



New Media, New Habits: Socialist Television and the Struggle for ‘Harmonious Consumption’ in 1960s Bulgaria

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Abstract: It is widely accepted in popular and scholarly discourse that Eastern European socialist media were mere tools of control and state propaganda. This article proposes a new approach that focuses on the cultural functions of socialist television. Using 1960s Bulgarian Television as a case study, this piece traces the participation of this new medium in the construction of a unique socialist mode of consumption described in local scholarly and political literature as ‘harmonious consumption’. Through the work of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov the study highlights some of the challenges posed by the new consumption patterns of the late 1950s and 1960s and then outlines how television tried to respond to them. The main argument of the essay is that through its engagement with high culture and education, socialist television constituted an alternative television model that deserves a long overdue attention.

Keywords: socialist television, Bulgaria, consumption, high culture, Georgi Markov, socialism

Up until recently it was held as common knowledge that Eastern European socialist media were mere messengers of the communist party’s directives to the population. Known as the ‘transmission belt’ theory, this belief features as a major component of the broader interpretation of socialism as a ‘totalitarian’ political system. According to this paradigm, the governments in the former Eastern bloc regulated every aspect of human life through state-controlled media, surveillance and political repression. In his *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Alexei Yurchak points out that the hegemony of this interpretation stems from the fact that knowledge of Soviet socialism

'has been produced either outside of, or in retrospect to, socialism in contexts dominated by antisocialist, nonsocialist or post-socialist political, moral, and cultural agendas and truths' (2005: 6). Indeed, to this day scholarship on socialist media remains replete with worn-out Cold War binaries that more often than not stop short of providing a theoretically rich or empirically substantiated overview of the media sphere during socialism. Oftentimes, the rigid representation of socialist media also operates as a point of departure for post-socialist media against which one can measure their 'progress'. 'From Communist state-owned media to private and/or independent media, from censored and governmentally controlled to pluralistic and open to civic dialogues, from rigid to flexible, deregulated media markets...' (Marin et al. 2007: 51).

These representations complicate the task of the media historian because the omnipresent argument that socialist media were simply tools of control and state propaganda renders any research endeavor meaningless. Similarly to the hypodermic needle theory, this model assumes that media operated in a linear fashion always achieving their intended effect. The governments issued orders, media transmitted them and the population obeyed. After all, what is there to study? But recent scholarship on socialist television has questioned this linear and hierarchical model by portraying this medium as 'an institution that lived in the intersection of the public and domestic spheres, between top-down attempts at influencing viewers and bottom-up demands for entertainment' (Imre, 2016: 4). As such, it operated 'with far less predictable consequences for the public life of the nation' than it is usually assumed (Mihelj et al. 2016: 333). In fact, since the publication of the first systematic attempt to investigate popular television during socialism (Imre et al. 2012), a growing number of studies have challenged both the West-centric placing of socialist television within Cold War dichotomies that simplify its political and cultural functions (Gumbert 2014; Mihelj 2014; Imre 2016) as well as its traditional exclusion from the broader history of European television (Goddard 2013).

This article contributes to the new scholarship on the role of television in the cultural politics of the former Eastern bloc by examining Bulgarian television during its first decade of operation. It moves away from the overemphasised themes of 'propaganda' and 'social control' and concentrates on the educational and cultural aspects of socialist media. Unlike authoritarian Spain or Portugal, where the governments simply 'sought to control the media, but did not assign them a positive role', Eastern European media were expected to play a role in social transformation (Hallin et al. 2013: 23). But, this article contends that the 'positive role' that Hallin and Mancini note was not only to educate and enlighten, but also had broader, far-reaching political aims. Specifically, it traces how in the 1960s Bulgarian television participated in the construction of a unique socialist mode of consumption described in local scholarly and political literature as 'harmonious consumption' (Deyanova 2009: 349). This type of consumption combined and balanced the material and cultural needs of people with the goal to distinguish it from the materialistic and 'decadent' bourgeoisie consumerism. This was a complex and often contradictory process in which theory and practice not always aligned. Yet, in this article I argue that indeed this attempt turned the new medium of television into a unique phenomenon that is worth revisiting, especially today when global, corporate, commercial television appears hegemonic and entrenched.

One of the problems of the transmission belt theory of socialist media is that it assigns to them a static, atemporal and uniform existence. As a result, the normative assessment leaves crucial historical nuances and experiences unexplored and sometimes even buries them under the implicit and oftentimes explicit celebration of 'our own', 'democratic' Western media. Through an analysis of the development of Bulgarian television in the 1960s and the socialist media producers' vision of mass communications, this piece shows that a significant part of the history of socialist media does not fit neatly in the category of propaganda. In other words, what was transmitted to socialist audiences did not always reflect traditional views of the content of 'totalitarian' mass communications. While official ceremonies, mass parades, and rigid news reporting remained a part of socialist television until the collapse of the system, socialist media content also offered products geared at the cultural enlightenment of the audience. With a focus on the political conjuncture that prompted this aspect of socialist television, the article adds to recent scholarly attempts at explaining the interaction between socialism and television. But with its specific focus on Bulgaria, it also sheds light on this topic from the perspective of a country that has remained almost completely unexamined in the growing literature on socialist television.

The first part briefly outlines some of the changes in the socialist regimes that occurred in the late 1950s and 1960s. Through a discussion of the work of Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov, along with an overview of some of the recent scholarship on socialist consumption, the text pays particular attention to some of the challenges posed to socialism by the changing status of material commodities. The rest of the article relies on largely empirical local research of television programming and policies in the 1960s in order to show how socialist television producers sought to turn the new medium into a venue for high culture and a purveyor of non-material, cultural consumption.

Late Socialism and the Promise and Peril of Consumption

Roughly since the late 1950s, Eastern European socialist societies entered a period of economic, demographic and political transformation that signaled the shift to what has been customarily described as 'late' or 'developed' socialism. One of the major issues of studying this era is the fact that for a long time Eastern European historiography rarely distinguished early and late socialism as it focused primarily on the former period. In her book, *The Green-grocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* historian Paulina Bren notes this problem and maintains that 'it is astonishing that twenty years after the end of communism in Eastern Europe, almost all the literature is preoccupied with Stalinism, with an occasional venture into the territory of the Khrushchev era. Historians write about postwar communism in Europe as if it had ended in the 1960s' (2011: 3). To this day, the significant differences between socialism of the first post-war decade and late socialism remain poorly historicised in media studies. The static portrayal of socialist media fails to note some of the important ways in which mass communications participated in these transformations and how the function of media changed significantly from their role during the first post-World War Two decade when they focused primarily on the mobilization of the population to participate in mass industrialisation and party life.

Another issue linked to the study of late socialism is the varied periodisation of this era. For some scholars late socialism ‘spanned approximately thirty years, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1980s, before the changes of the perestroika began’ (Yurchak 2005: 4). In similar vein, in May 2016, the University of Cologne, Germany, organised a conference on ‘The Many Faces of Late Socialism’, bracketing the period from 1953 to 1988. Others identify late socialism with the Brezhnev years (Klumbyte et al. 2013). One of the reasons for the conflicting periodisation are the diverse histories and political conjunctures in each of the Eastern bloc countries. For instance, in the case of Czechoslovakia, historian Paulina Bren (2011) views the 1960s as the decade of ‘socialism with a human face’ and identifies late socialism with the two decades that followed the Prague Spring.

In Bulgaria, the 9th of September, 1944 is unanimously regarded as the beginning of the socialist era and the 10th of November, 1989 as its end. But, there is no widely accepted date or even year that marks the beginning of late socialism. In addition, there are numerous continuities between the two stages and as long-term Bulgarian socialist leader Todor Zhivkov points out in his memoirs, both periods strived to achieve the ‘socialist ideal’ (Zhivkov 1997: 163). Finally, the period that followed the first post-World War II decade was not monolithic. The new constitution of 1971 along with the ascent of Liyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Todor Zhivkov, who had a tremendous effect on Bulgarian cultural politics, were watershed moments that signaled significant shifts within socialism during its final two decades. Yet, there is little doubt that Bulgarian socialism experienced significant economic, demographic and cultural transformations as early as the late 1950s and 1960s.

The death of Stalin in 1953 and Khurshev’s 1956 ‘secret speech’ in which he denounced him, had a ripple effect not only in the Eastern bloc, but across the world. What followed was broadly speaking a ‘liberalisation’, or as Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov put it, an experience of ‘a palpable feeling of a softening atmosphere’ (Markov, v.1 2008: 225). In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt herself noted that the death of Stalin ‘was not merely followed by a successor crisis and a temporary “thaw” until a new leader had asserted himself, but by an authentic, though never unequivocal, process of detotalitarianization’ (Arendt 1973: xxv).

Post-Stalinist political liberalisation, however, was only one aspect of the change in Eastern European societies. The transformation was much deeper. Throughout his speeches during the 1960s Bulgaria’s leader Todor Zhivkov noted that ‘some of the laws acting during the first stage of our socialist revolution are no longer in force; new laws of social development have emerged’ (Zhivkov 1975: 36). For the most part, these ‘new laws of social development’ appeared as a result of the intense industrialisation of the economy that led to both demographic changes and profound shifts in the socialist everyday life.

In 1946 less than 25 percent of the population lived in the cities, but by 1987, 66.4 percent of Bulgarians resided in urban centers while the capital Sofia grew from a population of 300,000 in the 1940s to 1,100,000 in the 1980s (Taylor 2006: 45-46). The growth in urban population coupled with the gradual reduction of work hours resulted in increased leisure time. Along with this change that accompanied industrialisation, there was another significant shift in the Bulgarian population. During the 1950s and 1960s appeared a new generation of young people who were born during socialism and had no experience with pre-socialist realities. The Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) understood that these young people

faced a very different context than their parents and this required a new approach to their socialisation under already constructed socialism.

All of these novelties signaled a deep shift in everyday life under socialism. They posed certain challenges to which mass communications needed to respond. Yet, perhaps the most far-reaching change was the economic growth of light industry and consumption. In 1962, the eight congress of the communist party concluded that in 1961 the production of commodities grew 61.4 percent since 1957 and it was nine times higher than in 1939 (*Rezoliutzia na Osmia Kongres* 1962: 15). Rapid industrialisation led to the capacity to produce more material goods and in turn precipitated higher consumption rates. While this was a positive development in certain ways, consumption also posed a problem, which mass communications could not ignore.

The industrialised economy and the possibility for consumption of more and better consumer goods created the feeling of progress and improvement especially if compared to the austere decade that followed World War Two. Thus, Oxford historian of Bulgaria Richard Crampton concludes that in the 1960s and 1970s 'for most of the population life was gradually becoming better' (2006: 196). However, the emergence of mass consumption also signaled a fundamental change in worldviews that was not always in line with socialist ideology. Some socialist thinkers and politicians worried that the values of self-sacrifice and selflessness would lose ground to the new priorities of the modern citizen engaged in mass consumption. Bulgarian dissident writer, Georgi Markov was perhaps the first one to note the shift in this direction. According to him, in the 1960s the communist beliefs of loyalty to the Marxist ideal began to 'float like large bubbles' in the increasingly 'dirtier social waters', while the 'building of socialism' translated into fortune whose agents were 'wardrobes, refrigerators, washing machines and automobiles' (Markov, v.1 2008: 410). Paradoxically, Markov remains one of the strongest Bulgarian critics of materialism and the longing for consumer goods.

It is not a coincidence that today Markov is popular with his anti-authoritarian essays, while his anti-consumerist texts are for the most part marginalized. Throughout the 1970s he was Bulgaria's most prominent dissident writer. Markov defected the country in 1969 and settled in London where he worked for the Bulgarian section of the *BBC World Service*, *Deutsche Welle* and *Radio Free Europe*. His criticism of socialism over the airwaves of western radio stations won him the ire of the Bulgarian government. But, Markov became known to the world only in 1978 when he fell victim to one of the most discussed Cold War era political assassinations. On 7 September 1978 while he waited for a bus at Waterloo Bridge in London, Markov felt a 'sting' in one of his legs. It turned out that a micro-engineered pellet containing the poison ricin was fired at Markov via a modified umbrella. He died a few days later and the 'umbrella murder', as it became known, was attributed to the Bulgarian secret services. Unsurprisingly, after 1989 Markov turned into a martyr for the anti-communist cause and in 2014, Bulgarian authorities erected a monument of Markov in 'Journalist' square in Bulgaria's capital Sofia. Virtually the entire conservative right-wing conservative intellectual and political elite of the country attended its official unveiling (Karkov 2015).¹

¹ For the most recent debate on the legacy of Markov in Bulgaria see 'Polemika: Za Georgi Markov i Komunizma na Dneshnite Anti-Komunisti / A Polemic: On Georgi Markov and the Communism of Today's Anti-Communists (2015) *Glasove*, August 13, <http://glasove.com/categories/komentari/news/polemika-za-georgi-markov-i-komunizmyt-na-dneshnite-antikomunisti>, (20.02.2016).

Unfortunately, the anti-communist politicisation of Markov's persona had resulted in the marginalisation of a number of crucial themes in his opus that are at odds with the neoliberal worldviews of his post-1989 right-wing followers. His discussions of equality and social justice along with Markov's insistence on the importance of a criticism of Eastern European socialism from a communist standpoint have been deliberately ignored.² The dissident's scathing criticism of socialist consumption suffered similar fate precisely because it paralleled left-wing discourses of the global 1960s and could easily apply to the capitalist world then and now. Nevertheless, in one of the most systematic Bulgarian investigations of consumption, Kristian Bankov (2009) acknowledges that 'no research of consumption culture during socialism could afford to ignore' Markov's writings (229). Bankov is correct in his assessment of the importance of Markov's work as a primary source that critiques the growth of consumption in 1960s socialist Bulgaria. Yet his insistence that the source of Markov's criticism is his 'appropriation of Western critical culture' (ibid: 229) during his exile, rather than to leftist lineages in his thought, echoes mainstream liberal readings of his opus. While this article focuses on the emergence of consumption culture in Bulgaria, one cannot help but interpret Markov's criticisms of the worship of money, consumer goods, and the transformation of nature according to the values of tourism not only as a vital diagnosis of the consumerism of the 1960s, but also of its hegemony today.

In his essay 'The Reverence for King Dollar' (1978 / 2008), Markov argued that the new consumption habits completely transformed Bulgaria's landscape. 'Bulgaria in 1966 was very different from Bulgaria in 1956' (Markov, v.1 2008: 402). He described the new model of economy as 'a predatory state capitalism' (ibid.: 403). 'Once again, many purely capitalist methods found place in a country which was described as socialist' (ibid.: 403). The Bulgarian dissident viewed the shift to consumerism as a reason for the demise of Marxist ideas. According to him, in the ten years after Khrushchev's speech that denounced Stalin, the word 'pleasure' replaced the word 'struggle' (Markov, v.1 2008: 403).

A main target of Markov's criticism was the opening of Bulgaria to tourism. In his essay 'The Sting and Honey of Tourism' (1978 / 2008), Markov paints a beautiful, nostalgic picture of the pristine Black Sea coast and its people from the 1940s and early 1950s. 'This old world,' he says 'was about to die on the day of the visit of Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 when he saw the beauty of the Black Sea and recommended to the Bulgarian government to open Bulgaria for tourism' (Markov, v.1 2008: 385). According to Markov, at that point the untouched beauty of Bulgarian nature was replaced by the 'plastic civilization of tourism' and the 'commercial disease of the new times' (ibid.: 385). In the 1960s the Black Sea coast was covered by 'lavish advertisements of hotel companies, restaurants and shops' (ibid.: 386). At the same time, the 'material luster' of the tourists from the West who flooded Bulgaria precipitated a 'primitive cult of worshiping consumer goods' (ibid.: 408). In the span of a few years, 'the ownership of pretty imported goods turned into a widespread disease and a fanatical conviction that one is not equal to others if [he/she] does not wear French underwear, Italian shoes or an English pullover. Not to mention radio sets, tape recorders, refrigerators and cars.' (ibid.: 408).³

² For an exception to this trend besides Karkov (2015) see Tsoneva, Zhana and Georgi Medarov (2014) 'Georgi Markov: Towards an Archaeology of the Absent / Georgi Markov: Kam Edna Arheologia na Otsastvashtoto', *Novi Levi Perspektivi*, 12 November, <http://novilevi.org/publications/204-markov> (30.03.2016).

According to Markov, the worship of material goods became even more pronounced when Bulgarians went abroad. He described this side of socialist consumerism in a recollection of his visit to Rome in 1963. Then Markov joined a group of Bulgarian journalists to cover an international football game between Bulgaria and Portugal.

As if drunk we walked from one shop window to another and from one market to another. Damn the Coliseum, the monuments of art, the Vatican and the old Rome. Our monuments of art were the beautiful Italian shoes, the magnificent pullovers, the underwear, the tape recorder tapes, the gramophone records, the women's handbags and the cosmetics (Markov, v.1 2008: 418).

Markov's discussion of *veshtomania* (mania for goods) runs throughout his work and as such it constitutes a devastating critique of the Eastern bloc. He writes that the thirty years of building communism in Bulgaria resulted not in communism but in mania for goods and contrasts it with the situation in the West. 'While in the western world an entire movement of hipsters, hippies, leftist intellectuals, revolutionaries, fugitives from cozy homes, vagrants and others were led by the idea of overthrowing the power of consumer goods and the cult of comfort and luster, in Bulgaria the exact opposite process developed', leading to the emergence of 'the most primitive petty bourgeoisie mentality' (Markov, v.1 2008: 422-423). But, the post-1989 anti-communist politicisation of Markov's work obscures his anti-consumerism. His writing, however, is an invaluable primary source that reveals the widespread negative effects of or attitudes towards material consumer goods in 1960s Bulgaria.

In the last decade, academics have also turned their attention to the role of socialist consumption in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe (Bren at al. 2012; Crowley et al. 2012; Hyder-Patterson 2011). This recent scholarship has not only challenged the monolithic depiction of socialism as 'drab' and 'grey' as Margaret Thatcher famously described it, but it has framed socialist consumption as a marker that distinguishes late socialism from the more austere post-World War II decade. For some scholars, the effects unleashed by socialist consumption, described memorably by Markov, were one of the main, if not the main reason, for the collapse of socialism. Ivaylo Ditchev refers to late socialism in Bulgaria as 'communist capitalism' and claims that 'the paradox of communist modernisation is that despite all the efforts invested in collectivist productivism, it succeeded best in something rather different: the creation of selfish consumers, indifferent to social matters' (Ditchev 2014: 101). Cristofer Scarboro (2011) advances a similar argument and is even more comfortable than Ditchev in deploying Western terminology to describe consumption. He argues that 'at its root, ironically, socialist humanism in Bulgaria during the 1960s and 1970s was driven by a move towards *embourgeoisement* and the creation of middle-class socialists' (Scarboro 2011: 1).

Some scholars disagree with the arguments that Ditchev and Scarboro advance. Although acknowledging that in the 1950s Eastern bloc countries engaged with the material culture of capitalist modernity, David Crowley and Susan Reid (2010) also claim that this 'did not amount to an unequivocal surrender of socialist principles, contrary to the hopes and expectations of cold warriors that the popular appetite for consumer goods once unleashed, would destabilize the socialist order' (21). Instead, they argue that socialist regimes engaged in 'a

³ Markov recounts that for men the ultimate happiness derived from the ownership of a Gillette razor and a western shaving cream. (Markov, v.1 2008: 408)

careful, if ultimately unsuccessful, balancing act' by seeking ideologically legitimate ways to raise living standards 'without triggering the unending process of demand generation and insatiable desire that was the original sin of consumerism in the capitalist West' (ibid.: 21). Across the region the emphasis on 'rational consumption norms', coupled with the active promotion of collective consumption in forms such as public canteens and laundries attempted to counter modern consumerism (ibid.: 25).

Perhaps the most convincing arguments that socialist consumption was unique belongs to Bulgarian sociologist Liliana Deyanova. Markov was not the only one to notice that the manifestations of the popular desire for material goods was at odds with Marxist ideology. Socialist thinkers and the government attempted to counter this development. Deyanova points out, that in the 1960s and 1970s Bulgarian social science and humanities journals devoted significant attention to the formulation of a unique concept of 'socialist consumption' (2009: 342). In official texts the term 'socialist consumption', also referred to as 'harmonious consumption', featured as 'a new structure of consumption, which organically combines the material and the intellectual bases in man' (Deyanova 2009: 349). The expression designated a combination of material and intellectual needs in which consumption figured not as an end in itself. Harmonious consumption intended to stimulate creativity and aimed at the construction of an intelligent and culturally rich socialist personality.

While the literature on late socialism and the development of socialist consumption is growing, it rarely includes discussions of mass media and especially the crucial role of the new medium of television in framing socialist consumption. This absence is reflected in studies on consumption published in Bulgarian journals as well (Elenkov 2011; Stanoeva 2015; Stanoeva 2015). In this regard, this otherwise valuable and interesting research, does little to challenge the stereotypes surrounding television and its political functions. Whereas literature and cinema attract significant scholarly attention, 'television has been and continues to be subjected to systematic exclusion in postcolonial and postsocialist studies alike' (Imre 2014: 123). According to Anikó Imre, this exclusion is due to linguistic and institutional barriers, but she also adds that the 'main culprit is a widespread assumption about the medium's low cultural value' (2014: 123). Ironically, socialist television strived and in many ways succeeded in being precisely the opposite—a vehicle for high culture.

Socialist Television and the Struggle for 'Harmonious Consumption'

With its appearance in 1959, Bulgarian Television (BT) presented itself as a new medium that will deliver cultural values directly to the homes of workers. It must be noted that in the Bulgarian language and other Slavic languages, the word for *kultura* (culture) designates what in English-speaking countries is usually described as 'high culture': high educational levels, polite manners, and high appreciation of arts, opera, theatre, poetry, cinema and other venues with an 'elitist' connotation in the West. But, the idea behind socialist television was that it will 'democratise' high culture, enable workers to acquire it, and stimulate their aesthetic tastes. With a better educated, younger public, which works less and lives predominantly in the cities media producers set the goal to increase the variety, quality and sophistication of cultural products in order to develop the aesthetic appreciation of the people.

The goal of this process was not simply a didactic attempt to increase the general intellect of the population, which many western thinkers committed to the social responsibility media model would agree is a precondition for a healthy society in the capitalist world as well. Socialist television aimed at the creation of cultural needs in each individual, which would counter and balance the unleashed desire for material consumer goods. With its capacity to enter the homes of workers and occupy their increased leisure time television strived to simultaneously offer high cultural products and develop the need for intellectual and artistic artefacts. The utopian goal was that in the future communist society of plenty, the desire for material goods will disappear and people will live entirely by aesthetics with the mass communications system functioning as the cultural system of communism that engenders new artistic forms, stimulates new cultural needs and provides a space for expression of each person. Hence there was an explicit belief that not only institutes and universities, but mass communications must spread knowledge and culture as well (Slavkov et al. 1981: 174).

As such, socialist television exhibited a clear break with early socialist media and in particular the audiovisual predecessor of television—the newsreel. While the socialist ethos of industrial workers collectively marching towards communism remained present, the newsreel images of sweating bodies of miners and builders of dams took a back seat.⁴ Late socialist audiovisual media showed classical concerts, poetry recitals, theatre, opera and other high cultural products while it openly and unapologetically declared that it will focus on the 'person' and the individual, rather than on masses and classes. In many respects, this approach was a part of de-Stalinization and the omnipresent at the time criticism of the 'cult of personality'.

Even though the Soviet Union experimented with television as early as the 1930s, World War Two completely interrupted its development. Engagement with the new medium resumed after the war and during the 1950s and 1960s, television enthusiasts regarded television as a natural device for de-Stalinization. They believed that as a particular type of technology, television had the capacity to reveal 'truth, reality and the contemporary *lichnost*' (individual or personality)' (Roth-Ey 2011: 223). Hence they viewed it as an inherently progressive medium capable of supplanting 'Stalinist fakery and bombast' simply by showing real, common people (ibid.: 223). This vision was humanist in its intention to purge people's minds from the *kul't lichnosti* (cult of personality) and replace it with 'a culture that celebrated many *lichnosti* — worthy individuals who would serve as models for personal growth and civic activism' (ibid.: 223).

In a similar vein, when regular television broadcasts began in Bulgaria in 1959, the medium found itself in the midst of a widespread rhetoric of de-Stalinization. The producers of this new medium saw it as inherently democratic and culturally enlightening. In November 1959, in his inaugural address, the first director of BT, Borislav Petrov stated that 'with the founding of Bulgarian television, Sofia's working people will gain a new, big cultural acquisition. Cinema, theatre, opera, and concerts will enter their homes. In front of them opens a new bright window to the world, culture and knowledge' (Petrov 1959a: 20). The idea behind this democratic vision of the new medium was that it would not only serve a niche audience of intellectuals but the entire population. Although, during early socialism newspapers, newsreels and radio reached every corner of Bulgaria and assisted in the transformation of its

⁴ See (Deyanova 2009) for a discussion on the newsreels during early socialism in Bulgaria.

landscape, economy and people Petrov's vision promised something more. He spoke of high culture products and a new window to the 'world'. In fact in his statement on the occasion of the launch of regular television programming, Petrov noted that the beginning of BT coincided with the 200th anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Schiller. In honor of the German poet, philosopher and playwright, BT included a programme called 'Schiller on the Bulgarian Stage'. Petrov hoped that the programme would reveal the 'mastery of this great playwright and the acting of some of our best actors' (Petrov, 1959b: 14).

Petrov's statement signaled a change in socialist mass communications in two crucial ways. First, his focus on high culture suggested that the new medium of television will differ from its audiovisual predecessor, the newsreel, in terms of content. It appeared that this will be more than a medium which shows sweating bodies of miners and builders, official ceremonies and anti-fascist recollections. Indeed, in the following decades it became clear that television no longer aimed solely at persuading the individual to join the masses in the process of building socialism. Instead, since the late 1950s media had to simultaneously create and nourish the cultural needs of an individual already living in a developed socialist society. Second, Petrov's statement hinted that the broadcast tower of BT would not solely face the Soviet Union. BT's quest for cultural enlightenment meant that it would engage with Western bourgeoisie thinkers as well, including Weimar Classicists, such as Friedrich Schiller. This was in line with post-Stalinist socialist humanism's 'rehabilitation' of Kantian, Romanticist, and German Idealist philosophical traditions (Valiavicharska 2014: 320). The development of BT in the following thirty years reaffirmed these two lines in Petrov's statement.

In contrast to early socialist media, BT's major goal was no longer to 'heat up the competition' between workers' collectives and mobilize the masses on the road to socialism. Its aim was to cultivate cultural needs in common people, especially the recently urbanized peasants and the socialist youth growing up in already existing socialism. Hence, some of the permanent television programs established in the early 1960s, such as 'Art', 'New Books', 'With the Pulse of the Time', 'The Poet's Recital' and 'New Poetry' showed 'significant events in ours [Bulgarian] and foreign art life—celebrations, visits, exhibits, theatre, opera and ballet performances as well as book reviews' (Slavkov et al. 1981: 121). As early as 1961, television broadcasted live performances from Sofia's opera and the state's musical theatre (Ivanova 2005: 43). Even the name of the first brand of television sets produced in Bulgaria (Opera) reflected the shift to high culture. Because of its cultural functions, Bulgarian media historian Polya Ivanova refers to early socialist television as 'artistic' (2005: 40).

Initially, the efforts of media producers to shape television as a cultural institution was met with some skepticism by the intelligentsia (Ivanova 2005: 54). In order to draw them to it, in 1966 BT appointed Bulgarian poet Leda Mileva as its new director. Mileva authored more than thirty collections of poems for children and wrote a number of theatre and radio plays. To this day, she remains one of Bulgaria's best translators of American, African, and English poetry. Her reputation among the intellectuals helped to draw them to BT as writers, screenwriters, actors, directors, poets and painters felt confident that the new medium was receptive to high culture. In turn they became active producers of television content and the emphasis on cultural enlightenment increased significantly in the second half of the 1960s.

One of the highlights of Mileva's directorship was the introduction of 'Television Theatre', a programme that remained a permanent feature of BT throughout the entire socialist period. The idea behind this program, broadcasted every Monday, was to intertwine the educational and artistic functions of the new medium (Ivanova 2005: 43). BT approached Bulgaria's most prominent writers, such as Georgi Karaslavov, Nikolay Haitov, Lahcezar Strelkov, Pavel Vezhinov, Borislav Rainov, Serafim Severniak and many others, with the request to write original plays suitable for television. When the first studies of audience preferences emerged in the early 1980s, they showed that the programme was one of the most popular ones among Bulgarian viewers (Ivanova 2005: 183). 'Television theatre' was not the only programme dedicated to this art. 'Theatre X' and 'Theatrical Meridians' were additional venues for theatre that introduced viewers to plays from around the globe. In addition, 'The Stage of the Centuries' appeared in 1967 to show 'the best productions of world classics' (Slavkov et al. 1981: 154).

The theatrical ambitions of BT grew and in 1968 it started to organise an international festival of television theatre. The festival drew the attention of television viewers not only from the Eastern bloc, but also from Western Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. In addition to the televised performances, it featured numerous workshops in which 'theoreticians, television theatre directors and other specialists from around the globe' discussed various issues of the field (Slavkov et al. 1981: 155). By 1980, eight such international festivals had taken place and the popularity of this genre only grew after its introduction during Mileva's directorship. In 1980 alone television theatre showed 35 plays from places around the globe including Nicaragua, Vietnam, Cuba, Nigeria and Mexico (Slavkov et al. 1981: 155).

A great number of programmes on literature, poetry, science and art such as 'Don Quixote and Hamlet', 'Pages', 'The Universe—Far and Near', 'The Human Being—Myth or a Hero', 'World Poetry', 'Artists and Art', 'Poetical Notebook', and others appeared under Mileva as well. In regards to literature, the idea was for viewers not only 'to gain knowledge of certain literary forms and phenomena', but also to 'build the habit of understanding the meaning' of these literary forms and techniques (Ivanova 2005: 66). Mileva believed that live broadcasts of concerts, plays, opera, and ballet were 'especially significant for small towns and villages'. (Ivanova 2005: 67). In sum, during the late 1960s the cultural programming occupied between 30-35 percent of the entire television broadcast time. This reflected socialist media producers' belief in democratizing high culture through television and the new medium's capacity to draw workers and peasants closer to the intellectuals. The ultimate goal was to stimulate and create cultural needs necessary for the construction of 'harmonious consumption'.

While programmes about art, poetry, opera, ballet and others sought to create new needs through the gradual accumulation of knowledge about high culture, BT also engaged in purely educational activities. As early as 1964, the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party stated that this new medium should serve as a 'popular people's university' and assist in 'raising the culture of the people and the education of the youth' (Slavkov et al. 1981: 131). In the same year, televised courses in math and literature for university applicants began (Slavkov et al. 1981: 130). By the late 1960s the educational programmes became a permanent feature of BT with programmes every Wednesday and Friday in the morning and every Tuesday and Thursday in the afternoon. Eighteen percent of BT's entire

schedule became dedicated to general education and school programming (Slavkov et al. 1981: 139). In 1969, BT launched school television programmes for 5th, 8th, 9th and 11th graders that included televised lessons in Bulgarian language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, history and geography. It also ran programmes to assist university applicants with their entry exams ('Uchebnite Programi' 1969: 57). Parents and teachers could also benefit from BT's schedule. Twice a month teachers of Bulgarian language and literature, mathematics, chemistry, physics and biology viewed a rubric that improved their qualifications through televised lectures on novel pedagogical methods in their disciplines. Once a month parents were offered a programme on children's upbringing and their advancement in school (Ivanova 2005: 63).

Although socialist media producers viewed television only as an 'assistant', rather than a substitute to the school and the university curricula, their goals were ambitious. At some point, there was even an idea that 'school television' would include courses through which people could obtain a degree after an examination at the end of the television course (Ivanova 2005: 64). Even though this idea did not materialise, BT successfully implemented televised language courses that remained popular throughout the entire socialist period. In 1964 every Friday evening BT offered a course in Russian and on Mondays the audience watched a course in German. In 1966, English also became part of the televised language curricula. This course continued for two and a half years and BT rebroadcasted it many times throughout the socialist period. Some educational courses had more practical, everyday applications. One example was a nine episode course on 'applied electronics', broadcasted every Wednesday. It taught Bulgarians how to fix small failures of their home appliances (Ivanova 2005: 49).

Because they targeted the youth, television games had an educational goal as well. Thus, one of the first television game shows (1964) was a drawing contest between children. Perhaps the most famous one was 'Fast, Brave, and Skillful' that began in 1966 and remained popular throughout the socialist era. It tested the athletic capabilities of the programme's participants, but also their knowledge. Frequently, the contestants in the game show were school teams, which competed with each other 'in dexterity of the hands, in the construction of models and objects, in graceful performance of a contemporary dance and in artistic, creative presentations' (Slavkov et al. 1981: 140). In this way, televised competitions served *prosvetitel'sko-razvlekatelna* (enlightenment-entertainment) function that 'broadened the social role of television' (Slavkov et al. 1981: 140). In some game shows the enlightenment impetus was even more obvious. For example, in 'With Bulgaria's Name' participants viewed a short fragment from a play and had to guess its author, director, and the name of the main actor.

In sum, high culture and experimentation with pedagogical methods marked the first decade of television in Bulgaria. This was a utopian project in a country, which less than two decades earlier had a predominantly peasant population, high levels of illiteracy and one of the most underdeveloped economies in Europe. This is not to say that BT was exclusively a purveyor of high cultural values. In the first half of the 1960s television did not abandon themes related to the five-year plans of the socialist economy. 'Towards the New: A Wide Road', 'The Innovator's Tribune', 'Who Will Save More Metal?', 'On a Visit to the Factory', 'The Obstacles on the Big Road', 'When the Numbers Come Alive', were early programmes that focused on the state of industrialisation. BT continued to feature this type of

programmes throughout the entire socialist period. For instance, 'Seeds in Furrows', a programme dedicated to agriculture and the peasantry, remained a permanent feature of socialist television. However, even programmes that did not deal with high culture, but strictly with economics also reflected the broader changes marking the transition to late socialism. Hence, most of the programmes about economics broadcasted at the time addressed light industry and construction while only 'a small section of them dealt with heavy industry, engineering and trade' (Ivanova 2005: 39). Programmes from the 1960s, such as 'A Conversation about the Quality of Clothes' and 'A Conversation about the Quality of Shoes' revealed the growing importance of consumption.

Because of the extraordinary importance of television for the creation of 'harmonious consumption' socialist authorities did their best to make it a more accessible item. When regular television appeared in Bulgaria in 1959, there were only 148 subscribers. The figure grew rapidly, and by the mid-1960s television added 200,000 people to its audience each year. In 1971, 1,164,365 Bulgarians owned a television set and nearly half of the country's population had the opportunity to watch television on a regular basis ('Prognoza' 1971: 122). In the 1970s the push to increase the availability of television sets in each home intensified further. In 1971, the Bulgarian government reduced the price of television sets with an average of 13.7 percent. The cost of the brand 'Pirin' fell from 310 to 265 leva, 'Sofia' was reduced from 450 to 395 leva and 'Sredetz' also went from 450 to 395 leva (Ivanova 2005: 83). This was the case not only in Bulgaria. In the Soviet Union 'when prices on luxury consumer items were raised in 1959, not only were TVs excluded, but the price of sets was lowered' (Roth-Ey 2011: 183). The goal was to make television widely available because of its role in constructing the cultural component of the dual form of socialist consumption as material and intellectual.

What did 1960s Socialist Television Achieve?

Bulgarian scholar Iwaylo Dichev had argued that Eastern European socialism itself stimulated the desire for consumer goods. According to him, material goods, such as toilet paper and coffee, became a consumer standard during communist urbanisation (Dichev 2014: 110-111). Dichev's intervention is important because it looks at socialist life from an angle different than the conventional portrayal of the Eastern bloc 'in terms of uniformity, grayness, and the ubiquitous queue' (Crowley et al. 2012: 9). However, as Deyanova (2009) had shown the end goal of the introduction of more consumer goods was not consumption itself. Socialist thinkers sought to create a unique type of consumption different than bourgeois consumerism, which sometimes provided material satisfaction to some groups in the population, but never stimulated their creative capacities. Hence, besides coffee and toilet paper, socialist thinkers also strived to generate high cultural and intellectual needs. This is an inseparable part of the story of socialist consumption that points to a significant difference from Western consumerism.

Television with its capacity to enter the domestic sphere, where 'decadent' habits were most entrenched, was deployed as a purveyor of cultural values. To what extent television did succeed in the construction of a new type of harmonious consumption is a question of de-

bate. As stated in the beginning of this article, this was a contradictory process in which theory and practice not always aligned. The 1960s television decade was not only marked by high cultural programming, but also by the emergence of advertising. Along with the direct promotion of material commodities, television also spread images of an ideal life that not always reflected socialist morals.

Image 1. Living room in 1960s Bulgaria. Screenshot from the website socbg.com



Source: socbg.com (last accessed 17.09.2016)

In her study on visual consumption culture in Bulgarian print advertisements and fashion magazines from the 1960s, Mila Mineva (2003) reveals how when faced with images, the socialist ideology of consumption started to ‘crack’. In response, socialist thinkers engaged in interpretative work that tried to dictate the meaning behind certain visual forms that were not inherently socialist. In this process, an image of a vase of flowers could be interpreted either as an example of ‘bourgeois depravity’ or ‘socialist comfort’ (Mineva 2003: 147). Needless to say, the interpretive work added to images in the form of written text outside of the image did not guarantee success. The images of carpets, kitchen tables and television sets retained an autonomy that allowed them to engender thoughts of ‘consumption culture without socialist style’ (ibid.: 164).⁵

Arguably television images also spread visions of ideal life that were not ‘inherently’ socialist. In addition, not everybody agreed that television’s function must be the promotion of cultural needs, including influential figures. For instance, Leonid Brezhnev believed that ‘the Soviet person has the right to relax in front of the television after [a] day’s work’ (Bren 2011:

⁵ For a version of this article in English see Mivena, Milla (2010) ‘Narratives and Images of Socialist Consumption: A Study of the Visual Construction of Consumer Culture in Bulgaria in the 1960s’, in Todorova, Maria (ed.) *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, New York: Social Science Research Council (349-373).

121). Under this vision, television functioned as a tool that provided the opportunity for *ot-dykh* (well-earned relaxation) and allowed socialist viewers to turn into 'something rather like a Soviet couch potato' (Roth-Ey 2012: 201).

Nevertheless, the goal of this article was to demonstrate that throughout the 1960s to a large degree BT functioned as a cultural and educational institution. Needless to say, further investigations can shed more light on the precise workings of this process. What seems clear though is that research that subsumes the entire existence of socialist media solely under the labels of 'propaganda', 'lack of freedom of expression', 'surveillance', and 'control' is inadequate in explaining the complex functions of late socialist television. This type of research cannot explain the educational functions of socialist mass media and its capacity to create a highly cultured audience. Ironically, it was precisely the late socialist celebration of high culture that opened the possibility for playwrights, philosophers, poets, actors and screenwriters to become the leaders of the new anti-communist movements in the late 1980s.

Further research on this topic can highlight that in fact this turn to Western high culture and the modernising attempts of socialist media producers to mold the new socialist citizen based on humanistic ideals resembled the social responsibility model of public media in the West. Jo Bardoel and Kees Brants argue that the Western European social responsibility model of public broadcasting was 'grounded in a belief in the makeability of society, the changeability of human nature and the establishment of the ideals of Enlightenment' (Bardoel et al. 2003: 168). However, with its emphasis on radical differences between West and East, Cold War historiography has marginalised these obvious similarities. At the same time, and in spite of the similarities, it is also crucial to explore thoroughly socialist television because it offered an alternative model of mass media.

The emphasis on high culture and education was not only grounded in the belief that an intelligent audience was a precondition for a decent society. The modernising, humanistic impetus of socialist television was intimately linked to the utopian project of communism. Unlike its Western counterparts, socialist television producers viewed modernisation and communism not as contradictory but as the same project. What is more, this unconventional model existed at a time when television in the West, especially in the United States, embarked on the road to trivialisation and low quality that remains hegemonic today. Less than two years after BT's first director expressed his happiness that the launching of television coincided with the 200th anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Schiller, US's Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow famously described US broadcast television as a 'vast wasteland' (Minow 1961). According to him, at the dawn of the 1960s American television had degenerated into 'a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials -- many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom' (Minow 1961).

Seven months after 1989, BT put an end to its international television theatre festival after it had existed for a quarter of a century. Within the same short period plays, Bulgarian films, programs about painting, opera and ballet disappeared from the Bulgarian television screen (Pesheva 1995: 156). This was accompanied by a staggering commercialization of television content that makes Minow's description perfectly befitting Eastern European post-

socialist television. But at the time of his speech socialist media took Enlightenment ideas much more seriously than its US counterparts. This is certainly a good reason to revisit this alternative model and examine it beyond the ‘transmission belt’ paradigm of socialist media. Otherwise, we risk losing an important part of the history of everyday life under socialism. Moreover, this history should be explored beyond the 1960s. Recent scholarship on socialist television shows that with time television in the Eastern bloc developed a multiplicity of genres and focused not only on education and cultural enlightenment, but also dedicated significant part of its time to other types programming, such as entertainment (Imre 2016). But the focus on culture and education did not diminish and in fact, in the Bulgarian case in many ways it intensified.

In the 1970s under the leadership of the complicated figure of Liyudmila Zhivkova, Todor Zhivkov’s daughter, Bulgarian culture entered a transformative and extremely interesting period. With her massive programs for aesthetic training Zhivkova sought to emancipate culture from its status as a ‘superstructure’ in order to turn it into ‘an independent man-building [*chovekostroitelna*] force’, serving as ‘the autonomous road to communism.’ (Elenkov 2008: 249). Bulgarian Television (BT), which was headed by Zhivkova’s husband, Ivan Slavkov, from 1972 to 1982, had an important role to play in this visionary project that cries for an open-minded research.

Finally, available studies show that by 1975 each day Bulgarians spent three hours and a half watching television, going to the cinema, reading newspapers or listening to the radio (Kunchev 1975: 5). By that time, electronic media were the fourth major activity of the Bulgarian citizen after labor, sleep and housework (Ivanova 2005: 123). In 1975 BT launched its second channel and became a part of the broader shift in Eastern Europe towards multi-channel television. Precipitated by the multiplying needs of the late socialist societies, the second channel targeted the increased cultural needs of the people (Ivanova 2006: 17). In Bulgaria too, the goal of the second channel was to ‘raise the cultural and educational level of the Bulgarian citizens’ and to focus ‘first and foremost’ on culture (Ivanova 2006: 23). Thus, television’s increased importance in everyday life adds another reason why it is important to historicise its role in the socialist politics of culture.

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