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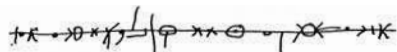
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The Rise and Fall of the Youth Republic in Rural Bulgaria: the Case of Momina Tsarkva



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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricacies of rural transformations in 20th century Bulgaria through the lens of so-called Projects of Modernity. Combining this broad methodological tool with the micro-level analysis of fieldwork anthropology, the article offers insight into the complex agenda and unexpected outcomes of the unorthodox Youth Republic Project. In practical terms, the article serves to stimulate discussions and offer strategies for the sustainability of dying rural communities such as Momina Tsarkva, through the investigation of the history, everyday experiences and cultural legacies inherited from the various Projects of Modernity.

KEYWORDS

Youth Republic; rural ghetto; Strandja-Sakar; projects of modernity; rural transformations; socialism; neo-liberalism

According to Alan Dingsdale, Central and Eastern Europe has undergone three key transformative periods in the 20th century, which he terms Projects of Modernity, where modernity is understood as an experience of practice and way of thinking. Each Project is driven by the search for new futures and each Project has strived to clear out the past, and yet look to the past as a means of creating its vision of the future. The three Projects of key discontinuity in spatial development in the 20th century that he defines are the Nationalist Project after 1920, the Communist Project after World War Two and, finally, the Neo-Liberalist Project after 1989 (Dingsdale 2002).

The legacy of these Projects and the most recent one in particular can offer valuable insights into the present condition of the countryside in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Both the study of the Neo-Liberalist Project and also its practical implementation, however, has been dominated by the urban financial sector. This can be

evidenced in the focus on the macro-economic policies of the period, and as Unwin, Pallot and Johnson suggest, rural life in general and agriculture in particular have almost completely been ignored, as they were considered forgotten elements of the rhetoric of transition (Unwin, Pallot and Johnson 2003, 110-111).

As Duijzings (2013) reminds, the bulk of globalization literature, where globalization and neo-liberalism are treated in tandem, also deals with cities and leaves rural communities out, although processes that have occurred in global cities are equally true for rural environments, such as fragmentation, inequality and global connectivity (Smart in Duijzings 2013).

According to Unwin, Pallot and Johnson, another reason for the lack of attention paid to rural matters in theoretical approaches to transition is the fact that rural life is messy and complex, and it is very difficult to measure, conceptualize and theorize (2003, 111).

Nevertheless, the understanding of the

grand transformations of the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe would not be complete without a thorough investigation of agriculture, which, due to the far-reaching reforms, was kept central to perceptions of socialism (the Communist Project), and, as a result of that, it became one of the first targets of the new post-socialist governments (the Neo-Liberalist Project) throughout the region. In the same vein, as evidenced by Katherine Verdery, between 1990 and 1992 all the countries of the former Eastern bloc had passed a Land Law, which was to regulate the breaking up of state and collective farms that symbolized socialism in the countryside, thus placing agriculture at the epicentre of state reforms (Verdery 2003, 88).

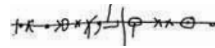
The history of strong agricultural traditions, which during the Nationalist Project in Bulgaria went as far as to unprecedentedly bring to power an Agrarian party, and which was used during the Communist Project in pursuit of a policy of agricultural concentration unmatched outside the Soviet Union (Creed 1998, 16), made Bulgaria an obvious choice for investigation.

The specifically Bulgarian trend of amelioration or 'domestication' of socialism, a term coined by Gerald Creed, was another motivational factor, which, coupled with my scholarly desire to look at a largely neglected, but hugely informative project named the Youth Republic led me to choose the village community of Momina Tsarkva. Its location by the Bulgarian-Turkish border, whose status during the Cold War years had hugely impacted the fate of the community, made it even more peculiar.

In order to investigate the intricacies of the rural transformations during the 1990s on a micro-level, I have relied on close-up fieldwork observation, which, as suggested by Chris Hann (2002, 7), is especially valuable in periods of uncertainty and institutional instability and which was facilitated by the existence of personal contacts and distant relatives in the village. During data collection, I have also relied on archival materials available through the

recently-opened State Archives, and the several local historiographies published in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Before turning to the fundamental dismantling of the socialist system and of the Youth Republic as its product during the 1990s and their effects on rural areas, I will pursue some of the vital paradoxes of the socialist system between the 1950s and the 1980s that spilled over to the Neo-Liberalist Project. Closer attention will be paid to the effects and defects of collectivization, industrialization, rural depopulation, and the Youth Republic, as the final attempt of the socialist state to rejuvenate the Strandja-Sakar region.



Rural Transformations during Socialism

At the time of the communist ascension, 75 per cent of the Bulgarian population lived in rural communities (*Entsiklopedia na Bulgaria* 1988, 153-154) and 68 per cent made their living through agriculture, stock raising and forestry (Znepolski 2011, 145). This predicament largely determined the dominance of agriculture achieved during socialism and the great focus on collectivization that the system immediately established. As Creed has reminded, the ideological linkage forged between communism and collectivization by the Soviet Union further encouraged such a focus and, in time, collectivization was to become a metaphor for the communist transformation of the countryside (Creed 1998, 33; Znepolski 2011, 145). The same centrality also makes agriculture a useful entrée to understanding political and economic forces in the local context (Creed 1998).

In a country where three-quarters of the population lived by the land, changing property rights and, with that, property relations the way socialism did, meant ending the economic and political independence of the large majority of Bulgarians. And as Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery have suggested, controlling the food supply had



paramount importance for state making, a revelation which the Soviet-imported modernization campaign skilfully utilized through collectivization (Kligman, Verdery 2011, 88).

In the early days of communist rule, the fear of collectivization was omnipresent and peasants were, to say, the least reluctant to take part in it (Sanders 1949, 212). Momina Tsarkva was no exception to the rule. From a total population of just over 2700 residents, only 18 men joined the socialist Cooperative farm (TKZS), which was founded in September 1948 as a department within the Universal Cooperative Farm Pchela¹ that had been set up back in 1925 (RDA, 709-1-1). According to Popov-Rumenov, the joiners contributed on average 30 decares (equal to 3 acres) of land per member, which set them in the category of the rural poor (1999, 156-157).

Similarly, in Zamfirovo, Creed has found that figure to be 32 decares per member. Contrary to the general belief shared by both Bulgarian villagers and outside observers that the early joiners were the poorest farmers, Creed suggests that this was merely a stereotype, as the land which they contributed to the TKZS was not all the land they possessed. This was based on the assumption that at this time [October 1948] they were not required to contribute all their land (Creed 198, 56). This thesis, however, is challenged by the Law on the TKZS that was passed in March 1948 and under which members of the TKZS were obliged to contribute all of their land to the cooperative farms, as well as their stock and agricultural tools (State Gazette 28th Feb 1948, cited in Znepolski 2011, 156). Thus, the initial postulation, which suggests that the villagers who had the motivation to join the cooperative farm were mainly those with little or nothing to lose, seems to be more plausible.

In this context, the community of Momina Tsarkva provides an interesting example. In 1945 and 1946 lists of low-income villagers were prepared by the Interim village council in line with the state policy to

provide up to 50 decares to landless villagers. The owing price of the land was due to be remitted once the new landowners joined the TKZS (Znepolski 2011, 149). The names of several of the 18 founding members of the TKZS appear on this list, curiously enough, headed by the future chair of the socialist cooperative (RDA, 156-1-1; RDA, 236-1-1). This provides clues to the economic status of the TKZS founders and confirms that they were not among the well-off villagers.

The experiences in neighbouring Romania where the first collective farms (GACs) attracted predominantly the poor and landless peasantry, who had little to lose and the most to gain if the GACs were a success, shows a similar trend (Kligman, Verdery 2011, 127). Despite the 'rural inelasticity' (Sanders 1949), the socialist regime pressed through with the project of collectivization, which would ultimately take away the attachment of the villagers to the land and turn the land reform into a long-lasting demoralizing factor (Langazov 1984, 129-130; Kaneff 2004, 172). Collectivization, however, changed not only people's connections to the land, but also to themselves and to the state, a tendency that would outlive the regime that had largely brought it into existence.

This tendency reveals one of the great paradoxes of the socialist system of collectivized agriculture, which, on the one hand, sustained the sense of community, but, on the other hand, greatly contributed to the atomization of socialist life (Kideckel 1993, cited in Creed 1998, 69). In the words of Ulf Brunnbauer, ideology became part of social life and vice versa; and while the state colonized the private, the private intruded into the public (2008, 47).

In Momina Tsarkva, very much in the same fashion as in the villages investigated by Deema Kaneff (2004), Gerald Creed (1998) and Lenka Nahodilova (2013), the socialist state increased its encroachment on the private space; on the one hand, through appropriation of time, and, on the other, by transferring traditions from the private to the public domain via the means of 'folklore'.

1) *Pchela* (transl. from Bulgarian) meaning a bee

This was also achieved through the transformation of village families into the primary unit of articulation with the state, whose strategies provoked reform programmes in agriculture (Creed 1998, 69). Traditional dress and customs were increasingly staged in the rural House of Culture [*Chitalishte*], while births, name-giving (aimed at replacing christenings), marriage, and death rituals were gradually arranged in a centralized socialist manner.

However, as the minutes of Momina Tsarkva's council meetings from the mid-1980s testify, none of these rituals was sufficiently adopted by the population four decades into socialist rule, the lowest being the ratio of name-giving rituals. This phenomenon is telling, on the one hand, of the questionable success of the state in replacing the Church with regards to civil rituals, and, equally important, of the dualistic nature and somewhat complacent cooperation of villagers with the state.

Another paradox concerns the fact that Party rule was established quite fundamentally through the all-encompassing land collectivization, which necessitated the 'self-creation' of the Party machine and not the other way round, as is commonly perceived (Kligman, Verdery 2011, 3). Between 1944 and 1958 when total land collectivization was completed in Bulgaria, the regime tested out different strategies in its campaign to 'tame' the countryside, beginning with the period of quota system for produce delivered to the state (so called *naryadi*), class segregation (the *kulaks*), psychological and physical pressure. There were also periods of alleviation of the strict measures (e.g. between May 1949 and the beginning of 1950), only to be followed by even more enhanced collectivization measures (Znepolski 2011, 155-158).

The two waves of increased pressure on landowners were articulated in 1950 and again in 1956. In Momina Tsarkva, from a modest membership of 18 at its establishment in 1948, after the adoption of the forced measures in 1950, the TKZS reached

a membership pool of over 450 members in a matter of a few months. Thanks to these forceful efforts, by the end of the 1950s, Bulgaria became the second country in the world to fully collectivize its agriculture (Creed 1998, 65; Creed 2013). This, however, did not mean eradication of private entrepreneurship or alleviation of the pressure on private proprietors. In fact, the pressure on them increased after 1956.

The pre-existing voluntary cooperative farms, which functioned on the basis of equity and membership fees were liquidated though the establishment of duplicate structures, the main one of which was the TKZS (see Znepolski 2011, 159). In Momina Tsarkva it was the village priest who had also worked as a financier before returning to the village, who was the inspirer and first chair of the Credit Cooperative Farm *Pchela* set up in 1925. By 1942 *Pchela* already boasted a membership pool of 104 men (RDA 127K-1-3).

In line with the TKZS law amendments of 1947 and 1948, however, the Momina Tsarkva TKZS was set up as a farm within *Pchela*, a farm that would slowly overtake its functions. The proponents of private property relations, who did not follow suit and join the TKZS in 1950, had joined the TKZS by 1956, after the ostentatious internment of 40 unruly families in the Balkan town of Kotel (Interview ZP, Dec 2013). Migevev (1995) and Yosifov (1998) document the various forms of economic, psychological and physical coercion exerted on Bulgarian villagers on a national scale between 1950 and 1956 and, thus, challenge the myth of the insular nature of such practices.

This traumatic 'taming' of the countryside, however, was supposed to fulfil one more task. It had to free rural labour that was needed in the cities to fuel the fast-track process of industrialization. This was also subordinated to the regime's modernization programme, which was in line with Leninist principles proclaiming that society would only reach the desired stage of 'communism' when the distinctions between

‘men and women’, ‘physical and mental labour’ and between ‘town and countryside’ have disappeared (Tucker 1975, cited in Nahodilova 2013). In pursuit of these tasks, all East European communist regimes were investing huge human and financial resources into dismantling gender, class and social differences, as well as the urban–rural divide (Nahodilova, in Dujizings 2013, 91).

The pressure on villagers was also exacerbated by another agricultural transformation introduced by the Communist Project, which was the mechanization of agriculture. Before 1944² as Sanders (1949), Kaneff (2004) and Creed (1998) have described, the standard cultivation tools in the country were quite basic, relying on the hoe and plow, and, as such, were in need of improvement. Mechanization technology also meant that rising numbers of villagers would lose their jobs, which was especially the case in the 1960s, when ‘collectivization conveniently ensured that labour would follow capital’ (Creed 1998, 37). By the 1970s, however, the process had gone too far, and rural areas were experiencing labour shortages. This turned mechanization into a necessary replacement for dwindling agricultural labour (Creed 1998, 80).

The remaining three interrelated processes, which formed the socialist state agenda to a great extent in Bulgaria, but which would also set the stage for the rise of the Youth Republic were the large-scale industrialization, urbanization and rural outmigration. Industrialization of the country, similarly to land collectivization, was a vital part of the Soviet development strategy, which included structural transformation from an agrarian to an industrial economy (Creed 1998, 126).

The first and foremost outcome of the national policy ‘to industrialise the country as fast as possible’ was rapid urbanization, paralleled with depletion of villages of their youths (Taylor 2006, 45). According to Mincho Semov, 1,164,811 people migrated between 1956 and 1965, and, crucially, 598,606 of them migrated from villages to

cities (Semov 1973, 18). This trend stayed largely unchanged between 1960 and 1975 when, as Ruskova has estimated, 1,299,775 people moved from villages to cities (Ruskova 1987, 27, in Creed 1998, 126).

Such transformation meant in effect that Bulgaria was no longer a rural country, at least not in terms of residence, and the urbanization project was a success, as far as the cities, which unequivocally gained from it, were concerned. This also signified the rapid growth of a ‘rurban’ population in the cities, a process also referred to as a ‘ruralization’ of the city (Simić 1982, cited in Nahodilova 2013, 91). A related tendency was the rise of the so-called worker-peasant category, comprising peasants that relied for their livelihood on both industrial wage and subsistence agriculture (Dorondel and Serban, this volume).

The Burgas region, part of which was and is the village community of Momina Tsarkva, will be used as an illustration of the process of rural outmigration. According to Avramchev and Vulcheva, in 1946, the town of Burgas numbered 50,921 residents, and, by 1965, that number had more than doubled, reaching 121,540³. Of these additional 70,619 residents, only 16,500 were due to natural growth, and the remaining 54,119 were migrants from other towns and villages (2/1970, 55). In other words, 70 percent of the city’s population growth between 1946 and 1965 was achieved through immigration, and, as statistics showed, that was immigration mainly from the surrounding villages.

One of the main motives for the mass migration inflow into Burgas, Avramchev and Vulcheva see in the construction and growth of the Petroleum-chemical plant *Neftochim* in the city, which attracted both specialist and unqualified labour in its thousands, reaching, according to some estimates, 20,000 employees in the plant’s heyday⁴. To illustrate the place of the plant in the national economy it is worth noting that in 1970 *Neftochim* generated industrial production that was equal to the total in-

2) On the 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front usurped power after a successful coup.

3) According to NSI statistics, the population of Burgas as per the 1946 Census numbered 51,323 residents, and in 1965 it was of 117,517 (accessed 20/10/2012).

4) The Neftochim Plant was officially opened by the First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party Todor Zhivkov on 30th December 1963.

dustrial production of capitalist Bulgaria in 1939, as noted in the commemorative publication *Obnoven kray: 1944-1979* (Sharlopov ed. 1979, 12).

Another reason for *Neftochim's* attractiveness was its provision of priority housing opportunities for its employees in a country where the average 22.5 units of housing per 1000 inhabitants ranked lowest in Eastern Europe in 1975, below the 26.5 units for Romania (Lampe 1986, 193, in Taylor 2006).

Avramchev and Vulcheva have made the ominous observation that rural population in the Burgas *okrug* was ageing intensively, and that of the 245 villages in the *okrug* 80 villages were considered 'futureless,' with an estimation that by 1980 they would be completely depopulated (Avramchev, Vulcheva 2/1970, 55). Their proposed solution to the crisis followed 'the only possible way' of improvement of the socioeconomic conditions of the rural population and overcoming of industrial concentration in the cities through industrial redistribution in rural areas on the basis of the so-called *mikrorayonoirane* [micro-regionalisation].

This new take on industrialization was initiated in the late 1960s to promote the idea of dispersed industrial development, whereby industrial enterprises were to be set up in rural and small town locations – in response to outmigration and attendant agricultural problems (mainly shortage of labour) and was a direct contribution to the domestication of socialism (Creed 1998, 149). This is also one of the traits that distinguish the Bulgarian case from that of neighbouring Romania where the direction of industrial development was only in the direction of the big cities.

Theoretically, the dispersed industrial development was aimed at redressing the ideologically unacceptable rural-urban inequalities that had emerged in the headlong rush for industrialization, without sacrificing the industrial bias of the regime through a 'horizontal integration of agriculture' (Sharlopov, ed. 1970, 20). In effect, it was supposed to promote equal regional

development by advocating a more even geographical distribution of productive activities. Implementation, however, proved more complex than planning (Creed 1998, 151).

In Momina Tsarkva, the TKZS underwent seven transformations between 1944 and 1989. After superseding *Pchela* in the 1940s, by 1958 the TKZS in Momina Tsarkva merged with its smaller peer from the neighbouring village of Gorska Polyana (RDA 709-1-30). In 1970, in the next thrust of collectivization efforts, it was included in the newly established Agrarian Industrial Complex (APK) in the local town centre. In 1984, the TKZS in the village was converted into a Complex Brigade – a more autonomous unit within the APK. This was followed by a reversal process of partitioning of the APK, and in 1986 Momina Tsarkva's cooperative farm joined a newly set-up APK in the next-door village Fakia. Yet again, in October 1989 a new Collective Agricultural Farm was set up in Momina Tsarkva, which was replaced in 1991 by the Agricultural Credit Cooperative, symbolically named *Pchela* after the first village cooperative (RDA 1073-2-1).

The frequent and largely superficial re-organisations and experiments, as testified by Popov-Rumenov, compromised cooperative farming and the cooperative idea as a whole in Momina Tsarkva. The members' land effectively became no one's land, as it was neither private, nor cooperative, nor state property (1999, 160). What is more, the never-ending reforms of the Communist Project exhausted rural energy, a process that would have great influence on the level of participation in the post-socialist transformations. Meanwhile, the so-called 'village exodus' (Creed 1998) was promising to devastate the countryside.

On the other hand, as a result of the headlong collectivization and industrialization, matched with mechanization technology, urbanization and the zigzag reformations of the cooperative, the shortage of work opportunities in rural areas had become rampant. Between 1965 and 1970, in

Momina Tsarkva and the neighbouring villages, the employment rate was hardly 50% of the able-bodied population (Avramchev, Vulcheva 2/1970, 59-60), a phenomenon that has not received enough scholarly attention yet.

Another tendency, which was largely misinterpreted by policy-makers, and which contributed to village outmigration, concerned the increased influence of consumerism and individualism among young people in the wake of the 1960s. This tendency was not dissimilar from cultural expressions of youths in the West (Douglas, in Parman, ed. 1998, 94-106; Hall, Jefferson, eds. 1976). As Taylor and Konstantinov have commented, the pull of the cities in Bulgaria was equated with a shining road to modernity; and it was conceived to be a journey from the periphery to the centre (Konstantinov 2001, 47, in Taylor 2006, 46).

Creed has similarly observed the shaping 'distaste for village life' among the general population (Creed 1998, 136), caused by the attainability of the 'modest dream of domestic comfort for many in the course of the 1960s,' where many of the material and social trappings of a supposedly socialist lifestyle had started to appear in a decidedly 'bourgeois' form (Taylor 2006, 47, 49).

The distaste for village life in border villages such as Momina Tsarkva, however, was additionally fuelled by its inclusion in the *closed military zone* as required by the Cold War realities. Unfortunately, the detrimental effects of this status on stock raising, tourism, but, more than anything, on the movement of people in border areas, were hardly recognized in reports published in the 1970s under the Strandja-Sakar set of initiatives when the shock wave of migration to the cities had largely subsided (Peykov, ed. 1984, Vol. 1, 104-109).

And lastly, there was one more factor of a rather subjective nature, which greatly contributed to the youth outflow from Momina Tsarkva, and which becomes apparent if examined comparatively with the case of the neighbouring village of Fakia. Interestingly,

between the two Censuses of 1956 and 1965, when *Neftochim* opened doors and began mass recruitment, Fakia lost approximately 28% of its population, while for the same period the size of Momina Tsarkva's size dropped by a mere 15%. In the following decade, however, between the Censuses of 1965 and 1975, Momina Tsarkva suddenly saw a 41% drop in its population size, in comparison to the significantly lower 24% in the case of Fakia.

The only structural difference that distinguished the two villages, and which, according to my preliminary findings could explain the sharp contrast of outmigration in the latter period, relates to the short-lived existence of an Agricultural Technical School in Momina Tsarkva. Between 1958 and 1972 this institution prepared specialists in agronomy and zootechnics and, in the earlier period, not only kept the youths of Momina Tsarkva in the village, but also attracted youths from elsewhere (Popov-Rumenov 1999, 214). Evidently, three years after the School's closure, and already twelve years into the existence of *Neftochim*, Momina Tsarkva lost 937 residents, in comparison to Fakia's loss of 291 (according to Censuses of 1965 and 1975 respectively). Therefore, the pull of the city only became irresistible after the Agricultural Technical School had ceased to exist, and with that, the pool of potential social contacts and marriage partners had rapidly shrunk.

To sum up, there were two sets of factors that, together, contributed to the population exodus from Momina Tsarkva, Strandja and many other rural areas of the country, of objective and subjective character. In the former group, quite prominent were the shortage of work opportunities and excess labour caused by the transformation from agricultural to planned economy and the attendant collectivization, industrialization, mechanization and urbanization processes. And in the latter group fell events such as the closure of the Agricultural Technical School.

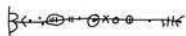
But there were also the unintended consequences, even paradoxes, of the system



(also termed ‘conflicting complementarities’ by Creed 1998). Such was the role of cooperative farms, which, on the one hand, sustained the sense of community through their intense promotion of largely mandatory social, cultural and political events; but, on the other hand, the same public ostentation of such events precipitated the withdrawal of villagers into their private world.

Another consequence of the cooperative structuration of work (and leisure) was the loss of attachment of the villagers to the land after its collectivization, as it thus ceased to belong to a person, or to a family for that matter, and was not cared for in a private, personal way any longer. This tendency would turn into one of the crucial stumbling blocks during the 1990s transition to market economy and would doom the re-privatization of land to failure.

Both intentionally and incidentally, the Communist Project aimed not only at moving villagers into cities, but also at resettling urbanites into villages. This trend of introducing modernity ‘from above’ was dissimilar from the experience of Western Europe, where modernization was based on movement in the rural–urban direction (Nahodilova, in Duijzings 2013, 91). The example of the Youth Republic, which will be investigated in the next section, was a case in point.



The Youth Republic in the Whirlpool of Reforms

Following the state-sponsored processes discussed in the previous section, the most viable rural capital, that was its youths, rapidly disappeared between 1960 and 1970. With very few exceptions, all villages in the Strandja-Sakar region lost substantial percentage of their inhabitants due to outmigration. By 1975, Momina Tsarkva’s population had dropped to 1310 (from 2247 in 1965) (Balev 2002, 92; NSI online database). The response of the socialist state however was not adequate enough. The pro-natalist

policies, stringent urban-inhabitancy measures, bachelor tax and fertility stimulation measures of the 1970s only had superficial and temporary effects (Creed 1998; Taylor 2006; Kuzmanova 2013).

Apart from the political efforts, however, there was also a shaping tide of academic vigour devoted to the question of rural depopulation, pioneered by an unlikely figure. In 1972 Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of state leader Todor Zhivkov, who was also a chair of the national Cultural Committee, began collaborations with the prominent Bulgarian archaeologist Prof. Alexander Fol on Thracian excavations in Strandja-Sakar that literally and metaphorically brought her in contact with the region and its many problems (see Kuzmanova 2013).

Zhivkova’s partnership with researchers of the region gradually institutionalized and regular symposia devoted to the problems of the region took place biannually between 1978 and 1984⁵. Thus, the close relations between researchers and the state leader’s daughter placed the region’s fate high on the state agenda and, in effect, predetermined the choosing of the region as a pilot project for a large-scale rejuvenation campaign, initiated in 1982 by *Politburo*, which was officially proclaimed The Youth Republic. As the now accessible Communist Party Archives show, apart from the overt demographic and cultural-preservation tasks, the programme also sought a number of unofficial goals, the most prominent of which was to sustain the ethnically Bulgarian character of the border region (meaning to prevent the relocation of ethnic Turks from inner Bulgaria into the border area). In addition to this, another factor that precipitated this choice was the location of the area at the border with Turkey - a NATO member-state (TDA, 136-75-22, 36).

Being a pilot project, the fulfilment of the Youth Republic was accompanied by a number of setbacks of institutional, logistic and subjective character, such as insufficient job opportunities for the new settlers, inadequate housing, clashes between the

5) The symposia continued even after her death in 1981.

social norms and the customs of the locals and those of the newcomers (see Kuzmanova 2013). Despite all of these shortcomings, however, between 1982 and 1990 only in Momina Tsarkva a total of 248 adults and 116 children settled under the Youth Republic scheme. They had come from 70 different Bulgarian settlements, 25 of which cities and 45 villages, testifying, contrary to official statements, that the migration flows were not only urban-rural, but also rural-rural (Adresen Registur, selo Zhelyazkovo).

The Youth Republic did not, however, manage to 'inject' into Strandja and Sakar the young blood in its thousands as it had initially proclaimed, and from the so far uncovered archival data, it also did not succeed in raising its economy or infrastructure to the national average, which was its economic aim. Furthermore, a great part of the lofty capital investments were squandered and went into private hands, but as Momina Tsarkva locals still joked, in the interviews carried out in 2012 and 2013, 'there was so much to steal' that, despite these mishaps, the accomplishments of the programme were indisputably impressive.

In this light, one could argue that the programme was doomed to failure by its very conception since the misappropriation of funds had become the norm in many, if not all settlements in the country by the early 1980s, as well as the Soviet Union as Alena Ledeneva (2008) and Gerlad Creed (1998) have discussed. Radost Ivanova has beautifully summarized these sentiments in her similar observations in another Bulgarian village - Panaretovo, which was not part of the Strandja revitalization programme. Ivanova's informants maintained that there were no thieves in the village, just theft from the cooperative farm, and since the latter had become a semi-legal form of remuneration, villagers justified their actions with the affirmation that one could not steal from one's own father or government (Ivanova, in Kideckel 1995, 229).

Another (un)intended consequence of a more buoyant character was the unusual

way in which the scheme turned participating settlements into ingeniously cosmopolitan communities. Growing up in the concrete flats of the Momina Tsarkva Youth Republic provided its children with the opportunity to mingle with peers who had all come from elsewhere and had brought with them something unique and special. This was a phenomenon that was taking place in a society that did not favour entrepreneurial individual actions and encouraged free movement of people even less. Thus, it would be fair to say that if the utopia of the Youth Republic succeeded in something, it was definitely in providing its children with an 'incubated' sense of belonging to something unique, if ephemeral (see Kuzmanova 2013). It also empowered and stimulated these young pioneers to take their lives in their own hands, still within the limits permitted by the system.

On balance, the material achievements in Momina Tsarkva included, among others, new improved road links with the municipal centre and sizable industrial facilities as part of the cooperative farm (TKZS). The long-term value of these assets, however, did not deter the liquidation efforts of the new post-1990 political leadership that targeted cooperative farms, as a symbol of a denounced era. All infrastructures were left to decay, and, with that, the commendable social care facilities (such as nursery, school canteen, etc.) were also destroyed in the early 1990s. But, the more subtle and controversial aim of the programme - to retain patriotically-minded population at the border and prevent the settlement of ethnic Turks - had been unequivocally achieved.

In sum, in a matter of less than forty years, Momina Tsarkva underwent a great leap from manual agricultural production before World War Two to an enhanced collectivization, urbanization and even more accelerated depopulation in the latter half of the 20th century. Against this background, the Strandja-Sakar initiative turned the village into an even more peculiar 'amphibian' settlement, neither a real village, nor a



real town, with its miniature blocks of flats, miniature sewing workshop and miniature pool of urbanites gathered in some cases by mercantile, in others by idealistic motives, but relatively and seemingly free and able to reinvent themselves. The youthful urbanites seemed to coexist with another host population consisting largely of elderly villagers, whose patriarchal norms were never fully eradicated (see Kuzmanova 2013).

The programme's greatest merit, which would ironically also turn into its greatest vice, was its voluntary, generous and de facto non-binding nature. In order to grasp the significance of its voluntary nature one only needs to be reminded of the context that it was implemented in, i.e. the overwhelming state campaign launched at more or less the same time, calling for the forced name-changing campaign and exodus directed against the Bulgarian Turkish population. The recently opened secret files of the Bulgarian State Security Agency, a small part of which is devoted to Strandja-Sakar, pose important questions regarding the influence of the Turkish exodus, or Revival Process as it is colloquially known in Bulgaria, on the Strandja-Sakar efforts themselves. In the so far consulted archive materials, there are a number of statements of intelligence and counter-intelligence operatives, claiming that no less than 90% of the participants in the Youth Republic scheme were spied on and monitored in one form or another by the State Security Agency. Such findings trigger questions regarding the effects of such supervision on the implementation of the programme, but can be plausibly answered only after thorough consideration of the above archive materials, which is still pending.

Only eight years after the birth of the Youth Republic, the socialist system that had been its main proponent was (self)defeated. The young families, who had left their hometowns and villages behind, in order to settle in Strandja-Sakar and who earned their living directly or indirectly through the TKZS, soon discovered that they had to relocate again. This time it would be moti-

vated by the manipulation of agriculture for political purposes by both former communists and the new democratic forces (Creed 1998, 226).

Once again, big politics would decide the fate of remote rural communities such as Momina Tsarkva. The ensuing dismantlement of the TKZS and with that of the Youth Republic will be analysed in more detail in the following section.



From Communism to Neo-Liberalism

Between 1989 and 1991 the Bulgarian Communist (in April 1990 renamed Socialist) Party made several attempts at reformation, a more-or-less universal trend among communist regimes throughout the region. Despite these attempts, however, it was forced to resign by unprecedented street protests in Sofia, the capital, as well as by the efforts of the newly-formed political opposition and trade unions (Znepolski ed. 2011, 445).

In this context, following a narrow victory at the elections held in October 1991, the reformist Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) began a large-scale campaign of clearing all vestiges of the Communist Project, starting off with the cooperative farm system, which as Creed and Verdery have suggested, symbolized socialism in the countryside, and which the UDF believed to sustain socialist sentiments among villagers (Creed 1998; Verdery 2003). Bulgarian farmers, on the other hand, strongly resisted de-collectivization, which made their preference of the BSP inevitable.

The irony in this is that, in just under 50 years, Bulgarian farmers were forced to radically change their methods of land cultivation twice – the first time round they had to totally 'collectivize' their land and means of land cultivation, and the second time, to un-do collectivization completely. It seemed that, in the end, both communist and democratic governments relied on one and the same means – coercion. Many other former fellow socialist countries, such

as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, chose a very different path of solving the complex agricultural legacy of socialism and with visibly greater results.

Returning to the Bulgarian Neo-liberal path, from its very inception, the implementation of the project at the political top resonated at the everyday level in rural communities, turning the agrarian question into a political matter. Between 1989 and 1995, parliamentary control shifted between democrats (UDF) and socialist (BSP), and, with that, the nature of state land policy oscillated between reconstitution of the cooperatives (advocated by the BSP), and their complete abolition (promoted by the UDF) (Creed 1998, 222). Thus, the socialist-era dynamic of alternation between reform initiatives and reversals was perpetuated in the post-socialist context.

1991 was a crucial year for property relations in Bulgaria. The national parliament adopted two crucial land laws in this respect: *The Cooperatives Act* and *The Ownership and Use of Agricultural Land Act*. Both of these acts were passed under the parliamentary control of the BSP, which explained their bias towards cooperative cultivation (see Creed 1998; and, Znepolski, 2011). *The Cooperatives Act* allowed TKZS farms to re-register and specified voluntary membership. In line with this provision, in Momina Tsarkva, as well as in many other villages in the country, a new cooperative farm was registered. The name that was given to the new farm did not reverberate communist allusions, but instead bore reference to the more distant pre-socialist cooperative farming in the village that boosted private property relations. The new farm Pchela also added to its name the new year of institutionalisation being 1991 (RDA 1073-2-1).

The generally smooth transfer of registration between cooperative farms in the country allowed for some carryover of old abuses, as Creed and Duijzings indicate (Creed 1998; Duijzings 2013). In Momina Tsarkva the chair of the TKZS overnight became chair of *Pchela-91* (Popov-Ru-

menov 1999). Village rumour has it that the same chair's fortune that he accumulated in the 1990s was gathered through personal profiteering in the privatization campaign, through manipulation of the public tenders of the cooperative farm property.

The October 1991 elections, which were won by the UDF, immediately changed the course of land reforms. Thanks to the newly adopted amendments of 1992, the Cooperatives Act provided for the complete liquidation of TKZS in Bulgaria. Purposeful Liquidation Councils were set up throughout the country to facilitate this process. As Creed has summarised, the Liquidation Councils had the schizophrenic task of managing farm production while liquidating farm assets.

Momina Tsarkva was a prime case in point. As evident in the available archive materials, *Pchela-91* was liquidated in 1992, again, under the new amendments to the Cooperative Act (RDA, 1073-2-12). Its assets were placed under the jurisdiction of the Liquidation Council set up in August of the same year (RDA, 1073-2-2). The outcome of the Council's management was a catastrophic loss of 5.5 million leva, which was unheard of in the history of the cooperative (RDA, 1073-2-2). The archive materials also testify to the numerous thefts from the inventory of the TKZS. The looting of the cooperative farms by Liquidation Council members was symptomatic for the whole country. For the villagers across the country this process was simply destructive and led them to call for the resignation of the government and the dismissal of the Liquidation Councils.

The polarized political climate in Bulgaria inevitably affected life in the now defunct Youth Republic. Crisis at the top led to rupture of the fragile peace between 'indigenous' villagers and the so-called 'newcomers' of the former Youth Republic. The split in Momina Tsarkva became evident in the exclusion of the Youth-Republic's settlers from both liquidation process and the decision-making in the Liquidation Council. The rift between 'old' and 'new' villagers,



which was initiated during the Youth Republic's days and the de facto favouritism of 'new' over 'old,' intensified after 1991 with the establishment of a parallel cooperative farm by the pro-reformist 'new.'

As testified in interviews, the pro-reformist 'newcomers' named their cooperative farm *Nadezhda*-10⁶, after the number of founding members. Immediately after the institution of their farm, two of the pro-reformist members who were still employed in *Pchela*-91 were unlawfully dismissed, which even led to a law suit won by the employee. The membership of one of the 'newcomers' in the trade union Podkrepa only exacerbated relations between the two factions. Thus, paradoxically, the de-collectivization efforts of the UDF, led to an increase in cooperative farming throughout the country and even amongst its supporters, as was the case with *Nadezhda*-10.

With the relaxation of the liquidation campaign during the BSP-backed expert government between 1992 and 1994, and rightfully assessing the vital importance of the cooperative farm for the economic viability of the community, the board of the liquidated cooperative farm in Momina Tsarkva set up a new *Comprehensive Cooperative Farm Pchela* in February 1993 (RDA, 1073-3-2). The name of the new farm was a carbon copy of the pre-socialist farm that existed prior to the onset of collectivization. The symbolism of return to the true cooperative beginning in the village was apparent. As testified in Popov-Rumenov (1999, 162-163), as late as 1998 land restitution was still undergoing.

If the political climate was favourable to *Pchela*, the economic situation of the early 1990s had quite the contrary effect on *Nadezhda*-10. As reflected in interviews (2013), former members of *Nadezhda*-10, had fallen victim to the double burden of the increasing monthly repayments of the bank loans, which they had taken to purchase machinery, and, on the other hand, of the lack of arable land, since land restitution had not effectively commenced.

As already mentioned, in Momina Tsarkva these processes also put social relations to the test. The genuine struggle of the 'newcomers'⁷ to sustain their cooperative farm and stay in the village despite the hardships of the 1990s illustrated in a nice way their sincere motives to make Momina Tsarkva their home, beyond the framework of the Youth Republic. One of the most vocal attempts at ascertaining this position was the aforementioned decision of a dismissed member of *Pchela*-91 to pursue her rights in court. In September 1992 she won the case and was duly reinstated at the cooperative (RDA 1073-2-6).

Meanwhile, the overall situation of Bulgarian farmers continued to deteriorate, aggravated by the suspension of state subsidies, which in turn was necessitated by the pressure handlers in economic finance exercised over all East and Central European governments. Instead, as Verdery observes, 'they were pressing for free markets with no subsidies and low tariffs – next door to an EU agriculture built on subsidies and protection' (2003, 92). In this vicious circle, the economies of the former Eastern bloc were sinking into a deeper crisis that between 1988 and 1993 was more profound than the Great Depression of 1929-1933 (Szelenyi cited in Verdery 2003).

In this climate, as documented in the archive materials, the *Comprehensive Cooperative Farm Pchela* liquidated its stock-raising branch to accumulate fast profit; not long after, the board acknowledged this to have been a grave mistake (RDA 1073-3-1). In 1994, however, it did generate a profit of 1 million levs, and boasted a membership pool of 1100 members, reaffirming the strong cooperative sentiments in the community.

At the elections in January 1995 the BSP came out victorious and, unsurprisingly, set about suspending the Liquidation Councils. Instead of improving the condition of the cooperatives, however, the economic policies of the socialists eventually undermined cooperative production (see Creed 1998, 262). When the government changed

6) *Nadezhda* (transl. from Bulgarian) meaning *hope*.

7) In everyday conversations in 2012 and 2013 the Youth-Republicans were commonly referred to as newcomers by the locals, although they settled in Momina Tsarkva over thirty years ago.

in 1997, as Verdery suggests, things were up in the air again. In the same vein, Bulgarian property rights remained insecure for most of the decade (Verdery 2011, 90).

In Momina Tsarkva, the late 1990s and early 2000s were a period of slow, but imminent social and economic downfall. Young families were forced to relocate to other towns and villages, after the closure of the nursery in the village (early 2000s) and school (2002). Many villagers were denied entry into the *Pchela cooperative*, due to personal preferences of its long-term chair (Popov-Rumenov 1999, 163), dooming many to a meagre livelihood.

In this context, a new category of unique capitalist entrepreneurs, popularly known as *arendatori*, who rented land from the new owners, appeared in many agricultural regions of Bulgaria. As Kostova and Giordano observed in the Dobrudzha region, the success and resulting wealth of the *arendatori* was attributed to the forms of social knowledge and capital acquired in socialist times (2013, ed, 2014, 111). Several *arendatori* set up house in Momina Tsarkva as well. The first mention of such activity was recorded in 1992 (Popov-Rumenov, 1999, 161). By 2012 public registers of farmers show 8 such enterprises in Momina Tsarkva. In 2013 their number had risen to 11, only to fall again to 8 in 2014. The economic input of the *arendatori* seems to be of mixed blessing to the community in Momina Tsarkva, providing some economic opportunity to those employed in the business, also financially supporting annual festive events such as the village fair, but little, if any large-scale effect on the rural economy of the village or the region for that matter.

Overall, the disappearance of the conflicting complementarities of Bulgarian socialism with the onset of the Neo-Liberal Project made cooperative farming dysfunctional. The land was restored to its 'real boundaries', but the rural population had little vested memory of traditional ways of rural life than those of the more Western countries of the region (Bradshaw and

Stenning 2003, 120). Momina Tsarkva was provided with the unique opportunity to have under its belt young and agriculture-prone population, an asset that was easily squandered. The delayed land restitution, short-sighted factionalism in the village, the personal profiteering at the expense of the cooperative farm, the closure of all village enterprises and the ultimate loss of means of income forced the young families one by one to abandon Momina Tsarkva. Looking back, some villagers shared deep regret and self-implication that some of the capable and hardworking people that had come thanks to the Youth Republic scheme were chased away recklessly (Interviews, Momina Tsarkva, 2013).

A similar sentiment was shared by those who had left the village, reminiscing in conversation of their subsequent returns to the village where some of them still have property, but were put off by the economic stagnation and mere lack of income. As they said, they had given the village their most productive years and wherever they were at the moment, they carried a part of it with them (Interviews, Burgas, 2012).

РЪААКНЕ

Conclusion

The transition from Nationalist through Communist to Neo-liberal modernity brought about important changes to the development of rural communities. Under communism, a negative attitude towards the capitalist, 'retrograde' and 'reactionary' rural beginning was methodically cultivated (also Brunnbauer 2008, 57).

On the other hand, however, efforts to urbanize, modernize and 'tame' the countryside were also premeditatedly pursued (Stenning 2004, 91). In this respect, in Bulgaria, as well as elsewhere in the Communist bloc, particularly prominent were meritorious titles such as 'exemplary home,' 'exemplary village,' and 'exemplary collective,' and in later years efforts such as cultural and folkloric reserves, comprehen-



sively studied by Angelova (2008, and this volume) and Kanef (1998). Even the Youth Republic scheme investigated in this study can plausibly be ascribed to this strategic effort to create an exemplary countryside.

There is yet another take on the socialist conceptualization of the village that offers valuable insight into its contemporary status. The idea that the village was not necessarily a powerless and victimized backwater, but instead consciously or unconsciously managed to gain a powerful position in the socialist order, can be illustrated by the findings of Ulf Brunnbauer and Gerald Creed among others. Brunnbauer contends that during the rapid urbanization process of the 1950s and 1960s, more than 1.5 million Bulgarians left their villages for good. These rural migrants carried habits that were not in tune with the socialist way of life, habits of former peasants and their offspring, which created a serious problem and a hard task for the Fatherland Front to socialize into the new urban, socialist society (Brunnbauer 2008, 57).

The 'pulse' of the third Project of Modernity, as defined by Dingsdale, however, revoked the socialist power model, and in its place produced winners and losers, 'by re-evaluating and reconstructing the rural and urban fabric, revising the text of representation and reimagining the identity of villages, towns and cities' (Dingsdale 2002, 180). The most prominent effect on most rural areas since 1989, as evidenced by Turnock (1999, 173), was some degree of impoverishment. Even more worrying are the findings of Arabajieva, cited by Duijzings (2013), which testify that poverty in rural areas of Bulgaria is twice as high as in urban areas, with the main problems being low birth rate, negative natural growth, ageing of population, higher mortality rates, depopulation, low wages, high long-term unemployment, poor and deteriorating infrastructure, low levels of agricultural productivity and weak agricultural performance, limited access to basic services, such as water, health, etc.

From this context of domesticated state

socialism, Bulgarian villages were thrown into a post-socialist state, which left them outside of economic development altogether, and thus precipitated the appearance of the paradoxical 'socialist nostalgia' (Creed 2010, 30). In line with Creed, this article argues that socialist nostalgia, also a particularly prominent phenomenon in Momina Tsarkva, signals the impossibility of going back. Thus, its rise in Bulgaria is clear evidence for the end of transition. This comes in stark contrast with the earlier discouragement by communism of pre-war and capitalist nostalgia, which served to sustain people's memories of pre-socialism as viable options in the future.

Also, in contrast to the 1990s, the socialist state stepped in to cure 'the traumatized countryside' of the 1950s and 1960s (Creed 2010, 38), which is another reason for the unfulfilled nostalgia. Ironically, as Creed concludes, by trivializing capitalist discontent and commodifying socialist contentment, socialist nostalgia, in fact, facilitates neo-liberal programmes (Creed 2010, 31).

Another element to the neoliberal rhetoric, especially valid for Romania and Bulgaria, as Ger Duijzings (2013) has suggested, is related to the fact that the state has not withered away as classical neo-liberalism postulates, but, instead, has been facilitating a path-specific East European form of neo-liberal restructuring, where the main beneficiaries are the former nomenklatura, who have used (and abused) their control over the state apparatus to privatize assets and enrich themselves in the process of it. The paradox of this arrangement, as suggested by Steven Sampson, lies in the fact that the same informal loyalties, which help groups survive oppression, are also those which carry out smuggling operations, corrupt police and keep silent (Sampson 2002, 31).

In this context, the rapidly disappearing community of Momina Tsarkva, in concurrence with Creed's observation of the village of Zamfirovo, resembles 'a shell of its former self' (2010, 35) and does not have bright



perspectives of survival and sustainability. Moreover, the spectre of the 'rural ghetto' as defined by Osha Grey Davidson (1990) is becoming a greater threat than ever. This would possibly become true, unless certain strategies are implemented with urgency. A starting point for an academic discussion on the subject has been provided by Creed and Kaneff (Duijzings 2013), suggesting a certain expansion of the experience of space

/ place. The other valuable recommendation made by Creed demands from researchers to specify the particular qualities and attributes that impact rural locations, while also looking at how the understanding of rurality is shaped by its articulation with other analytical and cultural categories, such as nature, agriculture, community and modernity.

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