CHALGA TO THE MAX!
MUSICAL SPEECH AND SPEECH ABOUT MUSIC ON THE ROAD BETWEEN BULGARIA AND MODERN EUROPE

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To Gencho Gaintadzhiev

За Генчо Гайтанджиев

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Eran Livni

CHALGA TO THE MAX!
MUSICAL SPEECH AND SPEECH ABOUT MUSIC ON THE ROAD BETWEEN BULGARIA AND MODERN EUROPE

This dissertation explores a discourse of democratic modernity in EU-member Bulgaria, which revolves around a hybrid popular music called chalga. I argue that chalga does not function as the name of a defined music genre. Rather, Bulgarians use it as a self-reflexive voice of ambivalence regarding the recontextualziation in liberal democracy of the socialist language ideology of evolutionary modernization: *navaksvane*—catching up—with Europe. On one hand, chalga indexes musical images that resonate with the current *zeitgeist* of modern European culture: aesthetical and social heterogeneity as well as commercial mass media. On the other hand, Bulgarians take this Ottoman-derived word as a non-referential index that invokes anxieties of Balkanism—a discursive trope of European modernity that has invented the Balkans as its liminal incomplete Self. As the ethnographic chapters of the dissertation show, Bulgarians deal with their ambivalence to chalga by seeking paternalist figures capable of imposing the language regimes of *navaksvane* when performers and audiences digress too much into coded zones of Balkan liminality. Regimenting modern popular music with top-down control points also to the political communication implicit in chalga. Cognizant of their inferior location vis-à-vis "real modern societies," ordinary Bulgarians seek paternalist leaders who can address them on an intimate level but are powerful enough to impose norms and practices circulating to Bulgaria from loci that represent the Occident. The expectation to have such leaders is not exclusive to democracy. It defined the political culture during socialism and even before. What is special to the contemporary era is the

discursive formulation of such leadership, which I define as paternalistic populism. Bulgarians regard democracy as working in their country when it is guided from above by an authoritarian boss (*shef*), who knows how to anticipate the popular will, how to ally with bigger and external forces in order to overcome the society's marginality, and most importantly, how to act with "barbarous" Balkan aggression so as to put the nation in modern European order.

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Richard Bauman

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Donna A. Buchanan

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Ilana Gershon

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Jane E. Goodman

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Susan Seizer

Table of Content

Introduction

Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas[1]	*Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas*
Chalga to the max—the party is here.	*Chalga do dupka—kupona e pri nas.*
We will get totally smashed today,	*Shte se napiem mnogo zdravo dnes,*
Farewell, no worries, the party is the best!	*Sbogom, chista sŭvest, kupona e na shest!*

Chalga to the Max (*Chalga do dupka*)—Tsvetelina and DJ Niki, 2005[2]

Scope

On January 14, 2008, when Bulgaria celebrated its first year of European Union membership, a popular Bulgarian web site (www.dir.bg) published a short news item about a survey conducted by the Bulgarian Association of Business and Touristic Information. The survey solicited from the public symbols that could represent the nation in the EU official institutions. The news item informs readers that, as expected, people chose well recognized national symbols, such as the monastery of the Rila Mountains, the Cyrillic alphabet, the citadel of Tsarevets, and Rose oil. The majority of the votes went to "the Madara Rider," a rock relief from the early medieval Bulgarian kingdom (8th century AD), which meant that it would represent the country on Euro bank notes.

On the following day (January 15, 2008), dir.bg released a follow up report that despite its appearance as serious news item seems to mock the survey. The item states that the report on the survey received hundreds of comments from readers who suggested alternative and much less glorious Bulgarian national symbols.[3] The item

[1] These are the biggest cities in Bulgaria (respectively). Sofia is the capital. Plovdiv is the second a historical regional center of Ottoman Thrace (nowadays southeastern Bulgaria, northwestern Turkey and eastern Greece). Varna and Burgas are the largest Black Sea cities.

[2] "Цветелина и DJ Ники Генов - Чалга до дупка / Tsvetelina & Niki Genov - Chalga... (Офиц. видео)," accessed October 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJh4OQrS7Mw.

[3] The original report: "What is The Most Bulgarian Symbol?"—"Кой е най-българският символ?" January 14, 2008, accessed October 25, 2014,

says that "[U]nfortunately…..the majority 'saw' Bulgaria through the lens of corruption, simplemindedness (*prostotiia*), Mafiosi, incompetent politicians, broken roads and car accident victims." Readers keyed this contemporary portrayal to local cultural imagination with *Hitar Petŭr* (Shrewd Peter) and Bai Ganio—both idioms of Bulgarians' derogatory self-labeling: "a peasant nation, simpleminded people." The first is the stupid-wise Bulgarian folktale protagonist; the latter is the 19th century literary hero-villain created by the writer Aleko Konstantinov (2010 [1895]). A sheep was selected as a political metaphor for Bulgarians constantly seeking authoritative leaders. Another reader suggested a symbol of garbage thrown all over to denote local disrespect for public norms. A picture of a ragged Bulgarian flag among more decent looking national flags waving in front of the European Parliament in Strasburg[4] alluded visually to the strong local sense of "Bulgarian exceptionalism," a case of "crypto-colonialism"[5] (Herzfeld 2002). The common local historical narrative relates to Bulgarians as the first European nation whose five centuries of occupation by the Ottoman Empire derailed them from the 'normal' European course of historical development. As a result, Bulgarians see themselves as if they were delayed in developing modernity, constantly lagging behind the rest of Europe. People also chose articles of food from the traditional cuisine, such as *kebapche* (minced grilled meatball), *rakiia* (fruit brandy), *shopska salata* (a vegetable salad with feta), and

http://dnes.dir.bg/news.php?id=2541512&c=1&act=post&error404#sepultura&nt=12. The follow up report: "Bai Ganio, Shrewd Peter, Azis, Tripe—the Real BG symbols"—"Бай Ганьо, Хитър Петър, Азис, шкембето - истинските БГ символи," January 15, 2008, accessed October 25, 2014, http://dnes.dir.bg/news.php?id=2544926.

[4] "Shabby Bulgarian Flag is on display in Strasburg"—"Дрипаво Българско знаме се вее в Страсбург," December 30, 2007, accessed October 25, 2014, http://olddnes.dir.bg/gallery.php?id=2524189&page=0.

[5] Herzfeld defines "crypto-colonialism" as the "curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence." (2002: 900-901).

shkembe chorba (tripe soup), as symbols of Bulgaria's "unrefined" culinary culture. Bulgarians point to tripe soup in particular as a paradigmatic example of how the national cuisine might not fit with EU hygiene standards.

According to the follow up report, most of the alternative votes went to chalga—a popular music phenomenon that boomed in Bulgaria in the late 1980s and has been dominating the local cultural scene in the last three decades. With many sarcastic references, readers linked chalga to the customary symbols of national self-derogation. The report maintains that "[I]n a way the name of Azis was noticeable; and more often the back parts of his body. One reader saw them going well alongside the [communist *e.l.*] red flag with the five-pointed star and the fez (the Bulgarian visual reference to 'Oriental' Turkey *e.l.*). In a biblical style another reader envisioned the holy trinity: Azis' a…[ass, *e.l*], Slavi's pumpkin [a slang word for bold head *e.l.*], and Boiko's thug-face [*mutra e.l*]."

Let me explain the above references briefly (see selected pictures bellow). Azis (figure 1) is the stage name of Vasil Troianov Boianov—the mega-star singer, whose carnivalesque-like performance has guided me to the deepest meanings in the chalga discourse, above all, ethnicity and gender. My initial intention was to center my ethnography on Azis. However, at the early stage of my fieldwork I preferred to take a more open-ended approach and let my encounters fashion the research focus.

Slavi Trifonov (figure 2) is a prominent singer-producer and a TV host who has been one of the first local entrepreneurs who recognized the commercial potential of hybridizing Balkan popular musics with Bulgarian socialist folklore and pop (called *Estrada*; see in detail chapter 1) and global pop.

Boiko Borisov (figure 3) alludes to the political subtext of chalga. The news item was published when he was a rising star in the local political scene, then serving

as the mayor of the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. In July 2009, the party Borisov founded—"Citizens for European Development in Bulgaria" (CEPB)—won the parliamentary elections by a landslide and led the country until 2013. At the time of completing this dissertation, Borisov heads the parliamentary opposition and builds his power toward returning to national leadership. As a prime minister, Boiko Borisov continued the pro-EU liberal agenda of almost all Bulgarian governments "since the arrival of democracy" (*sled kato doide demokratsiiata* is the colloquial term for the political era after 1989). His political power stems from his populist persona, which combines charismatic paternalism, police background (as head of the Police), family connections within the former socialist oligarchy (his father, Metodi Borisov, was a high official in the Ministry of the Interior), affiliation with the post-socialist shady security business (he was the bodyguard for Todor Zhivkov, the legendary leader of Communist Bulgaria), martial and soccer masculine sportsmanship, and village roots. The word "*mutra*" (with which Borisov is characterized in the news item) means literally "animal face." In post-socialist Bulgaria it became a slang idiom for Mafia-thugs with a stereotypical look of wide face, bold/shaved head, small eyes, short neck, and protruded lower jaw in the style of Marlon Brando in "The Godfather." Especially during the 1990s, chalga was perceived as celebrating the new money elite of *mutri* (the plural of *mutra*), who, on their part, sponsored chalga singers and producers financially (more in detail chapter 1).

Interestingly, none of the three men identify themselves publically with chalga. They characterize themselves in ways that fit the first news item and refer the derogatory item in general to Bulgarians, but not to themselves. Azis usually defines his music as popfolk (which is a debated synonym of chalga) with aspirations of becoming a global pop star. Trifonov characterizes his musical fusion as ethno-rock.

In chapter 2 I will present an item on Trifonov's late-night TV show (Slavi's Show, bTV), in which he attacks the appearance of a chalga singer in a school musical textbook. Boiko Borisov denounces chalga unequivocally. He even expressed many times his special hostility to Azis and Slavi Trifonov. Despite this denial Bulgarians tend to associate the three men with aesthetics, cultural values, as well as social environment of a music-scape, which they call "chalga" and which, according to dir.bg's semi-parodic news item as well as to my fieldwork informants, represents most eminently (and regretfully) Bulgarian national identity in the post-socialist democratic era.

Fig. 1—Azis (from the front page of "Beauty Coiffure" magazine, Feb. 2010)[6]

[6] Picture is taken from "Azis-Азис," JoyReactor, accessed October 25, 2014, http://joyreactor.cc/tag/%25D0%25B0%25D0%25B7%25D0%25B8%25D1%2581.

Fig. 2—Slavi Trifonov[7]

Fig. 3—Boiko Borisov[8]

Objectives and Argument

Emerging from Bulgarians' references to the three figures above is a double voice of collective affirmation countered with collective derogation, which the dir.bg news items captured so well. My goal in this dissertation is to explore the social life of this double speech, to analyze how it functions within Bulgarian national imagination, and to explain why people in Bulgaria invoke this voice particularly in regard to music they call chalga. The historical context of my study is the ongoing transition from one model of national modernity to another. Bulgarians would most likely react to this context with bitter irony because—to paraphrase the words of a villager in Gerald Creed's (1997) ethnography of a post-socialist village—they see

[7] Picture is taken from the news report "Мистериозни слухове съпровождат липсата на Слави Трифонов от екран," January 31, 2009, accessed October 25, 2014, https://frognews.bg/news_10001/Misteriozni-sluhove-saprovojdat-lipsata-na-Slavi-Trifonov-ot-ekran/.

[8] Picture is taken from Kerin Hope, "Bulgaria's PM Watches His Rating Slide," *Financial Times*, October 11, 2010, accessed October 25, 2014, http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2010/10/11/bulgaria/?Authorised=false.

their national life as a never-ending transition, from Ottoman rule to monarchy, from monarchy to socialism, and from socialism to democracy. These transitions had final points of beginning and end from the political perspective. The country was carved out of the Ottoman Empire at the Congress of Berlin (1878) in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War (1877-78). It became a fully independent monarchy in 1908. Between September 9, 1946 and November 10, 1989 Bulgaria was a socialist country allied with the Soviet Union and its satellite countries in Eastern Europe. Since November 11, 1989 Bulgaria has become a democratic country that joined the European Union on January 1, 2007.

Exploring the Bulgarian transitions from the cultural perspective shifts the language time frame from past and present simple to present perfect and present perfect progressive. Bulgarians have been experiencing their national sociality as a journey of becoming an organic part of modern Europe, which has never been completed. All the political regimes since the foundation of this country in 1878 have attempted to gain popular support by promoting nation-building that would transform Bulgarians from post-Ottoman Balkan subjects to modern European citizens. The keyword in this transformation is *navaksvane* or "closing the gap." This means that Bulgarians see themselves as a pre-modern European nation that was occupied by the Ottoman Empire and therefore did not take part in the development of modernity. Hence the goal of national independence is to close the historical gap and catch up with "the rest of Europe." Completing the cultural path of *navaksvane* has always required believing in a future in which modernity would finally be attained. To be modern has entailed performing the cultural formulation of the prototype that stands metonymically for the "rest of Europe" or, more idiomatically, "real European societies." In the Bulgarian kingdom the cultural formula was ethnic homogeneity like

in France, Germany, and UK (unlike the multiethnic Ottoman and Hapsburg empires). In the Bulgarian socialist republic the cultural formula was a classless proletariat nation. In democratic Bulgaria the cultural formula centers on pluralistic and liberal individualism as defined by the EU.

I argue that the double voice of self-affirmation and self-derogation in the two news items expresses more than a comic relief of carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984). It points to a deep social anxiety about the fact that, even though Bulgarians accept the current formula of cultural modernization, the goal of becoming a real part of Europe has not been realized and most likely will not be realized in the future, just as it never was in the past. Ethnographers of post-socialist Bulgaria have all captured the voice of disillusionment with socialist modernity coupled with suspicion to the current model of national modernity: democracy and capitalism (Buchanan 2006; Creed 1997, 2011; Ghodsee 2005, 2009; Pilbrow 2001; Rice 1994). Understanding the anxiety of the recent transition from socialism to democracy, I argue, requires us to open a *longue durée* perspective to the discourse of transition itself, particularly what national modernity and/or being an integral part of modern Europe actually means to Bulgarians in their everyday life. This is what I propose to accomplish with my ethnography of chalga's social life.

Exploring Bulgarian modernity through chalga follows in the footsteps of scholars, who analyze the politics of power and domination underlying the epistemology of modernity in Europe (Z. Bauman 1991; Foucault1970; Latour 1993), vis-à-vis the West's immediate Other (Said 1978) and in former European colonies (Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 1993). Within this body of literature I mostly engage with the Bulgaria-American historian Maria Todorova (1997) whose concept of "Balkanism" is fundamental to any study of modernity in post-Ottoman southeastern

Europe (or the Balkans), at large and Bulgaria, in particular. Todorova argues that the Balkans is Europe's "incomplete self." Meaning, modern Europeans invented the Balkans as liminal locus of Europe's "authentic" and "barbarous" ethnicities from which modern Western civilization has evolved into a higher form of sociality: the nation-state. Similarly to the other regional-political contexts, modernity arrived to the Balkans as a mission of civilization and modernization, in which European powers endeavored to enlighten the "barbarous natives" by promoting ideologies of rationality, national homogeneity, and social evolution. They traveled in one-directional channel of flow—from the European center to its peripheries—and were translated in local cultural contexts under the auspices of local modernity brokers.

The Bulgarian historian Diana Mishkova (2006) complicates Todorova's argument by suggesting that to understand the circulation of European modernity in the Balkans one should analyze the channels through which different ideas about "Europe" have been circulated, mediated and represented in Balkans since the mid 19th century thereby foregrounding local discourses about modern national politics, economy, science, and culture. In other words, Mishkova seeks to explore "the Balkan perspective of the West and its civilization not (only) in the sense of its stereotypes, perceptions and applications, but above all as a contextualized debate about modernity and society; a debate that would take into account pragmatic and empirical as well as utopian and anti-utopian components" (ibid: 31 f.n 5). This perspective which Mishkova ties with "Occidentalism"—a counter discourse of "Orientalism" (e.g. Buruma and Margalit 2005)—does not deny that the language of communication about modernity was first originated in Europe and then traveled to Bulgaria (the locus of Mishkova's analysis). However, there is neither one monolithic picture of Europe nor a defined European center. Narratives and ideas about Europe

were originated in Russia, France, Britain, Germany and the modernizing Ottoman capital of Istanbul; they traveled to the emerging Bulgarian national discourse via protestant missionaries, Bulgarian students in Europe as well as via "more developed" Balkan brokers, above all Greek, Serbian and, to lesser extent also, Romanian elites. In this sense, the first Bulgarian modernizers articulated nation-building not so much vis-à-vis an imagined Western center but in regard to those different representatives, brokers and mediators of European modernity in the Balkans. Mishkova argues that Bulgarians' stigma of having an "incomplete" national Self—the central perspective that underlies the second news report—did not originate through a direct contact with "the West," but was developed within Bulgarian national discourse and circulated back to Europe.

Building upon utopian ideas spread by Greek intellectual circles, Bulgarian literati believed in resolving this stigma by becoming or evolving into Europeans: modernizing by means of attaining "the principles of enlightenment" (learning, reason and rationality). Hence, Mishkova concludes, studying discourses of national identity in the Balkans requires us to look beyond the ways in which the European powers constructed the Balkans as the "barbarous" or "backward" mirror image of "modernity" and "civilization." Instead she calls for a historical and comparative analysis of the ideological function of "Europe"—its normative, symbolic and encoded meanings—which is "significant and evident however only as a metaphor of modernity rather than by ideological semantics of its own" (ibid: 59).

Mishkova's analytical framework helps my study of chalga utilizes to explore ambivalent voices Bulgarians express toward the current stage in the project of national modernization. I particularly relate to the concept of Occidentalism in chapter 1 in which I link chalga with a discursive trope of Bulgarians living on the

road between the Balkans and Europe. The other chapters relate to Mishkova more implicitly. Chapter 2 examines how Bulgarian intellectuals adapt to democracy their role during socialism—brokers of modernization—by debating intertextual links between folklore ditties and a contemporary animal tale that connotes with chalga. Chapter 3 explores how Bulgarians shift through references to chalga between modern occidental and Balkan oriental discursive spaces. Chapter 4 illuminates how Bulgarian ethnic minorities, above all Roma, struggle through chalga with a legacy of assimilation as the only path of participation in the modern occident.

The Bulgarian scholar Rumen Avramov (2003) adds an economic historical perspective that helps me to tie chalga with a local debate about how to form capitalism (which Avramov considers the economic and cultural category of modernity) in a society without modern capital. Avramov uncovers the politics of inequality that are absent from Mishkova's analysis of modernity circulation. Shifting the focus from European enlightenment to European creditors reveals how texts about European modernity have been transfigured[9] (Ganokar and Povinelli 2003) through powerful mechanisms of exchange rather than being translated via linguistic codes of meaning-value into texts about Balkan (and particularly, Bulgarian) modernity.

Avramov argues that large-scale political changes in Europe have pushed small and peripheral European societies, such as Bulgaria, to a state of economic crisis, which they could resolve only by entering into debt cycles with major European creditors. Throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries Bulgaria's creditors were France, Germany, Russia (later, USSR) and the UK. At the turn of the 21st

[9] "[F]ocusing on transfiguration rather than translation—the refunctioning of a text as such for different demanding-sites—orients our analysis toward the calibration of vectors of power rather than vectors of meaning-value. We will care more about the distribution of power than of meaning, more about institutions of intelligibility, livability, and viability than about translation. Indeed meaning value, its sovereignty or dissemination, will cease to command our attention in regimes of recognition, and instead we might focus on the social forms these regimes demand" (Ganokar and Povinelli 2003: 396).