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## **“The readiness is all,” or the Politics of Art in Post-Communist Bulgaria**

At some point around the turn of the millennium, even as Bulgaria adopted the dominant ideological discourse of Western democracy, finalized the restitution of land and urban property to pre-World War II owners, carried out large-scale privatization of government assets, and took decisive steps toward Euro-Atlantic integration, its political transition got stuck in the vicious circle of post-communism.<sup>1</sup> Post-communism, hardly a condition limited to Bulgaria, we define as a forestalled democratic transition whose ultimate goals of freedom, justice, and economic prosperity have been hijacked. As poet and political activist Edvin Sugarev maintains, most Bulgarians today perceive the “transition to democracy as a territory of *crushed hopes*,” as “a free fall into philistinism and absurdity . . . recognized as degradation and experienced as depression.”<sup>2</sup> Bulgarian post-communism has generated a façade democracy, marked by a vast divide between the haves and the have-nots, a feeble middle class, pervasive corruption, a devastating demographic crisis, and wide-ranging social apathy and desperation.<sup>3</sup> Social stratification has reduced to basic survival a disturbingly large number of Bulgarians. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgaria joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994, applied for NATO membership in 1997, and was admitted in 2004. In 1995 it formally applied for EU membership and, having met membership conditions, joined the Union in 2007, although it was not granted full working rights until 2012. According to the World Bank, the two-stage mass privatization program (under Videnov's government in 1995-96 and under Kostov's, 1998-2000) resulted in 85% of privatization of overall state assets by the end of 2000 (<http://www.fdi.net/documents/WorldBank/databases/plink/factsheets/bulgaria.htm>). Privatization conditions, however, have been widely criticized as non-transparent and serving the interests of “power groups” connected to the State Security of the old communist state. See Andon Mihailov, *Balgarskiyat prehod 1989-2013? Obyasnenieto i spasenieto [The Bulgarian Transition 1989-2013? Explanation and Salvation]* (Sofia: Geopostmodern, 2014); Anton Todorov, *Balgarite sreshthu oligarhiyata [Bulgarians against the Oligarchy]* (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2013), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Edvin Sugarev, “Po sledite na izgubeniya prehod [“On the Track of the Lost Transition”] *Dnevnik*, 14 November 2014, [http://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2014/11/14/2418366\\_po\\_sledite\\_na\\_izgubeniia\\_prehod/?ref=topicoftheday](http://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2014/11/14/2418366_po_sledite_na_izgubeniia_prehod/?ref=topicoftheday).

<sup>3</sup> In December 2013, Transparency International, a Berlin-based advocacy group monitoring corruption, ranked Bulgaria as most corrupt European country after Greece. See Andrew Higgins, “Change Comes Slowly for Bulgaria, Even with E.U. Membership,” *New York Times*, 24 December 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/25/world/europe/bulgarias-struggle-belies-promise-of-eu-membership.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&\\_](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/25/world/europe/bulgarias-struggle-belies-promise-of-eu-membership.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&_) Between plunging birth rates and mass emigration, Bulgaria's population has shrunk by over twenty per cent since 1989.

wake of massive impoverishment, their health, educational and cultural status has also been downgraded.

In the cultural sphere, this shift is emblemized by the pervasiveness of *chalga*, a style of traditional Balkan entertainment, similar to *arabesk* in Turkey, *manele* in Romania, *laiko* in Greece, *turbofolk* in Serbia, and historically associated with marginalized groups. During the post-communist transition it mushroomed into a multi-million dollar industry. Characterized by gaudiness and moral indifference, the new *chalga* industry promotes consumerism and self-serving clannishness, stultifying social critique. What used to be a cheeky, even subversive form of music, has become part of a paternalistic-conservative complex of values, peddled as traditional national identity.

In this political and social context our attention is focused on a small slice of the dynamic of Bulgarian cultural life, namely, some distinctive and unusual Shakespeare theater productions and films that have appeared since 2000. Breaking away from the aggressive postmodernist celebration of fragmentation, meta-theatricality, and anti-illusionism in Shakespeare productions from the ecstatic and chaotic 1990s, these plays and films appropriate the cultural capital of Shakespeare to ask important questions about civic awareness, political ethics, and the possibility for healing through a culture that dwells on moral questions. As the post-communist transition in Bulgaria degenerated into a quagmire of corruption, divisiveness, and partisan misrule, performers both professional and amateur began staging Shakespeare as an antidote to the political ruthlessness and the degradation of ethical values. At stake at this point of the country's tortuous path to democracy is the ethical healing of history—and this, arguably, is the agenda of the Shakespeare productions and adaptations that we discuss. To understand the extraordinary individual conviction, creativity, and perseverance needed to challenge audiences to ponder the possibility and price of charting a path of ethically engaged citizenship, it is necessary to gauge the extent of the crisis out of which these productions have emerged.

### Political Vaudeville

The Bulgarian democratic transition began on 9 November, 1989 with an in-house Communist Party coup which ousted the man who had ruled the country for forty years. In the context of similar changes throughout what was then known as the Soviet Bloc, this event unleashed euphoria that splashed out into the streets in unprecedented mass political enthusiasm. As old structures were toppled and multi-party governance began to take shape, there was wide-spread

hope that Bulgaria would become a “normal” country within the foreseeable future. Only six years later however, in 1995, sociologist Ognyan Minchev pointed to the stabilizing of a particular post-communist model defying the hoped-for normality. Looking at the electoral successes of the re-fashioned former Communist Party, he concluded that the multi-party system which had emerged was lopsided as a result of the effective ideological control of the old Party over the center of the political spectrum. The old Communist—now renamed Socialist—Party ably presented itself as the only viable alternative to chaos and violence by ousting its own hard-liners and spotlighting the extreme, loud, and frightening elements in the motley anti-communist opposition coalition. The latter soon collapsed because of infighting and inability to develop a broader identity, beyond extreme anti-communism. By securing their stay in power, the newly branded Socialists enabled the old state apparatus to privatize, surreptitiously or openly, the assets of the state and to regroup numerous times, thus covering up the sources of their meteoric economic rise. The resulting synthesis of political and economic power, as Minchev suggests, created “a new form of totalitarian control over society through the structures of a formally democratic, but essentially elitist paternalistic state.”<sup>4</sup> Under its umbrella, the new oligarchy conjoins political and economic might; behind the scenes, it thwarts competition and immobilizes the system of checks and balances. Exhausted by economic hardship, caught in an institutional network operating for its self-interest, society is squeezed, deformed, and demoralized.

Bulgarian post-communism has produced grotesque confusions of basic social principles. The most conspicuous among these is the extensive politicizing of the judiciary and the economy.<sup>5</sup> The most repulsive perhaps, as philosopher and cultural critic Boyan Manchev suggests, is the legitimization of the figure of the criminal, “the embodiment of an archaic *kratos*, the brutal pre-political natural force,” and his investment with political value through the fusion of the mafia with the political class.<sup>6</sup> The aggressive “mug masculinity” of these new political

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<sup>4</sup> Ognyan Minchev, *Stupki po putya* [Steps along the Road] (Sofia: University Press “Sveti Kliment Ohridski,” 1995), 7, 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Mihaela Racovita, “Europeanization and Effective Democracy in Romania and Bulgaria,” *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 11:1 (2011), <http://www.sar.org.ro/polsci/?p=601>.

<sup>6</sup> Boyan Manchev, “Violence and Political Representation: The Post-Communist Case, *Ideologiyata–nachin na upotreba: Kultura i kritika*, chast IV [Ideology—a Means of Consumption: Culture and Criticism, part IV], ed. A. Vacheva et al. (Varna: Litternet, 2004-06). Economic historian and former politician Dimitar Ludjev claims, similarly, that Bulgaria is a liberal democracy with a market economy and the rule of law, all of them ugly and deformed. See *Tema Daily*, November 10, 2014,

players, literary and cultural critic Ralitsa Muharska maintains, has become the “terrifying icon of the transition.” “The consequence,” she continues, “is a politically passive society: the chief prerequisite for the maintenance of the status quo.”<sup>7</sup> As strong-arming remains a constant in Bulgarian economy and politics, party identities are in a state of permanent ideological morphing. Even after nearly 200 phantom parties were expunged from the 376 parties officially registered in Bulgaria in the spring of 2008, the political landscape remains bewildering.<sup>8</sup> The same is true of personal affiliations. Thus—to consider only the last fifteen years, the historical scope of this study—the allegedly center-right Boiko Borisov, who in March 2017 was elected to a third term as Prime Minister, a phenomenon unprecedented in the post-communist era, was a former bodyguard of the last communist head of state *and* of the ex-monarch Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha who became PM in 2001. If the morphing of an ex-monarch into a democratically elected politician strikes few of those who voted for him as bizarre, why should the current PM’s paradoxical position as the staunchest opponent of *both* the ex-communist Socialist Party and Simeon’s political formation be a surprise to anyone observing the vaudeville of Bulgarian politics?

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<http://temadaily.bg/publication/23447-%D0%94%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%8A%D1%80-%D0%9B%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%98%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%B2-%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0/>

<sup>7</sup> Ralitsa Muharska, “Mug Masculinity and Sport,” in *Gendering Popular Culture: Perspectives from Eastern Europe and the West*, ed. Kornelia Slavova and Krassimira Daskalova (Sofia: Polis, 2012), 91.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, out of the six socio-democratic parties successful in local, parliamentary, and EU elections, three have virtually undistinguishable names (the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party, Bulgarian Social Democracy, Bulgarian Social Democrats), one—the Bulgarian Socialist Party—is the descendent of the Bulgarian Communist Party (but is not to be confused with six currently existing Communist Parties), and the other two have chosen names void of references to a socio-democratic political platform (“Alternative for Bulgarian Revival” and “Movement ‘21’”). See Ivan Mihalev, “Partii za retziklirane [Parties to Recycle],” *Capital*, 25 April 2008, [http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2008/04/25/490079\\_partii\\_za\\_reciklirane](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2008/04/25/490079_partii_za_reciklirane). On the conservative end of the political spectrum, shortly after the 2014 election, the party “Bulgaria without Censorship” renamed itself as “Bulgarian Democratic Center”—a choice that journalist Svetoslav Terziev interpreted as an attempt “to acquire a more acceptable European image and shed their populist branding” (“Kak partiite si vrashtat politicheskata devstvenost [How Parties Restore Their Political Virginity],” *Tema Daily* 31 October 2014, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=723846>).

Among the political hydras spawned to secure the economic benefits of power groups was the three-way coalition government led by Sergei Stanishev (August 2005-July 2009). It brought together the Socialists with the political movement of the ex-monarch whom their precursor had exiled in 1946. The third coalition partner was the Movement for Rights and Liberties, originally created to reclaim the human rights of the Bulgarian-Turks, abrogated by the predecessors of the Socialists. In May 2013, another absurd political mal/formation came into being—cynically enough, with the promise of a clean-hands government of experts. Led by Plamen Oresharski, it lasted until August 2014. This time, the parliamentary survival of the flimsy alliance of the Socialists and the Movement for Rights and Liberties, now effectively an ethnic Turkish party, was guaranteed by the ultra-nationalist party Ataka, the latter believed to be funded by Russian capital in return for promoting its interests in Bulgaria.<sup>9</sup> The alliance among the three political parties was forged in spite of the fact that not so long ago Socialist leaders were ready to ban Ataka, while the ultra-nationalists, in turn, threatened to ban the Movement for Rights and Liberties. In post-communist Bulgaria it is impossible to disentangle the business, foreign and national interests of the “political class.”

In one election after another, members of Parliament turned out to be the straw-men of oligarchs with ties to shady businesses, crime rings, and the security networks of the old communist state.<sup>10</sup> Case in point: the notorious political appointment in June 2013 of media mogul Delyan Peevski as head of the State Agency for National Security in Oresharski’s coalition government. After all of fifteen minutes of parliamentary discussion of his nomination to a position of extreme sensitivity, Peevski was granted extended powers to order arrests, tap telephones, and access classified EU security communications. Never mind that only seven years previously the 32-year old millionaire had been fired from another prominent government post on serious allegations of corruption. Never mind that Peevski’s family business (all titled to his mother) was connected to the economic group around Corporate Commercial Bank, identified by

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<sup>9</sup> Florian Hassel, “Putins rechte Freunde” [“Putin’s Right-Wing Friends”] *Sueddeutsche.de*, 17 April 2014, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/nationalistische-verbuendete-putins-rechte-freunde-1.1938496> ; Jim Yardley and Jo Becker, “How Putin Forged a Pipeline Deal That Derailed,” *New York Times*, 30 December 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/world/europe/how-putin-forged-a-pipeline-deal-that-derailed-.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/world/europe/how-putin-forged-a-pipeline-deal-that-derailed-.html?_r=0);

<sup>10</sup> On the origins and transformation of oligarchic networks on Bulgaria, see Todorov, *Bulgarians against the Oligarchy*; Maya Antonova and Martin Inev, *Nyama kasmet Bulgaria s upravnitzite* [*Bulgaria Has No Luck with Its Governing Powers*] (Sofia: Best Media Publishing, 2013).

the *New York Times* as “the favored bank of Bulgaria’s energy oligarchs”—until its shadowy collapse in July 2014.<sup>11</sup> In the grab for wealth, no attempt was ever made to veil the exorbitant consolidation of power—political, police, media, energy, financial—in the hands of a family whose business was built with the support of, among others, the Greek billionaire Sokratis Kokkalis, a former agent of the East German Secret Service Stasi.<sup>12</sup> Peevski’s appointment was such a flagrant slap in the face of the average citizen that it unleashed massive street protests which caused him to resign within days. It also became emblematic of the gaping ethical void in the current political system.

For nearly a year after this event citizens of diverse political persuasions marched in the thousands calling for the resignation of Oresharski’s government and, more importantly, for restoring decency to politics. The result of the next election was a second government led by Boiko Borisov—the political leader who had resigned during the 2013 winter protests against price hikes by energy distribution monopolists, protests whose desperation was marked by seven self-immolations.<sup>13</sup> It did not take long, however, before Borisov’s re-election, too, generated an emblem of brazen political amorality. In November 2014, another oligarch, Slavi Binev, was appointed head of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Media. Binev’s accomplishments include being a taekwondo master, gangster-wars veteran from the 1990s, “new Orthodox politician” of the likes of the populist Russian nationalists, and owner of some forty pop-folk clubs as well as security and construction companies.<sup>14</sup> The appointment triggered

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<sup>11</sup> Yardley and Becker, “How Putin Forged a Pipeline Deal That Derailed.” The authors suggest that the swift collapse of the Corporate Commercial Bank was payback for the derailing, by the current Bulgarian government, of the Russian-backed South Stream natural gas pipeline project.

<sup>12</sup> Todorov, *Bulgarians against the Oligarchy*, 9-27; Matthew Brunwasser, “After Political Appointment in Bulgaria, Rage Boils Over,” *New York Times*, 28 June 2013.

<sup>13</sup> “Bulgaria Holds Prayers to End Suicides and Despair,” BBC News, 5 April, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22039182>; “Antimonopolni protesti v Bulgaria” [“Anti-Monopoly Protests in Bulgaria”], Wikipedia, [http://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%90%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B8\\_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8\\_%D0%B2%D0%91%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F\\_2013](http://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%90%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B8_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8_%D0%B2%D0%91%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F_2013).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of the “Orthodox politician” was first introduced by Dilyan Nikolchev in “Balgarskata pravoslavna zurkva mezhdú vyarata i politicheskata religiya [The Bulgarian Orthodox Church between Faith and Political Religion],” *Svododa za vseki [Freedom for All]* 20 (2009), <http://www.svododazavseki.com/broj-20/81-balgarskata-pravoslavna-tzarkva-mezhdú-vyarata-i-politicheskata-religiya.html>; it was further developed in his essay, “‘Politicheská religiya’ i pravoslavna tzurkva v iztochna i yugoiztochna Evropa—poliiticheski protzesi i tendentzii [“Political Religion’ and the Orthodox Church in Eastern and

the outrage of artists, actors, musicians, writers, students, and Bulgaria's professional artistic and media associations. Alexander Morfov, Artistic Director of the National Theater resigned in disgust, and the entire theater troupe threatened to follow. Binev withdrew from the post and from the Committee itself, and declared that he would turn down any parliamentary leadership posts he might be offered. Nonetheless, in less than a month, he was at the helm of the sub-committee in charge of absorbing EU funds.<sup>15</sup>

### Chalga as a Socio-Cultural Syndrome

For Bulgarians, the pop-folk music connection of Binev's business biography is charged with powerful and divisive socio-cultural symbolism. Known as *chalga*, this ubiquitous music-and-dance genre features lyrics ranging from the lewd to the vulgar and Balkan folk sound bites mixed with popular global melodies and performed by silicone and testosterone-pumped singers in provocative state of undress. With historical origins among socially marginalized groups, chalga acquired higher visibility in the late 1980s with the decay of communism. Its rise in the 1990s, we suggest, is partly due to its effective hybridization of Western consumerism and post-communist aggressive commodification of desire and the body, driven by the sex industry, and peddled as authentic to Bulgarian identity. As philosopher and cultural critic Georgi Kapriev points out, chalga is an aesthetic musical choice *and* a lifestyle, which have become a cultural

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Southeastern Europe: Political Processes and Tendencies," *Hristianstvo i kultura [Christianity and Culture]* 91 (2014): 32-39. Prime examples include Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Aleksandr Dugin in Russia. Slavi Binev, an ex-member of the ultra-nationalist party Ataka, as whose representative he was elected to the European Parliament in 2007 (he has changed party allegiances twice since), also boasts the title of Archon (defender and promoter of the Orthodox Church), given to him at a ceremony in Rome that drew the ire of both the Holy See and the Holy Synod in Sofia. "Koi sa Slavi Binev i krugut 'Bankya-fakti i legendi [Who Are Slavi Binev and the Circle 'Bankya'-Facts and Legends]," *Dnevnik*, 4 February 2013,

[http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/02/04/1996816\\_koi\\_sa\\_slavi\\_binev\\_i\\_krugut\\_bankia\\_-\\_fakti\\_i\\_legendi/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/02/04/1996816_koi_sa_slavi_binev_i_krugut_bankia_-_fakti_i_legendi/)

<sup>15</sup> "Trupata na Narodniya teatar shte podade ostavka, ako Slavi Binev ne se ottegli [The National Theater Troupe Will Resign unless Slavi Binev Steps Down]," *Dnevnik*, 5 December 2014,

[http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/12/05/2432873\\_trupata\\_na\\_narodniia\\_teur\\_shte\\_podade\\_ostavka\\_ako/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/12/05/2432873_trupata_na_narodniia_teur_shte_podade_ostavka_ako/); "Slavi Binev shte oglavi podkomisiya za usvoyavane na evrofondove [Slavi Binev Heads the Subcommittee for Absorption of Euro Funds]," *Dnevnik*, 16 December 2014,

[http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/12/16/2439408\\_slavi\\_binev\\_oglav\\_i\\_podkomisiyata\\_za\\_usvoivaneto\\_na/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/12/16/2439408_slavi_binev_oglav_i_podkomisiyata_za_usvoivaneto_na/).

norm with an elite status, countering elitism associated with social status based on education and professionalism.<sup>16</sup>

In the different phases of its development, chalga has been variously analyzed: as an overturn of “the regulations of bureaucratic socialism” and its ideas of what constitutes “authentic” folk music, or as representing multi-culturalism and “the *Zeitgeist* of post-socialist democracy.”<sup>17</sup> Some of this may have been true of the early 1990s, but since then, chalga has lost its playful subversiveness and has established itself as a hugely profitable business. The power of the capital it generates makes other entertainment forms pale into insignificance. Against the meagerly and irregularly paid actor or musician stands the louche groomed plumpness of the chalga star who has achieved the iconic status of a national treasure, projecting glamor and success. This glitzy image conceals a reality of unregulated and dangerous labor, sexual harassment and exploitation—but it sells well domestically and on the European market, especially among Bulgarian expats, and this is all that matters for the record-label bosses.<sup>18</sup> Communications studies scholar Eran Livni maps Bulgarian pop-folk media as comprising “four record labels . . . , two TV stations . . . , two nationwide radio stations . . . in addition to regional ones . . . , one print magazine . . . , “Folk” newspaper sections . . . , and a number of websites.”<sup>19</sup> One of these labels alone, Payner Media, holds 80 to 90% of the entire Bulgarian music market.<sup>20</sup> Livni further points out that although mainstream TV and radio stations generally avoid broadcasting chalga, its singer-celebrities feature widely on talk shows and in magazines, to say nothing of billboards, spreading the allure of material success.

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<sup>16</sup> Georgi Kapriev, “Teatralnata chalga otglezhda novi zriteli [“Theater chalga educates new spectators],” *Trud* 15 January 2013, <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1186134>; “Profesor Kapriev, filosof: vav vsyaka kultura ima chalga [Professor Kapriev, Philosopher: Every Culture Has Chalga],” *Monitor*, 4 February 2012, <http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=324927>.

<sup>17</sup> Ivailo Dichev, “Post-socialism, Pop-transition,” in *Gendering Popular Culture*, 69; Eran Livni, *Chalga to the Max! Musical Speech and Speech about Music on the Road between Bulgaria and Modern Europe*, Doctoral dissertation (Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University, 2014), 331.

<sup>18</sup> Livni, *Chalga to the Max*, chapter 1, “The Same Thing but Totally Different: Marta and Reni Performing Artificial Popfolk Star Personage” (59-123, esp. 78) provides an ethnographic analysis of the exploitative grip of the patron-bosses upon female chalga performers. The memoir of Stefan Tzirkov, ex-husband of the chalga star Petra, provides numerous examples of sexploitation in the business. See *Imperiyata ‘Pajneroff’ 1:1: Istinskata istoriya na chalgata [The Empire ‘Payneroff’ 1:1: The True History of Chalga]* (Sofia: Partner BG, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Livni, *Chalga to the Max*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> “Bulgaria’s Chalga Pop-Folk: A Cultural Rift,” BBC News Europe, 9 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21364650>.



Chalga mass-markets iconic representations of what many consider a successful lifestyle: luxury clothing, expensive cars, and aggressive sexuality. In other words, it sells both representation and self-representation. Its huge success banks on the desperation-driven hedonism of an economically deprived and politically disenfranchised population in a country where, as research reveals, the top twenty per cent of the population consumes as much as the remaining eighty.<sup>21</sup> Through its demotic idiom, chalga sells numbing dreams of “the good life.” A 2013 poll indicates that it has become the most influential creative industry in the country: it is the preferred musical genre of 47.5% of Bulgarians between 15 and 18 years of age, 45% of 19 to 25 year olds, and 33% of those 33 and above. A whole new generation has chosen chalga as its cultural idiom.<sup>22</sup>

Ethnologists Katerina Gehl and Klaus Roth of the Munich-based Southeast Europe Association concur that chalga has been embraced as the lifestyle of the new Bulgarian elites. In pop-folk clubs with acclaimed addresses in Bulgaria’s capital, high-profile male politicians, businessmen and media personalities parade conspicuous consumption and the benefits of self-serving clannishness. Ghel interprets this as designed to appeal to the larger public’s love of chalga, which, in turn, not only legitimizes this type of culture, but elevates the cultural status of a previously marginalized phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> A prime example of the ascent of chalga into the political sphere is its use at party rallies across the political spectrum, where attention to pre-

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<sup>21</sup> See Andrei Raichev, Kolyo Kolev, Andrei Bundjolov and Lidia Dimova, *Sotsialnata stratifikatsia v Bulgaria* [*Social Stratification in Bulgaria*] (Sofia: LIK, 2000), by far the most exhaustive and well-documented research on the period with its disturbing statistic; Antonii Todorov, *Politicheskiyat zhivot v Bulgaria, 1990-2005* [*Political Life in Bulgaria, 1990-2005*] (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2005), 105-115.

<sup>22</sup> Dilyana Panayotova, “Chalga slushat blizo 50% ot tijnejdzarite ni [Chalga Is Listened to by Nearly 50% of Our Teenagers],” *News.bg*, 20 August, 2013, [http://news.ibox.bg/news/id\\_1948677593](http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_1948677593).

<sup>23</sup> “Snoshenieto na balgarskite ‘eliti’ s chalgata [The Intercourse of Bulgarian ‘Elites’ with Chalga],” *Deutsche Welle*, April 4 2011, <http://www.dw.de/%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%81-%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0/a-14960962>.

election programs is displaced by melodic praises of “iron men” and by the offering of “red roses” by gyrating chalga stars.<sup>24</sup>

While the loud consumption of flashy labels and sex is the stylistic signature of chalga, the core value embraced by its proponents is brazen acquisitiveness. For ethnographer Roth, chalga culture denotes “the unabashed imposition of self-interest and the regime of nepotism.” He goes on to draw inferences about its effect on political culture: “All of this affects political life thus: the new political class has adopted a behavior model based on disregarding the law and abrogating personal responsibility for public interest. The one thing of importance is personal benefit and the benefit of a close circle of friends.”<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to account for the stalled Bulgarian democratic transition, Edvin Sugarev points to “the profanization and moral indifference of those in the public sphere.” The result is the emergence of a socially acceptable “chalga mindset, whose role model is the person who has succeeded at any cost, in the most vulgarly materialistic sense of the word.”<sup>26</sup> It is not the music style of chalga that presents a social problem, but the all-pervasive crass acquisitiveness it propagates. Combined with the marginalization and impoverishment of a huge part of the population, its elevation into a cultural norm contributes to the “erosion of the social base of the democratic order.”<sup>27</sup>

A particularly pernicious aspect of Bulgarian politics in the post-communist era is its inbreeding with what can be labeled as Christian Orthodox chalga-religiosity. Chalga-religiosity substitutes spiritual life and social care by glamorous spectacles: the tolling of church bells at celebrities’ weddings, sanctifications of company offices, bestowing of church honors upon prominent businessmen and politicians.<sup>28</sup> According to lawyer and essayist Plamen Sivov, the life of faith has become “a vanity fair, a political show . . . ; the church—an outgrowth and function of the state,” speaking in empty clichés and suppressing independent political thinking.

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<sup>24</sup> Livni, *Chalga to the Max*, 74-75; Tzirkov, *Empire Payneroff*, 8-10; Petar Ivanov and Desislava Rizova, “Partiite vpryagat chalgata za izborite [The Parties Saddle up Chalga for the Elections],” *Monitor*, 23 May, 2009, <http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=199757>.

<sup>25</sup> Klaus Roth, E. Lilov, “Chalgalizirane na Balgaria [Bulgaria’s Chalgaization],” *Deutsche Welle*, April 19, 2012 (<http://www.dw.de/%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F/a-15890682>).

<sup>26</sup> Sugarev, “On the Track of the Lost Transition.”

<sup>27</sup> Todorov, *Political Life in Bulgaria*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> See note 14.

The Orthodox Church has largely lost its moral authority, already undermined by the cooption of its leaders during communism, and rendered further suspect by its schismatic divisions, real-estate battles, and partisanship in the post-communist era. More disturbingly still, Sivov points out that “religious chalga generates[a] pseudo-patriotic consciousness and conduct,” calling on the laity “to *preserve* and *be proud of*” their faith, “not to *understand* or to *know*.”<sup>29</sup> Through the joined efforts of church leaders eager to benefit from state sponsorship and the above-mentioned “new Orthodox politicians,” an Orthodox-political fundamentalism is taking root. Far from innocuous, as Canon Law scholar Dilyan Nikolchev warns, the conflation of mindless entertainment, politics, and church life replaces the proper work of the church (the examination of the place of the individual and society in a cosmological system) by “the escalation of nationalistic tendencies rooted in Orthodox religiosity.”<sup>30</sup> As in the economic and the political sphere, here, too, insidious simulacra displace moral values.

In scholarly discourse chalga has had similar pernicious effects. Historian Dimitar Atanassov provides numerous examples of historians, both professionally trained and self-styled, practicing the commercially successful genre of populist historiography. Like the daydreams of label-carrying chalga songs, such histories deliver gratifying historical fantasies. They range from celebrations of the mythologized origins of the nation and its racial superiority, to a peculiar self-pitying nationalism verging on national nihilism.<sup>31</sup> Authors of chalga-histories, just

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<sup>29</sup> “Naklonenata vyara [The Slanting Faith]” *Pravoslavie Bulgaria*, 1 July 2010, emphasis in the original, <http://www.pravoslavie.bg/%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D1%8F%D1%80%D0%B0>. Sivov references here the split within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church that in 1996 led to the creation of an alternative Holy Synod and Patriarch, a split reconciled in 2001 through the direct intervention of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha’s government. Church elections, especially for the high-profile archbishop positions, are rocked with scandals of corruption and nepotism. See, for instance, Diana Petrova, “Igumenat na Bachkovo pak e kandidat za Varnenski mitropolit [The Abbot of Bachkovo Is Running again for Archbishop of Varna],” *Trud*, 24 November 2013, [http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=2476931&utm\\_source=flip.bg](http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=2476931&utm_source=flip.bg).

<sup>30</sup> Nikolchev, “‘Political Religion’ and the Orthodox Church,” 38.

<sup>31</sup> Dimitar Atanassov, “Marginalizing Academic Historical Discourse,” in *Marginalnota v literaturata [The Marginal in/of literature]* ed. Raya Kuncheva (Sofia: BoyanPenev Publishing Center, 2012), 536-62. Among writers of “chalga” history of the mythopoetic type Atanassov lists historian Bozhidar Dmitrov, economist Petar Dobrev, and archeologist Nikolai Ovcharov. A paragon of self-pitying nationalist “chalga” history is poet and playwright Stefan Tzanev. On Tzanev’s four-volume “chronicles,” see also Boris Popivanov, “Mahmurlukut na edin natzionalizam [The Hangover of a nationalism],” *Kultura* 31 (2425), 15 September 2006, <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/12068>.

like chalga singers, acquire cultural authority through the mass marketing of their products. In the deeply troubled Bulgarian social life, these unsavory multiplications of historical fantasies foster divisiveness and intolerance, and blunt critical discernment.

The inundation of the public sphere with chalga products—musical, political, religious, scholarly—goes hand in hand with the propagation of such mentality across social strata. Rosemary Statelova, author of the foundational book on the subject, describes this outlook as uncritical and socially passive. Issues of good and evil, let alone the awareness of the constructed nature of social life, do not concern the person who articulates his or her views through the discourse of chalga. The “chalga person,” Statelova maintains, exerts no effort “to acquire a civic ability to comprehend and influence the social process.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, s/he is a manipulated survivor, not a citizen, just like a chalga society is a populace, and not a civic society.

Civic lethargy and the concomitant proliferation of irresponsibility, corruption, and disdain for the rule of law in Bulgarian society resonate with a “Balkanist” discourse, first theorized by historian Maria Todorova. However, unlike this discourse, developed, as Todorova claims, as “a repository of *negative* characteristics [of ‘the other’ within] against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the ‘European’ and the ‘West’ has been constructed,”<sup>33</sup> chalga is, paradoxically, *both* Balkanist *and* self-congratulatory. This in spite of the fact that for many Bulgarians chalga is emblematic of the gap between the post-communist collapse of their social status and a European lifestyle, and of the relentless processes of social differentiation that have brought about a deep identity crisis. The concept of *chalgaization* as indicative of drastic devaluation (an umbrella term equally applicable to unprincipled politics, religion, justice, etc.) has entered the Bulgarian language. If “a syndrome is a set of medical signs and symptoms that are correlated with each other and, often, with a specific disease,”<sup>34</sup> then given the broad applicability of meanings acquired by the concept of chalga, it can be regarded as a syndrome of the crises of post-communist socio-economic realignment. Within this context and with no claim about Shakespeare as some kind of social and cultural panacea, it is important to analyze how his cultural capital, well established in Bulgarian education and culture, has been put to new use in cultivating an alternative individual and civic mentality, opening new horizons, awakening hope.

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<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Statelova, *The Seven Sins of Chalga: Toward an Anthropology of Ethnopop Music* (Sofia: Prosveta, 2005), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 188, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> “Syndrome,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syndrome>.

## The Post-Communist Crucible of Bulgarian Theater

Engaging with the social crises of post-communism and their impact on identity has by no means been the natural predisposition of the Bulgarian theater of the transition era. There are two powerful disincentives for this: a historical one (on the wane), and an economic one. To begin with, in the 1990s, after decades of mandated ideological service to the communist state and of endless re-iterations of “the normative canon of socialist realism,” theater professionals were eager for a change.<sup>35</sup> What followed was a belated post-modernist upsurge, when Bulgarian theater, for the most part, turned away from political engagement, including the deconstruction of the near past, and embraced the joyful (sometimes manic) overturning of norms, authorities, values, meanings, traditional symbols.<sup>36</sup> This carnivalesque topsy-turvyness bursting with daring originality challenged the textual side of theater, mingled popular and high culture, classical texts and the language of the street, lyric expression and farce, chalga and multi-media. The eventual subsiding of the post-modernist euphoria, according to theater critic and historian Kamelia Nikolova, coincided with the mentality shift accompanying the global economic crisis of the late 2000s, “the end of an era of entertainment, of pleasure on credit.” She argues that this has opened possibilities for re-engagement “with the real problems of contemporary life,” a position with which she credits the recent work of several directors and playwrights, including two represented in this study (Ivan Dobchev and Javor Gardev).<sup>37</sup> The conditions for such reengagement, we might add, have been prepared by the plethora of processes of post-communist social re-modeling, a reaction against moral stagnation, and a generational change in the theater.

The reorientation of several prominent Bulgarian theater-makers, now with a richer, more diverse palette of expression, toward social issues is a revival of the theater’s mission of civic education, dating back to its origins in the National Revival of the nineteenth century. Traditionally, the institution of theater, especially the National Theater, has been viewed as culturally integrative. By opening up social dialogues, theater has sustained the fabric of civic

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<sup>35</sup> Kamelia Nikolova, *Balgarskiyat teatar sled 1989 i novata britanska drama [The Bulgarian Theater after 1989 and the New British Drama]* (Sofia: University Press “Sveti Kliment Ohridski,” 2013), 248.

<sup>36</sup> Nikolova, *Bulgarian Theater after 1989*, 249-50; Violeta Decheva, *Teatarat na 90te: Repliki ot lozhata i drugi tekstove [The Theater of the 90s: Remarks from the Theater Box and Other Texts]* (Sofia: SONM, 2001), 200-05.

<sup>37</sup> Nikolova, *Bulgarian Theater after 1989*, 259-60.

life and, at the same time, challenged and expanded the audiences' ways of thinking.<sup>38</sup> Even under communism, as Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova have argued in their study of Shakespeare in that era, in spite of being harnessed into state-mandated ideological service, theater offered sites of resistance and opportunities for subversive thinking.<sup>39</sup> However, the renewed interest of some theater professionals in provoking a public dialogue about post-communism and its traumas is difficult, though not impossible, to implement, given the current economic and cultural context.

The economic disincentive is an outcome of a theater reform that has tied government subsidies to increasingly higher rates of return on the “investment” through ticket sales with pre-set minimum prices. Furthermore, the support of the theaters by private benefactors is practically non-existent. Add to this a dominant ideology of passive consumption of the stage spectacle—what critic Violeta Decheva has described as “the social ritual of ‘theater’ [that] participates in the public sphere primarily through backstage gossip and star actors,” and the impact on cultural tastes of omnipresent chalga products, and it is not difficult to see theater chalga—cookie-cutter productions offering belly laughs and live sexual titillation by TV stars and media personalities—become the most reliable way to fill the house.<sup>40</sup> For theaters outside of the capital, where audiences are smaller, more cash-strapped, and where government subsidies are lower, it may well be the only way to keep the doors open. The immediate result is a diminished genre range—no place for tragedy, satire, to say nothing about experimental forms. Chalga theater flatters spectators and assures them “that all is well,” writes director Ivan Dobchev. It is incapable of “preserving the cultural memory, of developing traditions,” argues Kapriev, and thus, according to director Javor Gardev, it deprives society of civility.<sup>41</sup> It undermines the historical identity of the Bulgarian theater and thwarts experimentation and development.

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<sup>38</sup> See Kamelia Nikolova, *Teatarat na granitzata na XX i XXI vek [Theater on the Cusp between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century]*, 61, 88; Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 52-54.

<sup>39</sup> See Shurbanov and Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red*.

<sup>40</sup> Violeta Decheva, *Mezhdu ideologiite i hedonizma: Teatarat v nachaloto na noviya vek [Between Ideologies and Hedonism: Theater at the Turn of the New Century]*, part II (Sofia: Black Flamingo Publishing, 2014), 262.

<sup>41</sup> “Ivan Dobchev: Sramen teatur vurshee kato taifun iz provintziyata [Ivan Dobchev: A Shameful Theater Rages Like a Typhoon in the Country],” *Ploshtad Slaveikov*, 29 June 2014, <http://ploshtadslaveikov.com/?p=3468>; Kapriev, “Teatralnata chalga otglezhda nov zritel [Theater Chalga Raises a New Spectator],” *Trud*, 15 Jan 2012.

The Shakespeare performances analyzed in this collection of articles are among productions that refuse to cater to spectators described by Decheva as “hedonistic and passive . . . , waiting for theater to deliver the next dose of temptation.”<sup>42</sup> They offer artistic provocations in which the familiar Shakespearean stories are re-positioned, refracted, and presented in a new theater (and film) language. By no means devoid of visual and aural pleasures, they challenge audiences across the social spectrum to reflect upon and re-imagine the post-communist social dis-order. Their spectators are diverse: intellectually curious followers of experiment in the theater-laboratory *Sfumato (Wittenberg Revisited)*, people from all walks of life and age groups filling the National Theater to see the performances of Gardev’s *Hamlet* and *The Moth*, TV viewers engaging with the personal stories of prison inmates acting in *Othello*, film festival attendees of an unlikely survivor of a documentary (*The Hamlet Adventure*), village families rubbing shoulders with theater-makers at the open-air Shakespeare performances in the village of Patalenitsa. Each of these performances connects the personal and political histories of Shakespeare’s characters to the lives of audiences and actors. Shakespeare’s cultural authority is harnessed in dramatizing and engendering habits of individual introspection and interpersonal engagement, countering socially desiccating chalga mentality, and restoring crushed hopes.

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On the field of political action the usefulness of Shakespeare for raising civic awareness became apparent during the nearly year-long peaceful protests against the abrogation of political ethics by Oresharski’s government. His portrait featured in a series of flash mob style demonstrations by students from the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts significantly timed for the Day of the Enlighteners of the Nation in November 2013.<sup>43</sup> It was captioned by a semantically charged modification of “To be or not to be, this is the question,” in which a slight vowel shift, transformed “da badem” (“to be”) to “da budim” (“to awaken”). Thus the protesting students transformed Hamlet’s rhetorical inquiry into a clarion call for civic awakening.

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<http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1186134>; Javor Gardev, interview by Vesko Koev and Lyuba Koeva, *Teatral Now*, 23 Oct 2014, <https://sites.google.com/site/teatralnow/intervvuta/avorgrdev>.

<sup>42</sup> Decheva, *Mezhdu ideologiite i hedonizma*, part I, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Victor Kozhuharov’s video of one of the flash mob demonstrations of the Theater students is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvloGcCqFos>.



Other striking images in the visual lexicon of the 2013-14 protests included an “urban butterfly” ballerina dancing at the head of a demonstration, an actress impersonating Delacroix’s *Victory Leading the People*, papier-maché shields painted as the covers of books from the Bulgarian literary canon, and a fence of actual books set up by university professors around the Parliament building (figs. 1-3).



Fig. 1. An Urban Butterfly. Photo by Daniel Ahchiev.



Fig. 2. Delacroix’s *Victory Leading the People* live. Photo by Sergei Antonov.





Fig. 3. “Shields” from books of the Bulgarian literary canon. Photo by Julia Lazarova.

These symbolic images were, of course, hotly debated in the social media and the political press. Questions about their meaning or effectiveness aside, it is clear that Shakespeare, along other emblems from the cultural canon, was put to use in direct civic action. These emblems of high culture entered the lexicon of street protests against the debasement of moral norms by a long series of governments. Shakespeare’s place in the citizens’ movement against political chлгаization in the vicious cycle of post-communism is not unrelated, we would suggest, to the lease of imaginative life granted him by the remarkable performances discussed in this collection.

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