and “civilised”, have become sustainable and even predominant element of the idiom of ruling UDF party. Bulgaria has been invited to start negotiations for future association to European Union on December 1, 2000 and this event has been an occasion for emerging real political euphoria.⁶ Signatory countries of the Schengen agreement have cancelled visa restrictions for Bulgarian citizens in April 2001. Although positively evaluated by the entire population, this political success of UDF could not compensate the failure of economic reforms in Bulgaria; UDF lost the elections in June 2001.

Comparative data from two national repre-

sentative sociological surveys during the “early transition” (1991, 1993) prove the changing European identity of the Bulgarians in the post-socialist period and its differentiation in terms of basic socio-demographic characteristics and ethnic, religious and political affiliation. To the question: “Do you feel an European?” in 1991 16.0% of the respondents answered: “completely”, 29.7% “to some extent”, 16.7% “not at all”, and 16.7% gave no answer. In 1993, 10.1% felt Europeans “completely”, 32.4% “to some extent”, 40.2% “not at all”, and 17.3% gave no answer. It is interesting that the most categorical expression of European identity was declared by representatives of small ethnic groups (Hebrews, Armenians); ethnic Bulgarians held a middle position, while ethnic Turks and Roma felt Europeans to a lesser degree (Topalova 1997: 116, 120). Stronger feelings of European identity were expressed mostly by younger (up to 40), individualistic, educated Bulgarians (*ibid.*, 118–122).

The relatively low level of European identity is most probably due to a perceived incompatibility of the low living standards of the average Bulgarian and the “belonging to Europe”. An inquiry of January 1999 among 58 students of the New Bulgarian University in Sofia proved that about 60% of them think Bulgaria belongs to Europe both geographically and culturally. But also the students’ image of Europe is vague and ambivalent, and most of them think that Europe coincides with Western Europe.

The topic has obviously not been exhausted, but the observations give grounds for some *conclusions*. Like more than one hundred years ago, the sense of the Bulgarian people of belonging to Europe is ambivalent. The reasons for this are both the peripheral location of the Balkan Peninsula in Europe and the awareness of cultural differences. Like their predecessors from the late 19th century, the Bulgarians of today, after the end of totalitarian socialism, live with the feeling of being “isolated” and “forgotten” by the rest of the European continent. To a certain extent they are justified to feel this way, but the issue has also been considerably exaggerated. While in the late 19th century the concept of Europe was used synonymously with “civilisation” and “modernisation”, to-

day it is associated with the overcoming of the closedness and the social deformations of totalitarian rule. But the Bulgarians' concept of Europe is still vague and abstract. This vagueness of the image of Europe turns "the European card" into a ready tool and argument in the political struggle. The very possibility of using the concept of Europe as a strong political argument, however, indicates that the image of Europe is positive and has a high position in the value system of the Bulgarians of today.

Notes

- 1 Cf. *24 Časa*, May 11, 1991; June 12, 1991; July 19, 1991; August 3, 1991; September 13, 1991; *Trud*, August 27, 1998.
- 2 *24 Časa*, June 21, 1991; August 17, 1991; August 3, 1991; *Trud*, August 6, 1998; August 27, 1998.
- 3 On techniques of media manipulation through the imposition of "frames" cf. Neveu 1996: 90–91.
- 4 *Evrolevica* Party failed during the next parliamentary elections (June 2001) and was no more parliamentary represented party.
- 5 Cf. the interview of Valeria Veleva with Prime Minister Ivan Kostov, in *Trud*, August 3, 1998.
- 6 See *Capital* weekly newspaper, N 48, December 2000, p. 1, 9. (See also www.capital.bg)

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