

EAST MEETS WEST

THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF TELEVISION IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: This study provides a glimpse into the cultural history of the popular medium of television for the period 1944-2016. Seeking a more nuanced and more evolved understanding of the role of the television in Bulgaria during socialist and in post-socialist times, this essay argues for a 'situated' reading of these historical developments, theorising that socialist and post-socialist television are indeed defined by disparate, yet equally influential and dynamic, cultural and political processes. From the 'golden age' of communist-era television, during which TV was hailed as a main force for mobilisation, education and entertainment, we will trace the 'boom' in commercial TV channels at the offset of the transition, with its often-questionable quality, leading to the emergence of several serious contenders on the broadcasting scene, both in terms of their financial value and in terms of their power over public opinion.

Keywords: television, Bulgaria, television history, socialism, communism, post-communism

1 Introduction

In the former communist bloc, the mass media have been recognised as a central part of the political, economic and social transformations that brought the end of the Cold War. With the end of the economic and ideological divide between the

¹ Authors listed in alphabetical order.

East and West, the former Soviet nations launched a trip of self-discovery in search of a new, post-communist cultural and political identity. As the most influential vehicle of public opinion and social sentiments, the mass media became the public forum for this process, addressing themselves to the West in search of new models and fresh ideas.

As such, the consequences of the Westernisation of media in Eastern Europe have been vast and copious. In 1995, Bakardjieva pondered: 'Will the emergence of new, independent media channels fulfill the expectations for a democratic public debate on issues critical to society, . . . or will they "Dallasify" and drown to death any attempts at critical civic thinking and participation?'² The discussion of these media trends continues to be critical as it demonstrates the complex processes that nations like Bulgaria undergo to find their own identity after the fall of communism.

In this vein, television in Eastern Europe has perhaps been the most compelling and most underexplored arena of post-socialist media transformations, which as Havens, Imre and Lustyik (2013) suggest,³ serve as a fruitful cultural study of the complex interactions between economic and funding systems, regulatory trends and policies, globalisation, imperialism, political culture and cultural identity. Given the paucity of research on the development of television in Bulgaria, this study provides a glimpse into the cultural history of this popular medium for the period 1944–2016. From the 'golden age' of communist-era television during which TV was hailed as a main force for mobilisation, education and entertainment, we will trace the 'boom' in commercial TV channels at the offset of the transition, with its often-questionable quality, leading to the emergence of several serious contenders on the broadcasting scene, both in terms of their financial value and in terms of their power over public opinion. We also look at the cultural impact of the growth of commercial television production, which meanders between being the cultural voice of local talent or the windmill of copycat models of Western programming. In doing so, we hope to present a nuanced and culturally situated timeline of the development of Bulgarian television that acknowledges the complexities of socialist television as revealed in the growing body of media and cultural studies scholarship from the wider region.⁴ In this sense, we want to echo Dana Mustata's⁵ contention that politics should not be the only factor considered when examining the history of television in Eastern Europe. In short, the goal of this essay is to offer a retrospect of the history of Bulgarian television with the hope of imagining where it will find itself in the future.

This essay offers a historical contextual analysis, engaging both primary sources such as original articles and documents about the development of Bulgarian television, as well as secondary sources, including academic articles and Bulgarian books on the history of the medium. Given that both researchers are fluent in the language and grew up in Bulgaria during the socialist period, the essay also offers some ethnographic reflections that help us grapple with sociocultural complexity through deeper and more individualised engagement with social formations and cultural forms.

As scholars note, the history of socialist TV should not be presented in simplistic and predictable Cold War dichotomies⁶ since the medium does not neatly fit into the category of state propaganda,⁷ thus shifting the research focus from the political dimensions of television to its position as a cultural institution.⁸ Seeking a more nuanced and more evolved understanding of the role of television in Bulgaria during socialism and in post-socialist times, this essay argues for a 'situated' reading of these historical developments, theorising that socialist and post-socialist television are indeed defined by disparate, yet equally influential and dynamic, cultural and political processes. Finally, we want to acknowledge the

2 Maria Bakardjieva, 'The New Media Landscape in Bulgaria,' *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 20,1, 1995, <http://www.cjc-online.ca/viewarticle.php?id=268>.

3 Aniko Imre, Timothy Haves and Katalin Lustyik, eds., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, Routledge, 2013.

4 See Aniko Imre, *TV Socialism*, Duke University Press, 2016.

5 Dana Mustata, 'Television in the Age of (Post) Communism: The Case of Romania', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 40, 3, 2012, 131-140.

6 For instance, see: Imre *TV Socialism*; Mustata, 'Television in the Age of (Post) Communism: The Case of Romania'; Sabina Mihelj, 'Understanding Socialist Television: Concepts, Objects and Methods', *VIEW: Journal of Television History and Culture*, 3, 5, 2014, 7-16; Martin Marinos, 'New Media, New Habits: Socialist Television and the Struggle for Harmonious Consumption in 1960s Bulgaria', *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian, and Central European New Media*, 15, 2016, 37-55.

7 Marinos, 'New Media, New Habits'.

8 Mihelj, 'Understanding Socialist Television'.

importance of avoiding pitfalls of methodological nationalism,⁹ approaching the development and cultural impact of television in Bulgaria not necessarily as an identity formation process restricted by the boundaries of the Bulgarian state and narrated solely by nativistic processes, but as a cultural phenomenon with national roots and transnational reach.

2 1950–1989: Socialist TV

Not surprisingly, technical aspects dominate the early years of Bulgarian television, slowly giving way to cultural and ideological considerations. Early television history in Bulgaria parallels developments of ‘brotherly’ countries in the Communist bloc. The 1950s mark the introduction of broadcasting, followed by a rapid technological expansion and a vast audience reach, and a ‘golden era’ in the 1970s and early 1980s is marked by a rise in local productions and record ratings.¹⁰ Yet as a faithful Soviet satellite, Bulgaria retains close connections to the USSR and espouses a Communist view of this new medium as a powerful political instrument, thus becoming the ‘national medium par excellence’.¹¹

The early history of television in Bulgaria closely resembles that of its neighbour, Romania, and could be characterised by what Mustata¹² calls an ‘era of scarcity’ where the medium lacks ‘clear aesthetic, professional or institutional identity’. The first experimental work on transmitting images was initiated in 1951 by a group of enthusiasts affiliated with what is today known as the Technical University in Sofia.¹³ By May of 1953, the first over the air broadcast was



Figure 1. The birth of TV in Bulgaria.

9 Ibid.

10 Sabina Mihelj, ‘Television Entertainment in Socialist Eastern Europe: Between Cold War Politics and Global Developments’, in: A. Imre, T. Havens and K. Lustyik eds., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, 2013.

11 Ibid., p. 23.

12 Mustata, ‘Television in the Age of (Post) Communism’.

13 Shterbak, M. ‘History of Bulgarian Television’, <http://www.predavatel.com/bg/tv/bnt>.

completed, and by November of 1954, the experimental centre was transmitting twice a week: on Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m. and Saturdays at 8 p.m. The equipment consists of a single camera and an old film projector, and content is borrowed from the office of the Bulgarian Cinematography Center. The first live event broadcast in the capital of Sofia, not surprisingly, is the 37th celebration of the Great October Socialist Revolution.¹⁴

The experimental work prompts discussions at the Ministry of Communications, and by April of 1958, the Communist Party makes a decision to start developing national television.¹⁵ The building of the transmitter is initiated in December of 1958 and is completed in a record 11-month period.¹⁶ The transmitter is 14-storeys high with a height of 106 metres, including the antenna. The first trial broadcast from the new transmitter is completed on 1 November 1959.¹⁷ Five days later, the trial broadcasts include a soccer match and the Soviet film *A Girl Looking for Her Father*.¹⁸

The beginning of professional television in Bulgaria can be traced to the live transmission of the November 7 parade marking the celebration of the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1959. With three camera crews and two directors, one whom arrives directly from the Soviet Union, the event is a success.¹⁹ This is the time the national news bulletin debuted as well.²⁰ The very first official broadcast happens on December 26 (which is considered the birthdate of Bulgarian National Television) that same year and consists of three parts: speeches by party officials and awards for those who participated in building the TV tower, a celebratory concert with congratulatory messages from 'brotherly' countries, and a film, which was a joint Bulgarian-Russian production.²¹

During its formative years, Bulgarian National Television (BNT) owns 2–3 cameras, has a crew of 22 people and is broadcast over channel 7, which even today remains the place Bulgarian audiences can find the defining national news bulletin.²² In 1960, Bulgaria puts a 20-kilowatt transmitter on Mount Botev, covering 17–20% of the country, which at this time has close to 10,000 television sets.²³ Yet rapid growth occurs within years. By 1966, BNT transmissions cover 60% of the country, with transmitters in major metropolitan centres like Plovdiv, Pernik and Rousse, and TV ownership rises to 185,000 sets.²⁴ The rapid development of television also justifies the creation of a separate directorate in 1964 called 'Bulgarian Radio and Television,' as part of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture and the Arts.

As with other post-Communist countries, the period of socialism should not be examined as a monolithic occurrence; rather, a distinction should be established between the early post-war decade and the process of de-Stalinization that followed it as well as the developments after the 1968 Prague Spring when the function of the medium changed from that of mobilisation of the masses to cultural enlightenment and education.²⁵ In an attempt to provide an insight into the cultural functions of Bulgarian television in the 1960s, Martin Marinos²⁶ argues that television in this period is viewed as a 'natural device for de-Stalinization'. As Marinos explains:

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 '50 years BNT: Bulgarian National Television's history', <http://50.bnt.bg/>

17 Ibid.

18 Shterbak, 'History of Bulgarian Television' and '50 years BNT: Bulgarian National Television's history'.

19 Shterbak, 'History of Bulgarian Television.'

20 '50 years BNT: Bulgarian National Television's history'

21 Shterbak, 'History of Bulgarian Television'; *Kapital*. "Dossier: Bulgarian National Television: BNT". http://www.capital.bg/link_dosie/medii/872918_bulgarska_nacionalna_televizia_bnt/.

22 Shterbak, 'History of Bulgarian Television'; '50 years BNT: Bulgarian National Television's history'.

23 Ibid.

24 Shterbak, 'History of Bulgarian Television'.

25 Marinos, 'New Media, New Habits'.

26 Ibid.

[I]n 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.²⁷

The first general manager of BNT is Borislav Petrov, who manages to increase the proportion of news programmes and establishes BNT as a cultural and ideological institution.²⁸ For example, the iconic news programme *Around the World and at Home* (*По света и у нас*) begins broadcasting at 8 p.m. on 20 July 1960 and is regarded as most trusted among audiences.²⁹ This time slot is selected so that it does not interfere with the National Radio news broadcast, which is traditionally set for 8:30 p.m. In 1962, Anahid Tacheva becomes lead anchor for *Around the World and at Home*, a position she holds for more than 30 years.³⁰ When she leaves on maternity leave, people inundate BNT headquarters with phone calls asking why she is off the air. Her face and voice become symbolic of the news for this time period and remain emblazoned in the national psyche.

The close ideological alignment between Bulgaria and the USSR is an intricate part of the history of Bulgarian television. Although by 1965 BNT starts broadcasting daily, its *Soviet Friday* programming schedule includes Central USSR TV broadcasts (without translation) from 10 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. and from 5 p.m. until 11 p.m.³¹ As Mihelj observes, 'Bulgaria was, in this sense, something of an exception, and remained heavily dependent on Soviet imports



Figure 2. Anahid Tacheva.

27 Ibid., p. 46

28 Poly Ivanova, 'History of Television in Bulgaria,' *Newmedia21.eu*, November 20, 2014, <http://www.newmedia21.eu/proekti/istoriya-na-televiziyata/>

29 '50 years BNT: Bulgarian National Television's history.'

30 Her initial aspiration is to become an actress but when her husband, the famous Bulgarian actor Kosta Tsonev, frowns upon this idea, she goes to the first audition for BNT anchor and gets the job. See: *Pik.bg. Anahid Tacheva turns 73*, <http://pik.bg/%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B8%D0%B4-%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-73-news107824.html>

31 '50 years BNT: Bulgarian National Television's history.'



Figure 3. Tacheva toasting with First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party Todor Zhivkov during his visit to BNT in 1970.

throughout.³² In fact, the country has one of the highest levels of imported programming (45%), mostly Soviet, compared to its Communist counterparts. Nevertheless, some Western formats are appropriated, as is the case with the popular *Panorama* (Панорама) current affairs show, which the then BNT General Manager, Leda Mileva, modelled after an analogous BBC show.³³ BNT also brings to its audiences the historic landing of Apollo 11 on the Moon in July of 1969. The same year, it starts its first trial colour transmissions, and in the mid-1970s, it adds a second channel. Channel 2 exists as a complementary part of BNT's programming throughout this period. The intent is not to compete but rather bring additional cultural and entertainment offerings like documentaries, folklore, opera and art. Showcasing high culture through television with the aim of creating a highly cultured audience remains a staple of late socialist television and thus generates a great number of programmes on literature, theatre, opera and art. As a result, close to 30–35% of programming during the late 1960s falls under the category of 'cultural'.³⁴

The history of BNT in the 1970s cannot be fully understood without giving attention to the influence of its general manager from 1972–1982, Ivan Slavkov, and his wife, Todor Zhivkov's only daughter, Lyudmila Zhivkova. As the son-in-law of the First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Slavkov has special access to the highest echelons of power and an ambition to reform the medium into an 'organic part of Bulgarian society'.³⁵ While his wife completes her doctorate at Oxford, he works as a reporter for the emblematic Communist Party newspaper *Rabotnichesko Delo*, and later briefly appears on TV as a reporter. Lyudmila's contributions are not directly related to television, but we need to point out that she is one of the biggest patrons and promoters of Bulgarian art and culture at home and abroad, and as such, she undertakes some large-scale projects aimed at the cultural opening of Bulgaria to the world.³⁶ Zhivkov's daughter, Lyudmila, is seen as his apparent heir, yet her infatuation with Eastern religion and spirituality later in her

32 Mihelj, 'Television Entertainment in Socialist Eastern Europe,' p. 16.

33 *Kapital*, 'Dossier: Bulgarian National Television: BNT.'

34 Marinov, 'New Media, New Habits.'

35 Ivanova, 'History of Television in Bulgaria.'

36 Ana Luleva, 'The Debate on the Communist Past and the Memory of Lyudmila Zhivkova in Bulgaria,' *Cultures of History Forum*, 2014, <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/bulgaria/the-debate-on-the-communist-past-and-the-memory-of-lyudmila-zhivkova-in-bulgaria/>; Krum Blagov, *Mysteriata Lyudmila Zhivkova*, Reporter, 2012.

life makes Soviet Party leaders unhappy.³⁷ It should not be surprising, then, to see how the son-in-law could have the audacity to make pervasive changes to all aspects of BNT, albeit Slavkov later shares that he only spoke several times directly with his father-in-law about television.³⁸ He remembers that the only time Zhivkov got mad at him was when they mistakenly showed a clip of him in which it appears he is repeating his words.³⁹

Slavkov spearheads the introduction of regional centres and the revamping of BTV's programming structure and schedule, as well as the introduction of iconic programmes, most notable of which is *Every Sunday* (*Всяка Неделя*), which starts in 1979 and continues even after the fall of Communism. Slavkov himself recalls that the idea for the show originated when the producer, Yancho Takov, returned from specialisation in the USA and proposed the creation of a local show that would resemble the format of *Good Morning America*.⁴⁰ On many occasions, the content of *Every Sunday* is so inflammatory that in its 25-year existence it is pulled off the air four times.⁴¹ The most popular segment of the show includes in-depth interviews with notable personalities, which elevated it to the highest international journalistic standards.⁴² Throughout the years, the programme brings new genres and introduces a new style of broadcast journalism where, for the first time, Bulgarian audiences can see the studio and camera operators live—all contributing factors to its success as the top TV programme during Communist times⁴³ as well as the designation of 'afternoon church of the Bulgarian people'.⁴⁴ In his memoirs, one of the long-time anchors of *Panorama* and a



Figure 4. The daughter of Todor Zhivkov, Lyudmila Zhivkova, and her second husband, Ivan Slavkov, with their newborn son, Todor Slavkov, and daughter from previous marriage, Evgeniya Zhivkova, who was adopted by her grandfather after the death of her mother in 1981.

37 Ibid.

38 Kevork Kevorkian, 'Interview with Kevork Kevorkian,' originally published in *24 Chassa* newspaper, 2009, http://www.kevorkkevorkian.com/bg/publications&article_id=4703.html; Ivan Slavkov Interview, *Every Sunday: The Legend and its Heroes, 25 years*, Zaharii Stoyanov, 2004, <http://www.kevorkkevorkian.com/bg/hronika.html>.

39 Slavkov, *Every Sunday: The Legend and its Heroes, 25 years*.

40 Ibid.

41 *Kapital*, 'Dossier: Bulgarian National Television: BNT.'

42 Ibid. For a full list of participants in *Every Sunday*, go to: <http://www.kevorkkevorkian.com/bg/gallery.html>

43 Resume, *Every Sunday: The legend and its Heroes, 25 years*, Zaharii Stoyanov, 2004, <http://www.kevorkkevorkian.com/bg/hronika.html>

44 *Every Sunday* Blog, <http://vsqkanedelq.blog.bg/novini/2013/11/14/vsiaka-nedelia-s-kevork-kevorkian.1205688>

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Figure 5. A YouTube channel with excerpts of the interviews broadcast on Every Sunday. Among the participants are famous Bulgarian politicians, actors, athletes, poets, as well as, after the fall of Communism, such personalities as Mikhail Gorbachev, Noam Chomsky, the daughter of Fidel Castro, Melvin Goodman and Gore Vidal.



Figure 6. Kevork Kevorkian.



Figure 7. BNT Channel 1 Logo.



Figure 8. BNT Channel 2 Logo.

founding father of Bulgarian TV journalism, Ivan Garelov, remembers Slavkov as a person who had seen how things are done abroad and who had the ambition to make things happen locally. Because of this, Slavkov is in constant friction with Party leaders who try to control and censor him, and eventually manage to push him out after the death of his wife in 1981,⁴⁵ which Slavkov confirms.⁴⁶ Kevork Kevorkian, the most legendary TV personality and lead anchor of *Every Sunday*, states in an interview commemorating the 50th anniversary of BNT that Ivan Slavkov's name is rarely mentioned by those in TV circles, yet he had a 'notable instinct for television' and 'he was ready to take risks'.⁴⁷ He credits Slavkov for having the vision to come to him one day and ask him to be the anchor for *Every Sunday*. In this sense, Kevorkian argues that Slavkov changed his life. Kevorkian adds that 'many people owe their career in television to him but now they are quiet',⁴⁸ possibly because of the controversial legacy of Slavkov's name.⁴⁹

The late 1970s are marked by technological and format improvements. By 1979, BNT's Channel 1 is broadcast with the help of 11 transmitters and covers 82% of the country. That same year, BNT transmits 100 hours each week, 75% of which are in colour. The next year, Channel 2 starts daily transmissions in the late afternoons and adds new educational and sports programmes, thus following Party directives to 'solidify the moral-political unification of the people'.⁵⁰ By 1985, Bulgarians could watch three channels, the third channel directly transmitting the Central Television of the USSR.

The 1980s are marked by a renaissance period that features iconic local productions, ranging from children's series such as *Unexpected Vacation* (Неочаквана ваканция, 1981) or *Vasko da Gama from Rupcha* (Васко да Гама от село Рупча, 1986), and cult series such as *Notes on Bulgarian Rebellions* (Записки по българските въстания, 1976) and *Captain Petko Voyvoda* (Капитан Петко войвода, 1981). Bulgarian dramas such as *Night with The White Horses* (Нощем с белите коне, 1985) and *House for our Kids* (Дом за нашите деца, 1986) enjoy eager reception among Bulgarian audiences who would empty the streets in anticipation of each new episode. While actual viewership data from this period is hard to find, it is not an over-exaggeration to state that those Bulgarian productions were experienced by every single Bulgarian citizen regardless of age. Both authors can vividly recall the iconic music that

45 Ivanova, 'History of Television in Bulgaria'; Kevorkian, 'Interview with Kevork Kevorkian.'

46 Slavkov, *Every Sunday: The legend and its Heroes, 25 years*.

47 Kevorkian, 'Interview with Kevork Kevorkian.'

48 Ibid.

49 From 1985 till 2005 Slavkov is a chair of the Bulgarian National Olympic Committee and is elected International Olympic Committee member in 1987 but is removed from this position in 2005 for ethical misconduct.

50 Ivanova, 'History of Television in Bulgaria.'

was part of each production. At that time, Bulgarians were also exposed to an all-time-favourite—a Saturday film bloc called *Studio X*—which allowed viewers to immerse themselves in mystery/murder-themed movies.

Not surprisingly, the Perestroika and Glasnost changes after 1985 had a thawing effect on the programming of Bulgarian television. The period after 1985 is marked by greater emphasis on entertainment programming and an expansion of Western imports. By 1987, Bulgarian viewers are glued to the screen following the trials and tribulations of the slave *Isaura*, which was an imported Brazilian telenovela, or they could get a glimpse into the fight against the Mafia in the Italian-produced series *Octopus (La Piovra)* or even experience a live concert by German pop singer CC Catch. By 1988, Bulgarian TV starts exchanging news with CNN through Intersignal, granting rights to CNN to transmit TV programmes from Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.⁵¹ While this marks the first truly Western exchange of television news programming between Bulgaria and the United States, the Bulgarian authority maintains ideological control over the type of content they allow to be aired. As official documents of the signed agreement between CNN and the Bulgarian television authorities state, 'Bulgaria will focus on programming that properly propagates Bulgaria's experience in many spheres of public life.'⁵²

In spite of Party censorship, the dramatic political and economic changes in Eastern and Central Europe reverberate through the Bulgarian airwaves. At the end of 1988 and beginning of 1989, *Every Sunday* begins broadcasting a series of interviews with intellectual dissidents expressing opinions that run counter to the official Party line. In fact, *Every Sunday* becomes the stage of the biggest TV scandal when Russian academician Nikolai Amosov proclaims in a December 1988 interview that the slogan 'Proletarians of all countries, unite' is phony, thus rejecting one of the central postulates of communist ideology.⁵³ In the political fallout, the programme is shut down from June until 19 November, and returns to the airways just a few days after the removal of Todor Zhivkov from power in November of 1989.⁵⁴ At the end of 1989, as programming director of BNT, Kevork Kevorkian mandates a 'new concept' for news programmes, which includes a removal of the traditional Soviet salutation ('Comrades') and introduces 'Ladies and Gentlemen', a change in the overall language of delivery, and he launched open phone lines for viewer feedback.⁵⁵ During this period, BNT broadcasts live the numerous protests and rallies that accompany Bulgaria's transition from totalitarianism to a democracy and is, therefore, an instrumental force in carrying out the revolutionary changes leading to the removal of the totalitarian regime.

3 1989–2016: Transitional Television?

The transitional history of Bulgarian television would be incomplete without giving attention to an iconic show called *Ku-Ku (Ky Ky)*, which imitates the sound of a bird but is also a colloquialism for 'crazy,' which debuts in January of 1990 and ends in 1995. Created by a group of enthusiastic college students, the shows have a humorous format and feature a puppet called Ku-Ku who provides poignant commentary on the important topics of the day. The 'atomic Ku-Ku' is among the most memorable of its productions. Airing on 22 December 1991, the show exposes the viewers, in the style of Welles' *War of the Worlds*, to a possible scenario of how the 'beloved' BNT would react in the case of an explosion at the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant. The simulated news bulletins create mass panic, where reportedly 90% of viewers believe that something serious is happening and start insulating their homes or jump in their cars to head to the nearest border in preparation to leave the country. In the meantime, the president of the Bulgarian

51 *Kapital*, 'Dossier: Bulgarian National Television: BNT'

52 Ivanova, 'History of Television in Bulgaria,' p. 320.

53 *Every Sunday* Blog.

54 Shterbak, 'History of Bulgarian Television'.

55 *Ibid.*



Figure 9. The puppet Ku-Ku with its puppeteer Kamen Vodenicharov.

National Assembly makes a desperate attempt to take the show off the air.⁵⁶ The fallout from the show is immediate and catastrophic, the show is condemned by mainstream media and authorities for destabilising the country, and its producer and editor face a criminal trial. Few people at the time pay attention to the argument put forward by the creators that their intent is to show the power of the national TV medium and to underscore the need for alternative voices in the face of real threats.⁵⁷

Video 1. An excerpt from *Nuclear Ku-Ku* with English subtitles. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

The period following the collapse of the communist regime, characterised by an influx of programming from the West, is a period of tumultuous change and radical transformations. As Ivanova⁵⁸ points out, many of the changes that Bulgarian television endures are literally changes that take place on the spot, without much time for planning or strategizing. Nevertheless, some of the biggest changes that take place affect, first and foremost, the role that TV journalists are expected to follow and the commercial pressures of a new media environment after the collapse of the state-supported and financially guaranteed model of communist media. After the economic and political collapse of the regime, television in Bulgaria has to rethink and reform both its revenue stream and its production capabilities faced with a new, unregulated and increasingly competitive media landscape. The results are both exciting and disparaging, as the early 1990s are the period that offers the opportunity to look for fresh ideas in programming and television news, free of ideological control and self-censorship, and yet it delivers mostly cheap, imported American content that offers very little in terms of substance and social relevance. For example, the first American programme that aired on Bulgarian television is *The Flintstones* (Семейство Флинтстоун), which quickly grew in popularity only to serve as a distraction from the disparaging news of the day. Soon after, a number of American TV shows, including long-running soap operas and TV series such as *Dallas*,

56 *Kapital*, 'Dossier: Bulgarian National Television: BNT'.

57 *Ibid.*

58 Polya Ivanova, *Bulgarian television 1959-1990*. Sofia University Press, 2007.

the *Bold and the Beautiful* and *Baywatch*, become a staple of the Bulgarian TV viewers' TV diet. The shows grow both in popularity and ratings, solidifying the position of American entertainment programming on the Bulgarian television market.

The tendency of American television content to become the leading import is often explained by the growth of commercial channels all over Europe—a fact that is also obvious in the transition years of Bulgaria's post-communist television—and also by the fact that American fiction is cheaper than European fiction, and therefore, ensured higher ratings. This influx of American cultural content has been studied by media cultural scholars who have focused on its lasting impact on local cultures as well as global dominance. One school of thought led by De Bens et al.⁵⁹ provocatively launched the term 'Dallasification' to refer to the non-stop homogenizing influence of American programs. In later years, De Bens and de Smaele⁶⁰ revisit the ongoing 'Dallasification of television content' because, in spite of the European system of quotas and the fact that 'American series cannot touch the popularity of domestic series', U.S. fiction succeeds in breaking through all cultural barriers in Europe. De Bens et al. also acknowledge that in their analysis, they do not pay attention to the extent to which European fiction is Americanized because of its adoption of American formats, narrative codes, structures and production, a trend that has been acknowledged in the qualitative analysis of local European productions.⁶¹

Other social scientists suggest that what they called the 'Americanization paradigm' of cultural domination is responsible for the ensuing homogenization of world cultures. A good example is Ritzer's McDonalization thesis,⁶² which claims that rationalised capital-intensive forms of production, marketing and consumption are conquering older or alternative forms of production everywhere in the world. The same idea was evoked by Barber⁶³ whose fears materialised in the notion that there might be little choice between this sort of 'McWorld' and its territorialist and parochial opposite, symbolised by the Jihad and tribalisation.

However, opponents of the Americanization paradigm have pointed out that the adoption of American culture and American cultural influence around the world is not necessarily a forceful and an imposed imperialist move. Rather, as Schou⁶⁴ contends, in societies with clearly divisive culture along criteria of class, gender, age etc., the consumption and enjoyment of American goods and popular culture come to serve for the working-class consumers as a symbolic resistance to the paternalism of the national cultural establishment as expressed most visibly in everyday life through the public-service broadcasting institutions that, until recently, commanded the cultural space in Eastern European countries as well.

In Bulgaria, the effects of the influx of American television influences are immediately felt following the collapse of state control over television, partially because of the ideological vacuum of communism that prevents easy access to American television content, and partially because Bulgarian television is desperately trying to remake its image from a state organ of cultural edification and political propaganda into a source of entertainment, based on the widely circulating idea of the superiority of the Western television model. Thus, the 'Dallasification' of television content is not only not frowned upon, it is welcome and invited. It is not surprising, then, that the very first original post-communist entertainment programme is a game show on BNT Channel 1, called *Supershow Nevada* (a nod to the entertainment capital of the United States, Las Vegas, and the appeal of American culture) that airs in 1993 and continues until 2001. Game shows become very popular and are a form of low-cost, high rating entertainment that also attracts corporate sponsorship and offers lucrative prizes—a programming model that does not exist during communist times.

59 Els De Bens, Mary Kelly and Marit Bakke, 'Television Content: Dallasification of Culture?', in: Karen Suine & Wolfgang Truetschler, eds., *Dynamics of media politics*, Sage, 1992, 73-100.

60 Els De Bens and Hedwig de Smaele, 'The Inflow of American Television Fiction on European Broadcasting Channels Revisited,' *European Journal of Communication*, 16, 1, 2001, 51-76.

61 Sylwia Szostak, 'Poland's Return to Europe—Polish Terrestrial Broadcasters and TV fiction,' *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 1, 2, 2013, <http://rdbg.tuic.nl/euscreen-ojs/index.php/view/article/view/jethc021/43>.

62 George Ritzer, *The McDonalization of society*, Pine Forge Press, 1993.

63 Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Ballantine Books, 1996.

64 Søren Schou, 'Postwar Americanization and the Revitalization of European Culture,' in: Michael Skovmand and Kim Schrøder, eds, *Media cultures: Reappraising transnational media*, Routledge, 1992.

Similar developments are also experienced by other post-socialist countries in the region—Romania and Albania, for example—where television provides a fertile ground to borrow heavily from a Western model in order to produce TV programmes inspired mostly by Italian television shows and aimed at offering instant gratification, rapid consumerism, and deliberately stripped of any political overtones.⁶⁵ And while Imre⁶⁶ argues that for the nations of Central Europe, ‘the regional and national characteristics owe a great deal to local television industries’ negotiation between Soviet-type socialism to which they were officially beholden and the socialism of European democracies to which they had culturally belonged and wished to return’, in the case of Bulgaria, whose ties to European socialist traditions are somewhat weaker compared to those of its Central European neighbours, the cultural gravitational pull of American television seems to provide a model that Bulgarian TV producers can aspire to emulate, unburdened by ideological alliances and free of political baggage.

Video 2. *Supershow* Nevada, December 1995. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

Because of limited access to production resources and funding, the Bulgarian response to the influx of American television content is rather lethargic. In the 1990s, few domestic productions of high quality exist, the most notable and most culturally significant among them being *Danube Bridge* (Дунав Мост, 1999). The TV series is the first of its kind to focus on socially and culturally pressing issues, including economic depression, smuggling and corruption with a degree of honesty and candour that is immediately appreciated by Bulgarian audiences. In many ways, the success of numerous Bulgarian productions that follow suit after *Danube Bridge* is predicted by scholars like De Sola Pool,⁶⁷ who envisages the eventual ‘erosion’ of America’s popularity among local cultures, leading to a rapid growth in local production because American cultural imports are incapable of overriding the ‘barriers of culture’. ‘Domestic products portray characters eating the food people eat, wearing the clothes people wear, celebrating events they celebrate, and gossiping about celebrities they follow...’⁶⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2007, eight domestic productions are ranked in the top 10 most popular TV shows. In addition, in the same year, the most popular recurrent TV show becomes *Slavi’s Show*, a variety show with an audience rating of 34.6% and an audience share of 72%, which demonstrates that Bulgarian TV shows have something to offer and that Bulgarian TV audiences are ready to embrace creative content that offers an alternative to the American and Western themed TV programmes.⁶⁹

Video 3. 12 *Danube Bridge*, Episode 1, 1999. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

The growth of local television production, however, is not necessarily signalling a maturation of the cultural and social mission of television in Bulgaria. With the exponential growth of Bulgarian TV channels, and for some of them—the local programmes they offer—a decline in serious and professional journalistic work, in-depth analyses and interviews, expert discussions and documentaries become visible. Instead of focusing on programmes that in the past are seen as bearing the mark of quality, emblematic news programmes now seen as unnecessary and archaic, are displaced by talk shows and reality formats, by entertainment shows that colonise the public television sphere, instrumentalise journalism and distort the perception of what constitutes the reality of everyday living. This shift from a serious to an entertainment format is particularly evident in one of the few ambitious investigative journalism projects on Bulgarian television, bTV’s *Masters of the Air* (Господари на ефупа, the Bulgarian version of the Italian *Striscia la notizia*). *Masters of the Air*, similar to its predecessor *Ku-Ku*, is a comedic show focusing on the gaffes and bloopers of politicians and celebrities, which is now also seen as the tribune of investigative journalism in Bulgaria. The show is perhaps the best example of the pitfalls and triumph of transitional television in Bulgaria—by offering a non-traditional mix of comedy sketches based on real social issues reported by ordinary Bulgarian citizens, the programme evolved from a place where politicians can be ridiculed for their inept responses and comedic slips into a fire-brand, citizen-driven undercover journalism, which offers a much needed forum for holding governing bodies accountable.

65 Mustata, ‘Television in the Age of (Post) Communism.’

66 Imre, *TV Socialism*, 259.

67 Ithiel de Sola Pool, ‘The Changing Flow of Television,’ *Journal of Communication*, 27, 2, 1977, 139-149.

68 Ibid., 143.

69 Margarita Pesheva, *Radio and TV Environment 2002-2010*, Faber, 2011.

Video 4. *Masters of the Air (Господари на ефира)*, 2016. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

Bulgaria's experience in transitional television content and its cultural diversity beyond communism cannot be understood without situating this historical period in the economic realities of the media market at large and the television market in particular. Until 1994, for nearly five years beyond the collapse of the regime, Bulgaria continues to operate only two national channels—Kanal 1, which has taken on the profile of an information and news driven channel and Efir 2, which has served as a complementary service to Kanal 1 in offering a 'lighter' mix of programmes, mostly focused on education, entertainment, and culture. However, in evolving from the less serious, and therefore, less relevant to the lives of Bulgarian citizens in the post-communist transition, Efir 2 begins to build its own niche and reputation by offering an exciting alternative to the establishment. In 2000, Efir 2 is purchased by an offshoot of Fox Corporation, named Balkan News Corporation and later renamed Balkan Television (bTV for short), to become the first privately owned national TV channel in Bulgaria. The start of this first of its kind foreign venture in Bulgaria is not all smooth sailing, however, as the TV channel struggles to retain the interest of Bulgarian viewing audiences, who do not respond enthusiastically to bTV's initial programming, focused entirely on sports and entertainment, and very sparsely on local Bulgarian content.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, bTV quickly realises its mistakes and redirects its effort on providing current comedy and entertainment series, with strong name recognition and a loyal following among local viewers, as well as increasing its percentage of original Bulgarian programmes, including hosting the hugely popular *Slavi's Show*⁷¹ and launching an American style news programme, which precedes the 'official' news on Bulgarian National Television by 30 minutes and quickly becomes a leader in the news.⁷² More importantly, because of its 'flexible' marketing style and alluring advertising offers, coupled with the less than transparent relationships between the owners of bTV and the largest advertising players in the Bulgarian market at the time, bTV also establishes its position as the most dominant force in the budding advertising business in the country.⁷³

The market for private television channels also aligned with an exponential growth of cable television service providers, many of which launched locally operated TV channels concentrated mostly in the big cities. Currently, Bulgaria operates four national channels—BNT1, BNT2, Nova Television and bTV—two of which are owned by foreign companies, 33 local cable and satellite channels, and more than 28 foreign channels translated into Bulgarian, a seemingly diverse offering for a relatively small market that the country constitutes.⁷⁴ Pesheva⁷⁵ argues that the 'mushrooming' of television channels is in large part due to the unregulated licencing procedures and the lack of a solid legal framework to oversee the functioning, purchasing, and monitoring of TV channels in the country. According to data from the 2010 public registry of the Council of Electronic Media, there are 169 television programmes in a country of fewer than 7.5 million people.⁷⁶ The programming quality in these cable shows is often questionable, but many of the news-oriented and commentary style programmes that are engendered in this climate of lax oversight and high demand, such as the TV show *Attack (Атака)* on Skat TV, for example, serve as a launching pad for the political careers of far-right politicians who quickly realised the huge potential of unfettered access to TV viewing audiences with inflammatory, yet painfully resonant, rhetoric of political discontent.⁷⁷

As the TV channels grow in numbers, several problems begin to surface, defining the challenges of the transitional nature of television. For one, Bulgarian TV channels quickly resort to the convenient and tested Western TV programming models, focusing mostly on popular formats among all viewing audiences, regardless of age. Reality becomes the most dominant genre among Bulgarian viewers, with shows such as *Big Brother*, *VIP Big Brother*,

70 Elza Ibroscheva and Maria Raicheva-Stover, 'First Green is Always Gold: An Examination of the First Private Television Channel in Bulgaria,' in: Isaac A. Blankson and Patrick D. Murphy, eds, *Negotiating Democracy: Media Transformations in Emerging Democracies*, State University of New York Press, 2007, 219-237.

71 The host of the show, Slavi Trifonov, was among the founding members of the emblematic student show *Ku-Ku*.

72 Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover, 'First Green is Always Gold.'

73 Ibid.

74 Pesheva, *Radio and TV Environment 2002-2010*.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Elza Ibroscheva and Maria Raicheva-Stover, 'Politics of Hate or How Media Can Help an Ultra-Nationalist Party in Bulgaria Win Elections,' *Limina: Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, 15, 2009, 1-15.

Survivor and *Fort Boyard* bringing the highest ratings and celebrated by media critics as hailing a new, honest and hopeful 'piece of reality, usually connected with the private lives of people'.⁷⁸ Reality TV, as Raicheva-Stover⁷⁹ points out, can no longer be ignored as a passing fad as it seems that in many ways, reality TV presents a much needed blend of global and local content, albeit not always in the most socially appropriate way.

As reality shows became the norm, local content overturns the once ubiquitous dominance of Western programming, and Bulgarian television news grows in its professionalization, two transitional concerns become particularly pressing. The first and perhaps most difficult to tackle is the lack of transparency regarding the origin of capital and the financial dependency of the biggest TV channels, concentrated in the hands of a few powerful national and international players with deep political and economic interests. As Todorov⁸⁰ contests in the Foundation for Media Democracy annual media monitoring report, 'Ownership in the media validates the claim that ownership is the medium . . . Bulgarian television has become an immediate function of capital. This points to the alarming conclusion that Bulgarian television has willingly turned into a function of power and its interests.'

The second related issue also emanates from the lack of accountability behind the capital and origin of media ownership, and it has to do with the political power wielded by the current business moguls who stand the already completed and many pending TV ownership deals. As Ibroscheva⁸¹ has pointed out, the most powerful businesses interested in owning a variety of media outlets in Bulgaria, including television stations, are also former secret service collaborators and high ranking officials in the intelligence communities, who often purposely conceal their connections to the old regime, including highly regarded journalists and intellectuals of the dissent movement. With this degree of ambiguity, and often, deliberate misinformation, Bulgaria's television future seems clouded by its susceptibility to political manipulation. Perhaps the most fascinating and unique example of this is to be found in the current role of entertainment television in politics as exemplified by *Slavi's Show*. In late 2016, Slavi Trifonov, Bulgaria's most widely recognised TV host and reigning showman after the fall of Communism, calls for a national referendum to transform the electoral process and its oversight in the hope of eliminating long-standing corruption among the political class. While this brash political move from the TV screens during 'entertainment hour' was certainly unusual, it also represented the unique mix of 'hats' that transitional television wears in the post-communist climate of media experimentation. On the one hand, this move presents a serious call for much needed reform in the political realm, a reform that appears impossible to launch by a corrupt establishment. As Petkova⁸² points out, 'with this move, television took on a new charge: transforming itself from a subject, covering political reality and acting as its co-engineer, into its creator and an independent agent of the public.' On the other hand, however, it also stands for grand posturing in the tradition of populism, motivated by commercial interests, which is difficult to envision as a genuine force behind democratic political reform. In both cases, it is clear that television in Bulgaria remains, as in the rest of the Eastern European region, a site for expression and articulation of questions of identity, representation and cultural and political power.

Biography

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78 Maria Popova, 'Reality TV in Bulgaria: Social and Cultural Models and National Peculiarities,' *Sens Public*, 2012, http://www.sens-public.org/IMG/pdf/SensPublic_MPopova_Reality_TV_in_Bulgaria.pdf.

79 Maria Raicheva-Stover, 'You'll See, You'll Watch: The Success of Big Brother in Postcommunist Bulgaria,' in: Amir Hetsroni, ed., *Reality television: Merging the global and the local*, Nova Science Publishers, 2011.

80 Todor Todorov, 'Television in Bulgaria in 2011: Problems and Directions,' *Media Democracy Foundation*, 29 February 2012, <http://www.fmd.bg/?p=6324>.

81 Elza Ibroscheva, 'Spies like us: Media, politics and the Communist past in Bulgaria,' *Central European Journal of Communication*, 1 (8), 2012, 11-24.

82 Kalina Petkova, 'Television 2016; more content, less choice,' *Media Democracy Foundation*, January 30 2017, <http://www.fmd.bg/?p=9466>

Central European Journal of Communication, Feminist Media Studies, International Journal of Communication and Sex Roles: Journal of Research. A native of Bulgaria, her research interests focus on media developments in Eastern Europe, including media stereotypes, international and political communication, gender representations in the media as well as the role of the media in fueling nationalism. Ibroscheva is the author of *Advertising, Sex and Post Socialism: Women, Media and Femininity in the Balkans* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013) and co-editor (with Dr. Maria Raicheva-Stover) of the volume *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

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