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BULGARIA OR CHALGARIA: THE ATTENUATION OF BULGARIAN NATIONALISM IN A MASS-MEDIATED POPULAR MUSIC

By Timothy Rice

If there were something like ethnomusicological laws for the thermodynamics of musical change, one would surely state that when cultural, social, political or economic systems change, then some aspects of musical practice and style will change as a consequence. Our ethnomusicological theories of change do not predict, however, whether in a particular instance old musical forms will diminish in importance, continue but with new cultural meanings assigned to them, change to meet new demands, or be abandoned altogether. Similarly they do not predict when none of the old forms will be adequate and new forms of music will be required to meet new needs. The postcommunist transition in Eastern Europe (after 1989) and the former Soviet Union (after 1991) provides an ideal natural laboratory for studying particular instances of the application of this law (see, for examples, Slobin 1996). This article, a case study of that hypothesis and its ramifications in Bulgaria, a country effectively under Communist-Party control from 1944 to 1989, also is concerned with the role of music in constructing notions of national identity.

Since 1989, the citizens of Bulgaria have been involved in an economic, political, ideological and musical struggle—thankfully peaceful—to redefine themselves in a world of new possibilities, free of the constraints of the previous forty-five years.[1] As Donna Buchanan (1996a:227) put it,

> The primary issue underlying the Eastern European political transition is the transformation and reassertion of social identities in the political and economic spheres of culture. It is people's identities...that are ultimately in transition.

During fieldwork in the summer of 2000, I learned that the old forms of music so central to both the state and its opposition during the later years of the communist period had become nearly irrelevant in the years since 1989. In 2000, Bulgarians

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[1] A version of this paper was originally presented at the 36th World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music in July 2001, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The field research for the paper was undertaken in Bulgaria during July and August of 2000, supported by a Short-Term Travel Grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). I am very grateful to the Bulgarian musicologists Claire Levy and Gencho Gaitandzhiev for their help and conversation during that research trip and to the musicians, record company executives and radio producers who agreed to speak with me. The form of the title of the paper is a tip of the hat to another article that deals with an earlier period in the emergence of ethnopop music in Bulgaria, Donna Buchanan's 1999 "Democracy or'Crazyocracy'? Pirin Folk Music and Sociocultural Change in Bulgaria". The paper has also benefited from the sophisticated studies of this genre, some published subsequent to this research, by the Bulgarian musicologists Ventsislav Dimov, Claire Levy, Lozanka Pejcheva, and Rozmari Statelova.

were variously enthralled or repelled by a new form of music that fused popular, modern, traditional and ethnic elements to serve the needs of a society in transition. Though this new music plays many roles in this new political and economic era, my argument here focuses on the way it seemed to be participating in a reconsideration of the nature of Bulgarian national identity.

Music and nationalism in the communist period

During the communist period, state-sponsored music was intimately linked to the Communist Party's nationalist political agenda (documented in, for example, Buchanan 1991, 1995, 1996a; Rice 1994:169-233, 1996; Silverman 1982, 1983, 1989). In its centrally controlled mass media, the state supported a professionalised form of *obrabotena narodna muzika* ("arranged folk music"); a light, European popular music called *estradna muzika* ("music for the [popular] stage"); and western classical music, all symbolic expressions of the Party's progressive goals for humankind, the state and its citizens. The names of the first two genres had political implications. *Narodna* in *narodna muzika* referred in different contexts to "national", making the music a symbol of national identity; to "people" as in the People's Republic of Bulgaria, linking the music to government ideology; and "folk", referring to its roots in rural, peasant society. *Estradna muzika* was borrowed from a Soviet term for popular music, terminologically connecting that genre to the dominant cultural centre of the period.

Political opposition to the state during the communist period was fairly subdued in Bulgaria, and underground literary and artistic movements so important in the Soviet Union, conveyed through *samizdat* ("self-publishing") and *magnitizdat* ("publishing on tape"), were not especially prominent. This situation changed, however, in 1985, when the Bulgarian government instituted a particularly draconian set of regulations aimed at the Muslim minorities in the country, the Turks and Roma (Gypsies). These included the forced changing of Muslim names to Bulgarian or international ones (a process that had begun at least by the early 1970s when I encountered it accidentally during fieldwork among Muslim Bulgarians, the so-called Pomaks) and the outlawing of ostensibly Muslim forms of cultural display such as speaking Turkish, wearing a traditional style of women's pants, and playing Turkish and Rom music (Poulton 1991, Silverman 1989). These policies led to some terrorist reactions on the part of the Turkish minority and their emigration in large numbers to Turkey. As a consequence of the general politicisation of life during this period, some music not controlled by the state began to take on a symbolically oppositional character that it previously had lacked. The most important genres in this respect were rock music sung in Bulgarian and an extraordinarily popular genre of traditional music innocuously labeled *svatbarska muzika* ("wedding music").

In the 1980s *svatbarska muzika* evolved into an important source of patronage for musicians due to the wealth that had accumulated in a "second economy" of petty trading where people were allowed to sell homemade goods, skilled services (such as music) and agricultural produce from their own private

gardens. In a command economy that did not produce the consumer goods they wanted, Bulgarians saved and then spent on symbolic display, such as extravagant weddings. Many musicians, especially Roma, flourished in this environment and developed fabulous technical virtuosity that challenged the formal restrictions placed on state-sponsored *narodna muzika*. Megastars such as Ivo Papazov, whose name had been changed from the Muslim Ibryam Hapazov, stretched the limits of that repertoire by playing louder and faster, employing chromaticism and rapid key changes, emphasising improvisation over precomposition and including in their repertoire musical styles not contained within the narrowly constructed limits of *narodna muzika*, especially Rom music and the music of Bulgaria's Balkan neighbours. In the politicised context of the late 1980s, this musical style became an icon of the possibilities of personal freedom and expression within a totalitarian regime and a harbinger of the political changes to come (Buchanan 1996a, Rice 1996).

Also in the 1980s, rock in Bulgarian enjoyed a "spontaneous boom" as the result of a "euphoria" created by the loosening of ideological restrictions during the period of *glasnost* ("openness") mandated by the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev. Nearly every provincial town had at least one band and a "rock scene." Called BG-rock, its musical style and its overtly political texts provided a source of inspiration to some of those with antigovernment leanings in a context where Anglo-American rock and jazz had been favourite targets of anticapitalist discourse (Statelova 1995a:70-73).

The state-supported musical genres played, as it were, into two dominant but contradictory discourses of the period: cultural and economic progress toward a universal industrialism via communism and monoethnic nationalism. Progressive industrialism, the goal of both liberal and Marxist philosophies, should lead to "the withering away of nationalism" (Gellner 1997:32), but that has not happened, and both principles coexisted in Bulgaria during the communist period.

During that time, western classical music and *estradna muzika* exemplified the progressive goals of the Bulgarian state. Furthermore, the aesthetic ideals and practices of western classical music were held out as the highest standard of human achievement to which *narodna muzika* should aspire. Thus, the arrangements of *narodna muzika*, disseminated in the mass media, mimicked the principles of western classical music, transforming traditional solo and small-group performances of vocal and instrumental music into orchestral and choral textures and limiting the inevitable variations and improvisations of aural tradition through the use of notated arrangements made by classically trained composers.

Arranged *narodna muzika*, in addition to being an expression of the government's progressive goals for society, was also the musical site on which Bulgarian nationalism was propagated (Buchanan 1991). Nationalism developed in Bulgaria during the nineteenth century as a reaction against the Ottoman Empire, of which it was a part, and in parallel with similar nationalist movements and philosophies gaining strength throughout Europe. According to Ernest Gellner (1997:2-4),

> Nationalism is a political principle which maintains that similarity of culture is the basic social bond…The aspirations of extreme nationalists are thwarted if their nation-state fails to assemble all the members of the nation, and if it tolerates a significant number of nonmembers within its borders, particularly if they occupy places of importance.

As applied in Bulgaria, and indeed in other Balkan nations, nationalism meant extreme hostility toward the Ottoman Empire and a negative attitude toward its own "Ottoman legacy"; "a conscious effort to belittle, ignore, distort, deride, and even negate" the nationalist histories of its Balkan neighbors (Todorova 1997:183); and efforts to assimilate (or cause to emigrate) its minority populations of Turks, Gypsies, Greeks, Armenians and Jews (p.176). This nationalist hostility toward its external and internal others is captured touchingly by the Bulgarian musicologist Rozmari Statelova (1995b:43) in an article on ethnic identity in popular music. Bulgarian politicians, she says, having learned these concepts from historians, "advise us to keep our selves separate from other nations, nationalities, and ethnicities, to treat them with animosity or at least with suspicion".

The nationalist discourse also set up a tension between rural villages, where Bulgarian language, Christian Orthodoxy and folkloric cultural practices created both a similarity of culture and a "pure" repository of national identity, and urban areas, where the Ottoman legacy resulted in the "weaving together of ours with the foreign, the traditional with the new, the folkloric with the nonfolkloric", a mixing process to which Gypsies contributed importantly (Vulchinova 1994, cited in Statelova 1995b:43).[2] The nationalist discourse of the communist period favoured and supported a monoethnic notion of national identity by patronising and maintaining *narodna muzika* as a symbol of national purity and shared culture. At the same time, it sought to eradicate and minimise the Ottoman legacy by, among other things, trying to limit and control the popularity of *svatbarska muzika*, which celebrated and continued that legacy and which challenged the dominant, and demographically false, discourse of the monoethnic nation-state.

A new genre for a new era

On 10 November 1989, an internal coup within the Communist Party ended its forty-five year rule, an event that some have attributed to a reaction against the nationalist excesses of the late 1980s. By the summer of 2000, the major forms of traditional and popular music that had played such an important role in supporting and opposing the state during the communist era were almost completely absent from the now deregulated music media and had lost much of their cultural significance except as relics of a time past. (For discussions of the

[2] Members of this ethnic group prefer the label Roma, especially in political contexts and intellectual discourse. I mainly use it in this article, but occasionally, as here, I use the word Gypsy when it represents the terminology and viewpoint of Bulgarian commentators.

changes in musical production in Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, caused by media deregulation, see Kurkela 1993, 1995.) The political potential of BG-rock seemed little more than a nostalgic memory for its fans, though an Anglo-American-influenced rock scene still appealed to some young people. Only a couple of wedding bands were making a go of it in an economy that had left many people too poor to patronise lavish musical displays at weddings; the only new recording of Ivo Papazov I could find on the market was his unremarkable participation as an accompanying musician on a singer's album. *Obrabotena narodna muzika* was still shown occasionally on the national television station, but almost completely ignored by private, market-driven radio stations. As Emiliya Stoyanova, a radio programmer and journalist for a station called Radio Signal + that otherwise broadcast what she called "modern folk" told me in an interview, "In general 'the mystery of the Bulgarians voices' [the large, state-supported a cappella choirs that became famous in the 'world-music' market during the late 1980s] are not liked very much by our listeners" (see Buchanan 1996b for more on the mystery). She admitted, however, that many listeners continue to enjoy solo vocal and instrumental performances accompanied by a small ensemble, the sort of music they might hear in a restaurant or tavern. Finally, *estradna muzika* had almost completely disappeared as a genre label and a sound, replaced by the new English-derived terms *pop* and *popmuzika* and new beats derived from local forms of ethnic music.

The almost complete disappearance of these previously crucial musical genres from the media soundscape of 2000 indicated that merely updating these old genres has not been an adequate artistic response to the momentous changes in cultural, social, political and economic life during the postcommunist transition. A new genre of music was apparently required, and indeed a new one seemed to dominate the Bulgarian "mediascape" and journalistic and academic discourse in 2000.

The new genre, which goes by a bewildering variety of names, consists in the first instance of an appropriation of Balkan musical styles from neighbouring countries where musicians had, at least since the 1960s and 1970s, engaged in a fusion of "folk", "ethnic" and "national" elements with western pop styles, a fusion that the state had denied to Bulgarian musicians.[3] The most important of these influences came from Yugoslav "newly composed folk music" (NCFM), which had begun in 1964 and by the 1980s consisted of a "compilation" of regional styles (especially Macedonian rhythms, fast Serbian dance music and Bosnian "oriental" singing) and Gypsy music (Rasmussen 1995:247). Also in the Bulgarian mix of 2000 were borrowings from similar fusions of local and international styles in genres called *Türk pop müzigi* from

[3] In the 1980s, famous wedding musicians like Ivo Papazov and "orchestras" like Kristal, Kozari and Kanarite were working out such a fusion outside the framework of the national media. Perhaps the most direct precursor of the current *popfolk* movement was a "mythical figure", a singer called "Hisarski pop", who sang songs in Bulgarian with elements from "Greek *laika*, Serbian tavern songs, Thracian folk songs, and old *shlageri*", a kind of central European popular song (Dimov 2001:33).

Turkey and *laika* and *rebetika* from Greece.[4] A potpourri of "world music" influences, especially flamenco from Spain and various Latin American styles, played a minor role, but added to the cosmopolitan feel of the new genre.

In addition to the obvious indebtedness of the new genre to other Balkan music (here I, like Maria Todorova (1997), include Turkey in the Balkans), important local elements contribute to a sense that the style is Bulgarian as well as Balkan. First, while a significant portion of the repertoire consisted of cover versions (*kûver versii*, *kûveri*) of songs in Serbian, Turkish and Greek, many Bulgarian commentators point out that they had been "Bulgarianised" by translating the original texts or writing new ones in Bulgarian (Statelova 2001:68). Second, most commentators find the roots of the new genre in *svatbarska muzika*, which in this new form has evolved away from its emphasis on virtuosic instrumental solos toward songs in the verse-refrain-interlude structure of popular music. Third, the new genre and *svatbarska muzika* share, along with NCFM, an "oriental" sensibility, located in the use of microtones and *makam*-like instrumental improvisations, Rom dance rhythms and the prominent, though hardly exclusive, role played by Bulgarian Rom performers. Fourth, Bulgarians regard the southwestern part of the country as part of the larger Balkan region known as Macedonia, and an important segment of the repertoire of the new genre consists of Macedonian-style "authored songs on a folklore basis" (Dimov 2001:13); an important constituent of NCFM, they have been popular in many parts of Bulgaria at least since the 1920s and 1930s. Fifth, occasional echoes of Bulgarian folk instruments and vocal style are inserted into some recordings.

As befits an emergent genre, the labelling of this music has been both fluid and contentious and provides a starting point for analysing its cultural salience. There are more or less two trends in the naming of the genre. One collection of names uses English-language-derived terms and focuses on its relationship to and mix of traditional, popular and ethnic music. The most frequently used name in 2000, as far as I could tell, was *popfolk*, though other names have been and were used, including *folk*, *novfolk* ("new folk"), *folk end roll*, *folkrok*, and *etnorok* (Dimov 2001:16); Emiliya Stoyanova of Radio Signal + called it *moderen folk*. The contrasting trend employs a Turkish-language-derived term, *chalga*, which references the prominent role of Gypsy musicians and the indebtedness of the genre, in some respects at least, to Turkish culture and the Ottoman legacy. Musicians, apparently as suspicious of labels as their

[4] Some Bulgarian commentators have likened this new Bulgarian genre to the Turkish genre "Arabesk", and at the sociological level, in terms of their working-class fans and exclusion from official media, this may be so. But by the late 1990s, the synthesiser-based sound and duple meters of *Türk pop müzigi*, a genre distinguished from Arabesk and other popular forms in the Turkish *Billboard*-like magazine, *Müsik Vizyon*, and exemplified by a performer such as Tarkan, seemed to me a closer musical relative of the new Bulgarian genre than the orchestral string texture of Arabesk. I am grateful to Sonia Tamar Seeman for sharing her recordings, magazines and knowledge of the Turkish musical scene with me.

counterparts in other parts of the world, seem to enjoy making up yet more alternatives, in the form of puns like *balkanto* and *cha-cha-chalga*, to amuse and confuse. Given the proliferation of genre names, the Bulgarian musicologist who has studied most thoroughly its history, social significance and labelling has felt the need to create an "etic" term that cuts neutrally through the "emic" terminological thicket; he calls the genre *etnopopmuzika* (Dimov 1995, 2001).

Popfolk and its terminological cousins are formed from the English words popular, folk, ethnic and rock. These labels capture not only the new union of these types of music, which were kept apart ideologically and practically in the communist era, but the symbolic link of the genre to a new, Americanised, anglicised form of modernity that many Bulgarians have been seeking since 1989. These terms seem to distance the genre from any association with the Soviet-derived, Slavic terms once used for folk and popular music.

Chalga, on the other hand, is originally a Turkish word meaning musical instrument. Before its use as a name for this new genre, the root word had appeared in Bulgarian in the forms *chalgiya*, which referred to a small ensemble that played Ottoman-derived urban music on a mixture of Middle Eastern and European instruments, and *chalgadzhiya*, a Rom professional instrumentalist, especially a wedding musician. Emiliya Stoyanova suggested that *chalga* had been a largely neutral name or even positive name for the genre until a "war of words" in newspapers and magazines in 1997 between practitioners and opponents of the genre. Journalists and commentators "inserted the idea that it was a sign of bad taste and a synonym for poorly made music". Also it doesn't help that the music is associated with Gypsy culture and musicians. On the other hand, Stoyanova recalled the positive connotation of the word *chalgadzhiya* among Bulgarian musicians being trained in specialised schools and conservatories to perform "arranged folklore"; they told her in interviews about how they would go to a wedding to hear "a fabulous *chalgadzhiya*", that is, "a powerful musician, a master, an improviser". Similarly, Rom musicians regard the label positively: "Among Rom musicians *chalga* is used to mean our music, free, virtuosic, impressive, masterful, celebratory, good" (Pejcheva 1999:64, quoted in Dimov 2001:17). *Chalga* thus captures the association of the genre with Roma and Rom music and with Turkish cultural influences, and people's views of those associations and influences seem to affect whether they regard the genre and this label in neutral, positive or negative terms.

Whether called *popfolk* or *chalga*, it began as an appropriation of what once were considered, during the communist regime, foreign and therefore suspect musical styles and a rejection of the kinds of music that were supported during that period. The music of Bulgaria's Balkan neighbours had been popular during the communist period as a reaction against the nationalist and communist ideology of the state and against the arranged *narodna muzika* promoted by the state as representative of that ideology. During the later years of the communist period many people tuned out the national radio station that broadcast that music and that ideology and tuned in to Serbian, Greek and Turkish radio stations, which broadcast new forms of popular music that Bulgarians could relate to—music with a Balkan accent.

On a number of trips to Bulgaria in the 1980s, I was struck by the soundscape of a village I visited frequently in the mountains north of Sofia, the capital, which is fairly close to the Serbian border. There, radios set to receive Serbian NCFM echoed across the hills, not Bulgarian *narodna muzika* on the national radio station. In an interview in 2000, Evgenij Dimitrov, the thirty-something musical director of a popular *popfolk* group called Ku-ku Bend and of a recording company, Bulgarska Muzikalna Kompaniya, that specialised in producing *popfolk*, explained his generation's relation to *narodna muzika* and to the popular ethnopop fusions they could hear on the radio from neighbouring countries.

> At least for my generation, in the years when I grew up and developed as a musician, folklore was locked up in a cage, thanks to the politics of the former regime. They locked up Bulgarian folklore in national ensembles of song and dance…For me and my generation the term "Bulgarian folklore" was connected only with what these ensembles were doing…Official music, official Bulgarian folklore, was buttoned up and was like a museum.

He explained that, although there were alternatives to *narodna muzika* such as "*estradna muzika*, a concept taken from the Soviet Union", and rock music, which imitated American and European models,

> People had a need to listen to music that was close to their hearts and souls, and so there occurred an influx of music from neighbouring countries: Serbia, Greece and Turkey. This music was nowhere officially allowed or produced [in Bulgaria], but it was accepted with open arms by ordinary people…The recordings were sold illegally in street stalls, in markets. They made pirate copies. People found every way to obtain them. …In those days there was no local equivalent…Perhaps for that reason we haven't been able to cleanse ourselves of borrowings, of this influx of Serbian, Greek and Turkish music. Even ten years after the democratic changes, the influence from there continues. They still copy many Serbian, Greek and Turkish songs, translated into Bulgarian. Simply they sound close and familiar to Bulgarians, so much so that they have nearly become native folk to them.

After 1989, when there were no government impediments to experiments with new musical styles, Bulgarian musicians began to write their own song words in Bulgarian to well-known melodies from Rom, Macedonian, Serbian, Turkish and Greek hit songs. In this way, they appropriated Balkan musical styles, making them into a Bulgarian style that was already in some sense "ours" but which even someone involved in its production regards as in need of "cleansing" of its foreignness.

The components of *popfolk/chalga*

The components of *popfolk/chalga* include, minimally, its musical style, especially its rhythms, its lyrics and its performance conventions.

The rhythms of *popfolk*

Stylistically, *popfolk* has two main "streams". The first is based on "authored" Macedonian urban songs, which Claire Levy (in press) likens to U.S. country music, not in its musical style but in its orientation toward conservatism and the majority culture, and which some consider the "higher layer" and the locus of "higher values" in *popfolk* (Dimov 2001:135). A basic metrical marker of this stream is music in 7(3+2+2) to which traditional open-circle dances are done. Levy calls the second stream "oriental" and likens it to black music in the U.S., again not based on musical style but on its orientation towards values that stand in opposition to and challenge the majority culture. A basic rhythmic marker of this stream is the Rom *kyuchek* rhythm—or more precisely *kyuchek* rhythms—to which solo dancing with echoes of belly dancing and western popular dance are performed. As a type of Rom music, *kyuchek*s were either played as instrumentals or they had words in Romany. As such, they were signs of difference but also symbols of a kind of freedom of expression denied to Bulgarians during the communist period. Most *popfolk* songs borrow one of the two basic *kyuchek* rhythms, a duple metre (the other is in 9 = 2+2+2+3) that repeats a rhythmic ostinato represented in the following way:

Beats:	1 2
Implicit pulses:	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
Bass/drum beat:	x x x x

Serbians had already appropriated that beat from Gypsy music in the 1980s to create NCFM, and it is an important component of *Türk pop müzigi*. It is this stream that seems to attract the label *chalga* in its pejorative sense.

The popularity of these two streams seems to have varied over the years. Macedonian songs were at the core of the movement when *folk* first burst on the scene in 1992 at a festival called *Pirin Folk* (Buchanan 1998, 1999, Peters 1998). (The Pirin Mountains provide the Bulgarian name for the Macedonian region of the country.) Around 1994 the *kyuchek* stream seemed to start gaining momentum (Evgenij Dimitrov interview; Dimov 2001 provides a detailed history of the genre). By the summer of 2000, the *kyuchek* stream seemed to be completely dominant in the media, at least in Sofia. To give just one example, one evening I monitored a call-in show on Radio Signal + where listeners sent greetings to their friends and relatives in the form of requests for favorite songs. Over the course of an hour and a half, only one Macedonian song was requested compared to twelve songs in the *kyuchek* rhythm. The other tributaries to the *popfolk* river during that ninety-minute broadcast segment were three slow ballads, two Bulgarian-language songs in Greek style, a Serbian NCFM song and an American pop song. Other possibilities within *popfolk* not heard that night and thus perhaps marginal to it include Bulgarian traditional songs with modernised accompaniment from regions other than Macedonia and songs with references to swing-jazz, flamenco or Latin-American rhythms.

The lyrics of *popfolk*

Popfolk lyrics focus mainly on contemporary themes in a contemporary language using rhyme, a poetic structure that in this context is a sign of modernity. These

features contrast with the lyrics of traditional Bulgarian songs, which do not use rhyme and which deal with features of life, such as calendar rituals and patterns of work, that have largely disappeared (Rice 1994:91-165). I participated in an interview and call-in show about *popfolk* on Radio Signal +, and one caller, Lyubka Rondova, herself a *popfolk* singer of Macedonian songs, put the matter colourfully:

> Each era, each generation, has its own new music. Naturally our children cannot, in this fast-paced technocratic period, sing about lambs, wedding kegs [of brandy], and leggings [on traditional pants].

Popfolk songwriters have responded to that relevance gap by inventing new texts on modern themes, including current events such as devaluation of the currency, the increasing crime rate, poverty that keeps young people from marrying, and such mundane amusements of the new life as vacationing at the Black Sea and taking the train to Istanbul. Instead of climbing on a horse or a cart as they do in village songs, *popfolk* singers dream of owning BMWs. For some Bulgarians, one of the most shocking new themes in *popfolk* is sex, treated graphically though always with humour. One song popular in 2000, "Monika, Monika, Monika", even made fun in astonishing detail of the Monica Lewinsky–Bill Clinton scandal of the late 1990s. Less well developed in the genre as a whole but a prominent aspect of songs by Ku-ku Bend is overt political critique and satire.

Ventsislav Dimov (2001:136-68), in the most systematic discussion to date of the lyrics, divides them between the representations of male and female values. Men in Bulgaria today seek "strength and power" over society, which are represented in this transitional period by heroes such as football players, gigolos, "businessmen, wrestlers [thugs who run protection rackets], and the nouveau riche". Their success is represented in these songs by social symbols such as western cars (Mercedes and BMW), mobile phones, access to beautiful women and sex, fraudulent business deals (*dalavera*, *mente*) and lots of money. Women's values are expressed in "sentimental, romantic, emotional, erotic" songs that speak of love, seduction, happiness, marriage, lovesickness, house work, the "sweet life" with a rich man, "family coziness," parents, children and the motherland (*rodina*).

While the values in the women's songs correspond rather well to traditional Bulgarian values as surveyed by a sociologist (Hristova 1997, cited in Dimov 2001:150), men's songs seem to reflect new values and behaviours brought on by the tensions and problems of the new life in Bulgaria during the transition. This is not always a pretty picture. The welcome, new political freedom has been paid for with increased poverty and joblessness, a decaying infrastructure, loss in value of government pensions among the elderly due to inflation, loss of life savings though pyramid schemes and bank fraud, and the concentration of exorbitant wealth in the hands of a few mendacious politicians, businessmen and gangsters. Martin Karbovski, a Bulgarian journalist who finds *chalga* as cheap as the new country and its citizens are poor, disagrees with some

commentators who have suggested that *chalga* makes an otherwise noble nation ignoble. Rather, he believes that "*Chalga* does not make a nation look simple. A simple nation gives birth to *chalga*". After reviewing the sad reality of Bulgaria today he concludes,

> These pictures are not so horrible if you put music on top of them…This music should be happy, to speak of chicks and fancy cars, dough and bandits, love and painful separation. Misery wants its sound recordings and it has gotten them. Let the music play! (Karbovski 1999, cited in Dimov 2001:135-36).

So tight is the fit, in his view, between the new genre and the new life that he renames the country that loves, and in his view deserves, this music Chalgaria (Ibid, p.8).

Performances of *popfolk* songs

The performance style of *popfolk* is as thoroughly modern as the lyrics and the instruments. The male singers tend to adopt the rough look of the crooks and businessmen who are the heroes of the songs, speak on mobile phones, do deals and hang out with beautiful women. The biggest stars of *popfolk*, however, are young women who, influenced perhaps by Madonna, typically use one name, often a modern one such as Gloria, Kamelia or Lia. (Well-wishers during my ninety-minute radio sound check requested female singers to male ones eleven to six, with three duets.) Referred to in the press as "sex-appealing women" and *seksbombi*, they dress provocatively on album covers and, when they sing, move their hips and bodies sexily in motions related to social dancing in America, Rom *kyuchek*s and Middle-Eastern belly-dance styles. They are the perfect objects of men's desire and a symbol of their success.

This look and behaviour were most surprising, to me at least, when the singers sang Bulgarian songs with completely convincing and very skilled traditional ornamentation. Many of the singers have deep roots in the rural folk tradition by virtue of parents who were performers and by having been educated in the state-run high schools and university-level academy for folk music. One such singer I interviewed, Tsvetelina, who was born into a musical family in the Pirin region, claimed to enjoy singing regional folk songs from Macedonia, Thrace and Strandzha and put a few of them on each of her albums. She said that she would perform more of them if she thought there was a market for them, but she did not believe there was, and so she sang mainly *popfolk* songs. One of her biggest hits, "100 Mercedes", glorifies, it seems to me with some irony, the new material values and the link between political and sexual freedom for women made possible by democracy (Dimov 2001:77):

Demokratka stanax, bate,	I became a democratic woman, brother,
I svobodna sum sega.	And now I am free.
Sto mertsedesa da imam, sto, sto!	May I have a 100 Mercedes, a 100, a 100!
Sto godini da gi karam, sto, sto!	May I have 100 years to drive them, a 100, a 100!
Sto muzhe da iskat moyata ruka!	May a 100 men desire my hand!

Although singers and musicians told me that concerts and dance-club performances provide their main sources of income, *popfolk* is a mass-mediated music. A sociological study in 1999 claimed that it accounted for 85% of music production in the country (Dajnov 1999:65; cited in Dimov 2001:8). The early 1990s saw an efflorescence of private recording companies, about thirty of which were devoted mainly to *popfolk* (Dimov 2001:44). By the summer of 2000, a much smaller number seemed to dominate the market, the most prominent being Payner Studio, Bulgarska Muzikalna Kompaniya (BMK), Ara Audio-Video and Milena Rekûrdz. In Sofia, two private radio stations, Radio Signal + and Radio Veselina, and a number of cable video channels were devoted almost entirely to *popfolk*, although other stations broadcast it as well. Significantly, the national television and radio stations paid little attention to the genre and had banned one group, Evgenij Dimitrov's Ku-ku Bend, because of the political satire they weave into their lyrics and performances.

Some videos documented concerts and others contained stagings of the content of the lyrics. The concerts typically presented a potpourri of singers, often affiliated with a particular record company or from a festival devoted to this kind of music. The female singers looked beautiful and moved suggestively; the male singers looked a bit sleazy. The audiences contained a huge age range from young children between six and twelve years of age to teenagers and young adults to the forty-and fifty-year-old parents of the children. It seems that *popfolk* appeals to people of nearly every generation. (Radio Signal +, which broadcasts *moderern folk* and *chalga*, aims at an even wider range of listeners in its slogan, "music for your grandparents and your grandchildren".) Young boys and girls were allowed on stage to give flowers and exchange a hug or kiss on the cheek with the performers. This behaviour, it seemed to me, diffused the sexuality of the performances and reminded me of the teenybopper response to the sexuality of Madonna's material girl and more recently of Britney Spears.

The significance of *popfolk/chalga*

Popfolk or *chalga* is at once a popular art, a commodity with economic value, a site for modelling new behaviours made possible by the transition from communism to capitalism, and a wildly polysemic symbol. While all these topics have been touched on to some degree above, I would like to conclude by considering in more detail its symbolic meaning, its signification if you will. In particular, I wish to suggest that the combination of musical elements in *popfolk* creates a polysemic sign whose interpretation articulates the place of its makers, fans and opponents in relation to Bulgarian, Rom, Balkan and modern, globalised cultures and in so doing participates in, among other projects, the redefinition of Bulgarian national identity.

Popfolk and its overwhelming popularity during the 1990s seems to mount an overt challenge to two cornerstones of communist-era ideology: cultural progress based on a western-European elite model and monoethnic nationalism, values that seem to live on among some politicians and intellectuals in the postcommunist transition. As a complex symbol, *popfolk* itself contains

aspects of these ideas. The use of Bulgarian language, Macedonian songs, occasional references to the Bulgarian village tradition, coupled with its extraordinary popularity among Bulgarians, place the genre within a conceptual framework interpreted within the country as Bulgarian. The sound of the genre (its synthesisers and electronic beats), the stylish image of its performers and its rhyming, ironic lyrics link it to developments in a modern, global culture; if not a symbol of elite values, the modern in *popfolk*, it seems to me, gives its fans hope that some day the economic progress they associate with western European and global markets will come their way.

As *chalga*, however, the genre seems to fly in the face of those values by performing Bulgaria's Ottoman legacy and by bringing to artistic and performative prominence what many intellectuals condemn as cheap and tasteless. They are referring to the sex-filled song texts, the Balkan musical styles, the use of musical features associated with Rom culture and the ethnicity and appearance of some of the performers. Whatever is lowbrow about *popfolk* is, I believe, a conscious reaction by its makers and fans to the highbrow tone of communist culture and propaganda. *Popfolk* is a way of letting off steam for the vast majority of Bulgarians—steam that scalds some intellectuals and politicians.

By performing Bulgaria's Ottoman legacy, *chalga* seems to expand Bulgarian national identity beyond notions of unique, "clean", "pure" ethnocultural identity unsoiled by contact with others, one with a place for minorities alongside the majority and one that understands itself as sharing values, history and ways of life with neighbours in the Balkan region. For some intellectuals and musicians raised under a government that constructed and promoted a narrow Bulgarian nationalism in music, the popularity of *popfolk* with masses of people, and the relative absence of Bulgarian *narodna muzika* from the airwaves, is an affront to their national feelings. The fact that the songs are in Bulgarian is not enough to satisfy them. They hear in the music references to Rom, Turkish, Serbian and Greek styles, and they are not pleased.[5]

In addition, some educated Bulgarians are worried about their position in the world. Bulgaria has just left behind four decades in the "eastern bloc" and not too many years before that more than four hundred years in the Ottoman Empire. Some feel, in other words, that for most of their history they have been cut off from the main developments in European history and culture. This history strikes at their self-confidence, as it puts their status as "Europeans" in question. University students, intellectuals, business leaders and politicians hope that

[5] The interpretation of *popfolk* in Bulgaria in the 1990s as a challenge to received notions of national identity closely mirrors Rasmussen's (1995) characterisation of "newly composed folk music" (see also Rasmussen 2002). Its critics, presumably in the 1980s, called it "vulgar", "foreign Turkish-Arabic ethnic ersatz", "a denationalization of Yugoslav music", and "culturally subversive". While it exposed a tension between the west as "culturally progressive" and the east as "regressive", she argues that "NCFM is an expression of the Yugoslav post-1945 experiment as a nation; that is, this nation's experience of positioning itself within European culture while affirming its own identity…as a Balkan subculture" (p.255).

Bulgaria will soon become a full-fledged member of what they call "the European family". For such people, *popfolk* is an affront because its use of Balkan forms of music harkens back to a benighted past that they would prefer to put behind them and forget. Of course, not all intellectuals are so worried, and some are prepared to reevaluate, even accept their "balkanness". For example, a group of social scientists faced with "messages coming from Europe that it wants to absorb the people of its eastern regions" felt the need to respond to this pressure by holding a symposium on the question, "Is it possible to speak of a *homo balkanikus*?" (Galanova 1995:107). For classically trained artists and young intellectuals, *popfolk* is abhorrent because it glamorises Bulgaria's position in a marginalised part of Europe that has never been fully part of the European mainstream. Those who seek Bulgaria's future in a modern Europe tend to prefer classical music and popular music, like rock and rap, associated with western Europe and the United States and to hate *chalga*. To give just one example, an internet website presumably created by a well-educated young person, opened with a page that said only: "*Chalga*: the worst music in the world". It then segued automatically into a second page with the words: "Our opinion of *chalga*". An animated figure of a man wearing only shorts then moved across the screen, stopped, dropped his pants and urinated on the word *chalga* (*www.welcome.to/popfolk*).

The evidence for *popfolk* as a musical symbol of an expanded national identity lies both in its musical features and in the strident critique it has evoked from what some Bulgarian students of the genre call the "intellectual elite": journalists, writers, poets and scholars. The negative reaction began as early as the mid-1990s, with the first "boom" of this genre:

> Even pop and rock musicians, who until quite recently protested against censorship during totalitarian times, were now crying loudly against *chalga* and calling for new institutional controls to limit its access to the media (Levy, 2002).

In a similar vein, a composer told the press that in the next election he would vote for the politicians who would ban it. In fact, "the politicians didn't ban it, but included it in their election campaigns; [its popularity] guaranteed electoral success" (Dimov 2001:8). Clearly, another value of the communist period, social control, had not yet been shed by some of the "elite". The 1997 "war of words" in newspapers continued the negative commentary even if it was, according to Emiliya Stoyanova, merely

> pseudo-intellectual display…Our listeners come from all social classes, not only drivers and store clerks, but doctors, writers, actors. Some work in the Ministry of Defense and others in parliament. [We know because] to all we have broadcast well wishes. But when they get up in front of the media, they speak disparagingly of *chalga*.

A famous conductor in an interview in 1998 said that *chalga* was the only thing that would make him emigrate from Bulgaria (Dimov 2001:8).

In 1999, according to Levy (2002), a group of citizens circulated a petition to the Bulgarian parliament calling for a "cleansing" of "bad", "vulgar" and "strange" sounds produced by the "uncivilized experiences of the local Gypsies and Turks". They feared that this music would result in the "Gypsification" and "Turkification" of the nation. One even complained that "It will not be unexpected if soon our national hymns start to sound more oriental" (Levy 2000:87), the "more" perhaps indicating that he understood that the presence of an augmented second in the national anthem already sounds somewhat "oriental" and links the nation musically to an "east". In 2000, a prominent young conductor and arranger in the tradition of *obrabotena narodna muzika* told me that he found one of its leading male singers, Slavi Trifonov of Ku-ku Bend, "disgusting". The title of the last section of Ventsislav Dimov's (2001) book on the "ethnopop boom" is, in fact, "disgust", and he points out that the cause of this disgust, so evident in the history of the elite response to the genre, has not been theorised.

Chalga performs an Ottoman legacy that is simultaneously external to Bulgaria (musical styles from neighbouring countries in the Balkans) and internal (Rom musicians and musical elements), in the process confusing the neat distinctions of national ideology between "our" culture and "other" cultures. While nationalist discourse insists on the uniqueness of Bulgarian culture, *chalga* and its fans proclaim an expanded identity that embraces "balkanness". Nationalism also denies "places of importance" for minorities and encourages their assimilation, and yet *chalga* celebrates the centrality of local Roma to Bulgarian cultural life. As Statelova (2001:68) put it, "In contrast to folk music, [popfolk] is antiethnocentric".

A number of Bulgarian scholars have interpreted c*halga* as the "Balkans in Bulgaria" (Statelova 1995a:60) and "above all Balkan", pointing out that its popularity represents "a broadening of contemporary Bulgarian identity" (Dimov 2001:95). When the organisers of the festival called Pirin Folk call it "the most Bulgarian music" because it is so popular with audiences at the same time that the audience is dancing *kyucheks* and the Greek *syrtaki*, Dimov concludes that the standard nationalist discourse that valorises "ours" while denigrating the foreign is reversed by those who make *popfolk* their "cultural choice" (p.94). In effect, the masses, faced with a "macrocultural" choice between east and west have, through their aesthetic preference for Balkan and oriental sounds, chosen the east. As one commentator put it, "to the question, Western or Eastern, today most of our politicians answer the West, but traditional culture gives exactly the opposite answer" (Daskalov 1999, cited in Dimov 2001:94). But while nationalists may object to an expansion of national identity to include shared aspects of culture with other Balkan nations, this is not enough in itself, it seems to me, to explain their disgust. Furthermore, calling the genre Balkan, which it surely is, effectively erases or at least minimises the role of Roma in constructing and performing the genre. It is precisely when it is understood as the "Gypsy in Bulgaria" that the elite's disgust with it makes most sense.

Although Claire Levy (2000, 2002) does not directly address the issue of disgust, she has taken the next step in its theorisation. While many critics take

what seems to be an aesthetic stand against the music, she believes that racism and negative attitudes toward Roma may be at the centre of the "cultural elite's" distaste for this music. She claims that this elite views *chalga* "as an enemy, threatening the national culture" (Levy 2002). As she points out, the eastern and oriental qualities in *chalga* and its popularity are not mere traces but by a major part of "the cultural heritage of Bulgaria", where much of the language and musical vocabulary is an expression of "lively local inter-ethnic exchanges". The problem for her is that narrow nationalism "stimulates and reinforces, if not a racist, then at least a hostile attitude toward the bearers of any presumed 'non-Bulgarian' influences", namely the Roma and Turks. She interprets *chalga* as "a sign of modern hybridity and a specific form of multiculturalism". Unfortunately from her point of view, the cultural elites cling to an older point of view that identifies the nation as coterminous with its majority ethnic culture. In this context, "*chalga* has become a problematic site, raising, along with issues of identity, issues of tolerance, pluralism, and cultural relativism". Although she doesn't quite state it, it seems to me she understands that *chalga* and its popularity have constructed a counterdiscourse in music that attacks and discredits the literate discourse of the elite and the nationalist "idea of 'cultural purity' and 'authenticity'". I would further suggest that the elite commentary implies that they understand *chalga*'s threat to their position, not so much intellectually, but at a gut level that is expressed as an aesthetic disgust with the music because of its symbolic and performative association with Gypsy culture, a culture that one of Statelova's (2001:68) intellectual friends characterises as "simply not from our world". It surely further aggravates those elites that their ability to set, monitor and control taste and public ideology is effectively circumvented by mass-mediated, market-driven, electronically transmitted, performative discourses such as *chalga*.

The ideological tensions created by the popularity of *chalga* resonate with some of Maria Todorova's points about the Ottoman legacy in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997). As she points out, there are two views of that legacy. One is that Balkan nation-states and their cultures represent a complete break with the Ottoman past; the other argues for "a complex symbiosis of Turkish, Islamic, and Byzantine/Balkan traditions" (p.164) that "on the level of popular culture and everyday life...proved much more persistent" (p.180). The first of these positions, "the complete break" model as she calls it, won out politically and has been transmitted and

> shaped by a generation of historians, poets, writers, journalists, and other intellectuals, as well as politicians...There are no systematic studies of how deep and successful the penetration of these hegemonic views has been. Even more submerged in the realm of hypotheses is the important question of possible counterperceptions or alternative perceptions coming from different ethnic, social, or age groups within the separate nation-states. (Pp.181-82).

The phenomenon of *chalga*, I believe, is a locus for just such "alternative perceptions", in other words, an expression of the "symbiosis" model and the "persistence" of the Balkan and Ottoman legacy in Bulgaria. Indeed, a number of

my friends who liked both *popfolk* and *narodna muzika* took pride in their Balkan heritage and felt no shame and indeed a certain pride in considering themselves as thoroughly Balkan people. This sense of pride and a desirable Balkan "essence" was captured in a different way by a *popfolk* "girl group" called *Panterite* ("The Panthers"), who sang, "Southern blood is crazy".

Todorova (p.188) also points out that

> The Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the "European" and the "West" has been constructed...The Balkans are left in Europe's thrall, anticivilization, alter ego, the dark side within.

Bulgarian politicians, embracing these negative views of the Balkans, have tried, since 1989, to move Bulgaria out of the Balkans and eastern Europe conceptually and into an integrated Europe with membership in the European Union and NATO. As Todorova (p.183) says,

> The countries defined as Balkan (i.e., the ones that participated in the historical Ottoman sphere) have been moving steadily away from their Ottoman legacy, and with this also from their balkanness, a statement that is devoid of any evaluative element.

But this move, led by politicians and intellectuals, has been thwarted culturally, at least in the short term, by *chalga*, whose musical form and fans revel precisely in Bulgaria's Ottoman legacy and balkanness.

Conclusion

Popfolk participates simultaneously in many cultural and social domains. It is an art form that is produced extraordinarily well by its makers and loved by many fans. At the same time, its value as a commodity influences aspects of its form and some artistic choices and makes it a target for those who criticise its artistry as "cheap" and "vulgar". It also has symbolic cultural implications since it is interpreted as telling political stories about Bulgarians' position in the modern world and their sense of history. Its performances also model new forms of social behaviour, such as the public display of female sexuality and the potential cultural centrality of the socially marginalised Roma.

Popfolk also seems to be a local, nonverbal, artistic manifestation of more widespread questioning among intellectuals of the idea of nationalism and the nation-state. Ernst Gellner (1997:37-49) posited five stages in the development and practice of nationalism in central and eastern Europe:

(1) the status quo of the Russian, Hapsburg, and Ottoman Empires;
(2) the development of nationalism as a "self-evident...principle of political legitimacy" during the nineteenth century;
(3) the emergence of small states that were "appallingly fragile and feeble" between the world wars;

(4) ethnic cleansing in an attempt to make congruent the political unit and the ethnicity of the population; and
(5) "the attenuation of national feeling", a stage which may be "part reality, part wish fulfillment".

He claims that for the countries of eastern Europe this historical process was interrupted at or before the third stage by the antinationalist ideology of communism. For him the interesting historical question is whether they will emerge in the postcommunist period in stages 3, 4 or 5, and he predicts that it will be different in different places.

The former Yugoslavia clearly emerged in stage four and in fact its heinous politics gave this stage its label. But as Todorova (1997:185) points out, this nationalist pattern is particularly Yugoslav and not generalisable to the Balkans. It is not the result of "Balkan ghosts", "Balkan mentalities", and "ancient enmities", but of power-grabbing political thugs. The Bulgarian case, as represented by the conflict over national identity between the literati and the "ethnopop boom", helps to shore up both Todorova's claims for a variegated, historically contingent Balkans and Gellner's prediction of different stages of nationalism in different places of the former "east bloc". Bulgaria, which endured its stage-four attempts at ethnic cleansing by other names and methods at the end of the communist period, seems to be working its way through stage five, a period of attenuated nationalism to which *popfolk* and *chalga* are contributing in important ways, even as intellectuals drag their feet. In Bulgaria, a mass-mediated musical genre, by whatever name, seems to articulate ordinary Bulgarians' hope for a new understanding of Bulgarian national identity, an understanding that is not rooted in the equation of the state with a majority ethnicity. Rather, "the new music seeks a transcultural identity" (Dimov 2001:9). That new, expanded sense of national identity was captured in a new name for the country, Chalgaria, which was a kind of joke intended to disparage the genre and the country that spawned it. However, there is a more positive take on the name, the one I intend here, namely a country where a new musical genre may be helping Bulgarians understand themselves in a new way that transcends the limitations of monoethnic nationalism.

Lozanka Pejcheva (1998:141) regards as "an open question" whether the Gypsy element in *chalga* "traumatizes and ruins or opens up and enlarges Bulgarian identity". In fact, she and many of her musicological colleagues, including myself, have answered the question firmly on the side of enlargement. What is an open question, it seems to me, is whether a popular music form like *chalga* will have the real and effective power to transform ideas of national identity, first of all among the intellectuals and politicians whom it directly challenges and among its fans, who rarely if ever bring these questions to consciousness. In other words, will there be a true "attenuation of nationalism" in Bulgaria, keeping it in Gellner's wished-for fifth stage, or will politicians and intellectuals be unmoved by a mass-mediated, musical discourse and utilize their undeniable power over social policy to implement narrower nationalist ideas from previous "stages"? In the postcommunist transition in Bulgaria, which may have begun as a reaction against excessive nationalism, there has been a

"notorious tolerance" among Bulgarians "as we struggled toward the values of a civil society, which included pluralism, tolerance of cultural differences, and so on" (Levy 2000:70). So perhaps there is no real danger of such a reversion. Perhaps it is simply a matter of a disconnection between a tolerant public policy toward minorities, which will continue, and a persistent and difficult-to-eradicate "ethnic intolerance and even…racism" that manifests itself in some intellectuals' negative commentary on the "poor taste" displayed by *chalga* (Ibid). Perhaps one day Bulgarian intellectuals will realise that the seemingly irreconcilable opposition between a backward, Balkan, Ottoman east, as represented by *chalga*, and a progressive west, "naturalised" in nearly two centuries of discourse, can be reconciled precisely by their union, their synthesis if you will, in a progressive, attenuated nationalism of the sort implied by, for example, the European Union, a nationalism that recognises and even celebrates cultural diversity and cultural connections to others, a nationalism expressed in *chalga*.

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