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Russia and the USSR in the Bulgarian National Ritual Year

Abstract. Russia and the USSR have played a very important role in the Bulgarian national processes from the National Revival period (19th century) until nowadays. The image of Russia and the Russians was at the core of the processes of developing a national festive calendar—both before and after 1944, as well as after the democratic changes in 1989. Although Russia is no longer considered "the big brother", "brother nation", "matushka" or "bratushki" and the ideological focus of the Bulgarian national narrative has changed, 3 March—the date of Liberation—did not lose its central place in the centre of the national calendar (it is the date of signing the peace treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in what came to be known in Bulgaria as the Liberation War of 1877—1878). The position of Russia and the Russians will be analysed in the paper from a historical perspective, as well as in view of the present debates and festive practices. The study is based on data collected by the author in the last four years.

Keywords: Bulgaria, national ritual year, nationalism, public rituals, Russia, USSR.

In recent years the tension between Russophilia and Russophobia in Bulgaria (which is not a new phenomenon—it is a trend that goes back to the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century) resurfaced with full force in connection with the international situation of the two states, particularly Russia's economic interests in Bulgaria and Bulgaria's membership in the EU and NATO. Even though the official relations between Bulgaria and Russia are not explicitly articulated by politicians, it is clear that Bulgarians could not put behind them the existence of this "Great Power" and should accept it not only because of its global significance but also because of its connections with the country's history, culture, economics, and everyday life.

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In writing this article I was particularly inspired by *Mechanisms of Formation of Russia's Positive Image in Post-Soviet Countries* (Bespalov

et al. 2007). Its authors argue that by means of mass culture and mass education the elites in the post-Soviet countries are building their new national festivity (and identity) mainly in opposition to Russia (Bespalov et al. 2007: 20). As regards Eastern European nationalism of the 19th and 20th century this would not come as a surprise; for Bulgaria, such an enemy is Turkey or the Ottoman Empire; the attitude toward Russia as a "significant other" in the processes of nation-building, however, is quite interesting.

Nationalism and its features, such as national festivities, are usually studied in two perspectives: as an independent system with its own historical grounds (in the established states of Western Europe) and as a response to the empires' policies and foreign influences (in the "new" nations in Central and Eastern Europe). According to E. Hobsbawm, two more perspectives arise: from below, i.e., "in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests" of the society; and from above, i.e., from the viewpoint of "the governments and the spokesmen and activists of nationalist … movements" (Hobsbawm 2004: 10—11). Although Hobsbawm criticizes E. Gellner for applying a "from above" approach, in Hobsbawm's work there is no implication of an authentic grassroots, "banal" (Billing 1995) or everyday (Goode & Stroup 2015) nationalism either. I find it more fitting to study nationalism through the national festive system and collective conscience (Durkheim 1997), thus combining the two approaches—from above and from below—and at the same time not contradicting the constructivist approach. Furthermore, I base my work on the methodological propositions put forward in the book, *We Are What We Celebrate: Understanding Holidays and Rituals*, edited by A. Etzioni and J. Bloom (2004) who point out the methodological merits of holidays; for one thing, they provide indicators that help us identify the features of any large collectives. Therefore I claim that historical research of national holidays and rituals could offer a new understanding of the gap between the official political discourse and everyday political, social and cultural notions and trends.

There are five main reasons why it is important to study the image of Russia in Bulgarian national festivities during the last 130 years, i.e., the time of the so called Third Bulgarian State:

1) it is unusual to study nationalism from the perspective of a the foreign "positive" influence—i.e., not regarding Ottoman Empire / Turkey as "the national enemy", but rather regarding Russia / USSR; or if we go back to Bespalov, it is interesting to change the viewpoint and consider nationalism not as a conflict but as a partnership;

2) this topic has not been studied at all; it has only been touched upon by two scholars (Simeonova 2007; Sedakova 2014);

3) it is a way to debunk some of the myths about the recent past: for instance, that Russia and Bulgaria have been closely bound up (economically, politically, and ideologically) only during the socialist period;

4) hence, I would also like to contribute to the discussion regarding the date of Bulgaria's national holiday—3 March, the day a peace treaty was signed between two alien countries, vs. 6 September or 22 September, dates which evoke the nation's inner powers, wills, and historical achievements;[1]

5) finally, I would like to inquire what further connotations the image of Russia offers from the perspective of national festivities: is it also a military power, a cultural inspiration, or an economic giant?

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In the present paper, my focus is the Bulgarian national festive calendar from 1878 until today—a period which encompasses three quite different social and political contexts—a monarchy, a totalitarian socialist republic, and a parliamentary democracy. These shifts have brought about many changes in the public rituals and the accompanying events. My research is based mainly on information gathered from the media (the press and television), the focal point being the image of Russia / USSR and the Russians. We could consider the media as a part of the public sphere, but I prefer to use it only as a source of empirical information concerning facts rather than opinions or notions. It is a very important remark, especially with regard to the press in the times of the monarchy when all newspapers were politically dependent, as well as with reference to the socialist period when the media were completely censored and not free. Even now we cannot rely on the alleged pluralism of the free and

independent media, bearing in mind not just the political but essentially the economic interests of the Bulgarian media companies. For the last few years, however, I have made my own observations and have collected documentation.

According to my initial hypothesis, regardless of the changes in the political circumstances, the image of Russia has not changed dramatically—only the dynamics between the official, semi-official, and non-official spheres have significantly shifted. We usually study festivities in their importance for the community or for the society that performs it—festivities are often used to exert influence not only on the nation but also in the field of international affairs. Official civic festivities and foreign affairs are tightly connected and the changes of the ritual system, which is usually quite conservative, provide good materials also for political studies. In the present article I describe briefly the trends in the processes of building the image of Russia and Russians by means of official festivities in Bulgaria, taking as a starting point the established historical periodization in our scholarly tradition. As outlined by the historians, the time period from Liberation in 1878 until nowadays can be divided into three main periods in political, economic, social, and cultural terms.

The first period spans from the Liberation of 1878 until 1944 when Bulgaria shifted from a monarchy to a socialist republic. This period was not homogeneous and smooth as concerns the relationships between the two countries—the attitude of the Bulgarian monarchs and governments often varied, and after the October Revolution (1917) in Russia the political and cultural interactions changed rapidly. In 1888, soon after Liberation, Prince Alexander of Battenberg proclaimed 3 March—the date of the San Stefano Peace Treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire (1878)—an official state holiday. This day was celebrated with fading solemnity until the end of 1940s. During the rule of Prince Alexander of Battenberg and King Ferdinand the two states enjoyed good relations, at times even excellent. However, after 1918 in the time of King Boris III, the bilateral relations gradually cooled, which affected the festivities as well. During the second period—from 1944 to 1989—when Bulgaria was a socialist country, as could be expected, the state had outstanding interactions with the USSR: politically, economically,

and culturally, the two countries were tightly connected. Because of the ideological changes 3 March was hardly celebrated—the only noticeable celebration was in 1978, marking the 100th anniversary of Liberation. The national holiday already was 9 September—the Liberty Day—the day of the so-called second or "real" liberation of the Bulgarians—from fascism. The day of the October Revolution, 7 November, was also celebrated in Bulgaria, as well as in the other socialist countries. After 1989, of course, 9 September and 7 November completely dropped off the calendar. In 1990, 3 March was re-established as a national holiday and restored to the official national calendar. At the same time, there is a holiday which has never stopped being celebrated and has always reflected Russian Slavic unity; this is 24 May, the Day of Bulgarian Education and Culture, and Slavonic Literature.

We can observe that the festivities politically and symbolically connected with Russia could be divided into three types—feasts of gratitude to Russia (3 March and 9 September), Russian (or Soviet) feasts celebrated in Bulgaria (7 November), and Slavic holidays in which Russia is indirectly implied (24 May). Here I should make two important remarks: first, there is no country other than Russia involved in such a way in Bulgarian official festivities—neither Turkey, nor any other; and second, Bulgaria has never been within the Russian Empire, the USSR, or the Russian Federation.

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In the post-Liberation period the festivity system in Bulgaria was highly developed and it was connected with both the church calendar and the personal holidays of the members of the royal family[2] whose birthdays and name days were celebrated by the nation as well. It was then that the basis of the national calendar was established and its ideology and principles were further elaborated through the years.

The Day of Bulgarian Education and Culture, and Slavonic Literature—the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Day was celebrated in Bulgaria even before Liberation. As in other Slavic countries, it has always been an expression of the kinship of the Slavic nations. Since its establishment it was mainly a civil ritual, later it included religious elements but they have never taken priority.

Fig. 1. Students and teachers at a school celebration, 1930s, Sofia. Photo: online archive LostBulgaria.com

Until 1944 it was celebrated together with the church holiday on 11 May; later, because of the change in the civic and the church calendars (add a note on Julian and Gregorian styles), two separate holidays appeared—a church one (11 May) and a civic one (24 May).

3 March turned to be one of the most solemn feasts in the country in that period. It was a civic holiday although it started with a memorial church service dedicated to the soldiers and volunteers who died in the Russian-Ottoman Liberation War. The scenario of the holiday did not change until 1912 when Bulgaria entered the First Balkan War. The service took place in the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral—this church was a present to Bulgaria by Russia and it was the main church of the Bulgarian Exarchate. The service was attended by the prime minister, ministers, deputies, foreign ambassadors, officials, military officers, and education and church representatives. If the prince, or respectively the king, was in the country, he was also among the official guests—however, according to the press materials, around the time of this holiday he was usually on a visit abroad. After the service a procession to the Monument of Tsar Liberator was organized—Tsar Liberator is the Russian Emperor Alexander II who

is given this name not only in Bulgaria. In front of the monument, which stands across from the Bulgarian Parliament and is close to other important buildings, speeches were given—usually these were talks by teachers or university professors. The event was attended not only by the elite, but also by many ordinary people. There were also cases, albeit rare, when the procession afterwards proceeded to the monarch's palace to greet the royal family. In the evening a reception for the diplomatic corps was held in an upscale restaurant. It can be assumed that the main places where the celebrations took place were explicitly connected with Russia—the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and the Monument of Emperor Alexander II. According to the media data collected the Russian ambassador often played an important role in the celebrations, usually delivering a speech in front of the monument.

On the holidays themselves there were many events organized by the Slavic Community as well—concerts, lectures or official gatherings of its members. Furthermore, many annual competitions aiming to select an anthem dedicated to Liberation took place at the turn of the 20th century. The prize-winning work was usually played at the concerts—all these anthems reflected the gratitude of Bulgaria to Russia. Newspapers, of course, published many historical articles and veteran memories, as well as greetings from the Russian Emperor to the Bulgarian people. During the Balkan and the First World wars the celebrations, public rituals, and gatherings were not so crowded and lavishly organized. After 1917, the relations between Bulgaria and Russia changed, not only regarding the holiday; the scenario, however, did not change dramatically until the end of the 1940s.

After 1944, 3 March dropped out from the national calendar because there was a considerably greater liberation of the Bulgarians—liberation from fascism on 9 September. In the period until 1989 the fate of Bulgaria and practically all political and cultural decisions were connected with the USSR. The national holiday was 9 September but 7 November was very solemnly celebrated as well. 24 May remained in the calendar.

Most holidays in socialist Bulgaria were celebrated with a manifestation—a procession which included students and adults marching

in a military formation in front of the local party headquarters and greeting the party heads who were standing up on a balcony, or on a flight of stairs at least, i.e., above the people. In Sofia such a place was the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov (similar to the mausoleum of the Soviet polotical leaders Lenin and Stalin in Moscow).[3] The organization of the ritual space was bright and vivid and included images of Soviet leaders—past and present, especially Lenin (his monument stood nearby) and Stalin until the mid-50s. Appeals for eternal friendship between the Bulgarian and the Soviet people could be read everywhere—on the posters held by the manifesting groups as well.

All feasts followed a similar scenario. On 24 May, it was mostly school and university students, teachers, professors, and scholars who took part in the manifestations. The procession ended with a cultural program—usually folk dances or gymnastic performances. In the mid-1950s, after Stalin's cult of personality was taken down and when Todor Zhivkov became head of state, the national element in the celebrations became more and more prominent—at first, in connection with the Slavic culture, since the USSR became the unifying center of all Slavs after the communist uprisings.[4] Reframing the holiday in view of eradicating its religious origin and erasing the national element because of the internationalism ideology actually resulted in enhancing the positive image and role of the USSR. 1 May underwent a similar process of reframing although it had been celebrated before 1944, even if not officially and mostly by the communists and the syndicates.

Although it was a national holiday, 9 September was largely dedicated to Bulgarian-Soviet friendship and to the Soviet Army that had liberated Bulgaria one more time. As on the other holidays, the USSR and its emblems had a visible place in the wasteful decoration of the public ritual space. In socialist times the practice of accompanying manifestations by an official—although anonymous—narrator's voice was initiated—it replaced the teachers' talks and was played through a loudspeaker; it was anonymous and at the same time collective. This narrator's voice pointed out the Bulgarian contribution to the partisan war and expressed gratitude to the Soviet people for liberating Bulgaria twice. Some pieces of music (the anthem and other solemn melodies) and slogans shouted by the crowds (for

instance, "Glory to 9 September!" or "Hurray!") completed the sound landscape of the ritual. The 9 September Square (the capital's central square), the Lenin Monument, the Soviet Army Monument (an imposing complex in the city center), and the so called Brothers' Grave (a common grave) were among the important spaces where the manifestations took place. Such memorial complexes were built in all large towns in Bulgaria and they rapidly became the venues for the 9 September civic ritual.

Fig. 2. A manifestation on 9 September, 1970, Sofia.
Photo: online archive LostBulgaria.com

Although 7 November was a working day, it was always celebrated with a manifestation. I should underline that during the socialist times, 7 November, the Day of the Russian October Revolution, was considered important not only for the USSR but also for the entire communist world. This day was a festive one in other socialist countries too. The celebration of 7 November, logically, was dominated by expressions of gratitude to the Soviet people, appreciation of the October Revolution's victory, and images of the Soviet leaders.

In summary, in the socialist times, holidays were celebrated mainly with manifestations which—as rituals—relied upon lavishly decorated

public space. They were organized at several significant places nominally connected with the socialist revolution and the USSR. Manifestations enunciated a simple public narrative but relied on the spontaneous efforts of particular groups to communicate its message in slogans. These slogans, of course, had been preapproved by local political elites.

Immediately after the democratic changes in 1989, 9 September and 7 November were removed from the national calendar. The celebrations of the rest of the holidays were purged of the communist ideology—and this was very important concerning 3 March. From an ideological point of view, this process was not so drastic because in the 1980s all public events acquired significant nationalist features. Much more drastic was the full termination of certain manifestations. Because new rituals were not invented rapidly, many holidays were not publicly celebrated at all for a long time.

Fig. 3. A celebration at the Bulgarian Volunteer's Monument organized by the Russian Cultural Information Center on the occasion of 3 March, 2012. Photo: Lina Gergova

3 March was restored to the point where it is now the national holiday of Bulgaria. Its celebration is similar to the celebration of 6 May—the Day of the Bulgarian Army. There is a ceremony in the

morning at which state officials give speeches and lay flowers at the Monument of the Unknown Soldier;[5] then in the evening, a ritual roll call of honor is performed. Some attempts to restore manifestations on 24 May have been made; this holiday does not have a clear and stable scenario yet. Most feasts today are celebrated in a similar way: state officials present flowers to a monument and then speeches are given by them or by certain intellectuals. The memorial spaces are guarded and citizens are not allowed to get closer—they participate in the rituals only as an audience; the nation is not an actor in the national rituals.

It is important to mention that the image of Russia is visible only on 3 March, Liberation Day. The evening roll call of honor is organized in front of the Tsar Liberator Monument on Parliament Square. At the same time, the Russian Cultural Information Center in collaboration with several Russophile associations organizes a parallel celebration of 3 March at the Bulgarian Volunteer Monument in Sofia.[6] This celebration is not official and is not attended by any Bulgarian officials; however, it is quite visible and is silently supported by local authorities.

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I have tried here to combine the perspectives from below and from above in reference to public rituals which are organized by institutions (national and local) and public bodies (political, intellectual and cultural organizations) and which transmit national narratives, myths, images and heroes from the public sphere to the nation. These rituals, and partially their context (ritual space, side events, actors, etc.), could be reconstructed as a sequence of events using media materials. Even such a brief description of the history of Bulgarian civic holidays connected with Russia and the USSR confirms the hypothesis that the holiday and the public ritual are not only a social phenomenon but also a political instrument; in other words, we cannot firmly separate national calendar from national foreign politics. The turns of international affairs, however, are usually sharper and faster than the changes in public rituals; significant changes are possible only in totalitarian societies.

As we have observed, in the Bulgarian national festive system and public rituals, certain images of Russia and the USSR have been

stable through the years: Russia is considered to be "liberator and brother country", Russians are brothers ("bratushki"), the Russian emperor—an emanation of Russia and the Russian Army—is our Liberator, the Russian leaders Lenin and Stalin were figures of global significance, and the Russian culture is a part of the common Slavic family. These notions have not always been part of the official messages but they appeared in the media (private media or media affiliated with certain political parties), or indications of their presence were seen in the ritual spaces—so, to some extent they compose the public sphere and form the collective conscience.

Still, what are the basic attributes of the processes of building the images of Russia and the USSR in Bulgarian national festivities in the last 12 to 13 decades? They include public spaces as ritual ones, public narratives, including media materials, public actors (and audience), and public rituals and side events. We cannot disregard the role of school education—in Bulgaria the generations that were educated during the socialist times are still active. Meanwhile, some artificially inserted references to Russia in national festivities have been naturally invalidated in the last 25 years—such as the pan-Slavic messages in the celebration of 24 May. In conclusion, I argue that the image of Russia at present is dynamic and not homogeneous; it remains important because it is implicated in the public debates regarding national holidays.

Notes

1. On 6 September 1885, the unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and the then Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia was proclaimed. On 22 September 1908, Bulgaria proclaimed its independence from the Ottoman Empire.

2. After the announcement of Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire the "prince (*knyaz*) of Bulgaria" (Ferdinand at the time) proclaimed himself the "king (*tsar*) of the Bulgarians".

3. Georgi Dimitrov (1882—1949) was the first communist leader of Bulgaria, from 1946 to 1949. After his death his body was embalmed and placed on display in a mausoleum in the center of Sofia.

4. Todor Zhivkov (1911—1998) was First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party and head of state of the People's Republic of Bulgaria for 35 years (1954—1989).

5. The Monument of the Unknown Soldier is a different from the Brothers' Grave. The socialist monument is a pylon on a small hill and was built in 1956—it is called the Brothers' Grave because the remains of the most important partisans were buried there. The older and newer monument (it was removed in 1944 and restored in 1981) is a sculpture of a lion on a sarcophagus at the base of the southern wall of St. Sofia Church; it was inaugurated in 1941.

6. For instance, the Bulgarian People's Voluntary Army (in Bulgarian *Opŭlchenie*) "Shipka"—an heir of the volunteer formations which took part in the Russian-Ottoman War in 1877—1878.

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