Maledictum Bulgaricus: Bulgaria's Perpetual Stagnation Due to its Negative National Narrative and Political Nostalgia

Yoana Sidzhimova

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Maledictum Bulgaricus: Bulgaria’s Perpetual Stagnation Due to its Negative National Narrative and Political Nostalgia

submitted to
Professor Zachary Courser

by
Yoana Nikolaeva Sidzhimova

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Chapter 1: National Narratives & Nostalgia, Entwined

Our past, on the contrary, is that which acts no longer but which might act, and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation of which it borrows the vitality.

—Henri Bergson

While a nation’s past may not act in the present, it certainly lives in it. The narrative that the people of a nation come to embody and protect, though influenced by its past, comes about through how generations recollect and carry forth this shared history. National narratives are, inherently, stories—albeit fact-based stories—but stories, nonetheless. Melancholy accounts of history carry through generations, and their emotional appeal increases a people’s tendency to safeguard the narrative. While the internalization of many historic events influences a nation's narrative, I will argue that those of occupation, war, and outcomes of economic development—positive or negative—have the most profound effect. This protected, and often tailored, narrative touches all aspects of a nation’s identity and their presentation and perception on the global stage.

Bulgaria demonstrates particularly well history’s effect on a nation’s narrative. Unfortunate negative historic circumstances following occupation, war, and poor economic development have inculcated a cynical and pessimistic historic internalization amongst the Bulgarian people that only persists and intensifies with time. The first significant event followed the apogee of the Second Bulgarian Empire in the 13th century, when the Ottoman Empire subjugated the nation, resulting in a 500-year long occupation.¹ The freedom, territory, and

economic superiority lost during the Turkish Occupation was the catalyst for a perpetually worsening national narrative. When the Russian Empire liberated the Bulgarians from the Ottomans after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, independence gave the Bulgarian people but a mere glimpse of hope. A tumultuous warring period followed the creation of the Bulgarian state in 1878 with the Balkan Wars from 1912-1913, World War I in 1914, and World War II in 1939. Losses suffered through the Balkan Wars and alliances with Germany in both World Wars furthered a dreary Bulgarian narrative. The most recent in Bulgaria’s series of unfortunate events to influence the shift to a bleak national narrative was the nearly forty-five yearlong Communist regime and Bulgaria’s poor transition to capitalism following its fall. Highlighting the events that led to a Bulgarian narrative grim with negative internalizations of history plays a pivotal role in understanding the narrative’s evolution. The jarring geographic transformation from the Second Bulgarian Empire (Fig. 1) to Bulgaria today (Fig. 2) stresses the unique power Bulgaria once had and its inability to regain it. As Bulgaria’s geographical reach diminished, so did the hope among the Bulgarian people, and thus, the positivity within the national narrative.

While specific historical events influence the Bulgarian narrative, one must look at the entirety of Bulgarian history to truly understand the internalization of such a negative narrative. The Ottoman Occupation gave rise to two sentiments that both contribute to the negative narrative: The “Turkish yoke” and the practice of oplakvane. Though these will be discussed meticulously in Chapter Two, I will briefly cover their definition and their effect on the narrative. The Turkish yoke is an ideology within the Bulgarian collective imagination that

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perceives Western rejection and Bulgaria’s backwardness as a result of Ottoman Turkish barbarism, and asserts that the Bulgarians “saved” Europe from a similar fate. While centering itself on resentment towards the Turks, the yoke is also resentful and jealous of the West for their unwillingness to assist the Bulgarian people during the Occupation and the benefits this selfish nature had on the West’s own economic and cultural development. In short, the yoke places feelings of self-importance alongside indignation within the Bulgarian narrative. Furthermore, the practice of oplakvane (complaining) grew out of frustration towards Bulgarian complacency during the Occupation and lack of recognition from the global community. These

3 Ibid.
Occupation-born sentiments transformed the Bulgarian narrative into harboring constant dissatisfaction towards the national condition. As Bulgaria entered a series of wars in the early Twentieth Century, the country faced betrayal from Balkan neighbors, territorial losses, and worsened at-home conditions. Essentially, bad alliances and poor decision making at key moments diminished hope for Bulgarian success during this period—this will be further discussed in Chapter Two. During this time, not only did oplakvane become quotidian, but mere tones of dissatisfaction within the national narrative escalated into heightened hopelessness of ever regaining satisfaction. Not only were the people unhappy, but unhappiness became habitual. The greatness of the culturally and ethnically homogenous Second Bulgarian Empire remained a distant memory and any prospects of its restoration quickly became unattainable fantasies. While previous periods lamented betrayal from the West and Balkan neighbors, the country’s experience and transition from the forty-five yearlong Bulgarian Communist regime—fervent with corruption, economic turmoil, and polarization of the elite and middle class—signaled deception within its people. Thus, the national narrative only grew more negative as the transition cemented feelings of hopelessness and cultivated sentiments of a ‘Bulgarian curse’ of perpetual backwardness. The Bulgarian narrative’s negative trajectory progressed with time, beginning as a dissatisfaction towards the present, transitioning into a disheartenment towards improvement, and, ultimately, propagating the belief of a cursed backwardness.

In interviews conducted by communication psychologist Nadezhda Sotirova to study the Bulgarian narrative, interviewees expressed the present-day belief of the ‘Bulgarian curse.’ All interviewees held sentiments with the following tone: “Run, run away, and don’t come back.”
Watch your life. Your parents will be fine. You go to a normal country—and don’t look back.”

These present accounts, as this thesis will show, exhibit how the Bulgarian narrative began as a mere dissatisfaction, evolved into a loss of hope, and culminated into the current ‘Bulgarian curse’ motivating many Bulgarians to flee the nation. Unfortunately, as Chapter Four will illustrate, the Bulgarian narrative continues to worsen in the present day—and this begs the question, why?

From the birth of oplakvane and the Turkish Yoke, the Bulgarian narrative displayed tones that made its beliefs a breeding ground for nostalgia. However, as the circumstances of various wars and Bulgaria’s transition from communism further infiltrated the Bulgarian narrative, Bulgaria’s nostalgia only increased and grew political in nature. The internalization of nostalgia in a political context and use of nostalgia as a political weapon poses massive threats to development. So large, that political nostalgia, which has only increased through a defeatist national narrative, has caused Bulgaria’s stagnation. This chapter will primarily define nostalgia, frame it within a political context, and conclude by discussing its dangers in a political context. After establishing this foundation, Chapter Two will address the impetus of nostalgia as a result of the worsening national narrative following the Ottoman Occupation, The Balkan Wars, and World War I. Chapter Three will address the rise of political nostalgia as a result of the national narrative transgressing from pessimistic to hopeless due to the reign of the Bulgarian Communist regime and Bulgaria’s transition to a democracy. Ultimately, Chapter Four will highlight how the dangers of political nostalgia manifest themselves in Bulgaria today, due to a national narrative purporting the Bulgarian curse of perpetual backwardness and the use of nostalgia to spur

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populist political parties. Bulgaria remains overshadowed by its distant greatness, fueling a bleak national narrative fervent with dangerous political nostalgia that magnifies with time, stagnating the nation’s ability to ever progress.

*The Literature of Political Nostalgia*

Nostalgia arises from two Greek roots: *Nostos* (“return home”) and *algos* (“pain”). The positive relationship between the Bulgarian narrative’s negativity and the greatness of Bulgaria’s past embodies these roots; as the people’s internalization of the pain under present conditions increased, so did the desire to return to an exaggerated historic greatness. In order to prove that political nostalgia thrives in Bulgaria, I will first explore literature regarding the presence of political nostalgia in other nations.

Daphne Berdahl, an anthropologist noted for her work on gender, consumption, and post-communist nostalgia, discusses the social conditions that gave rise to *Ostalgie*—or eastern German nostalgia—in the former German Democratic Republic and the subsequent birth and boom of a nostalgia industry in former East Germany in ``(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things.” Berdahl relies on earlier literature of Kathleen Stewart⁶ in “Nostalgia—A Polemic” and Andreas Huyssen’s⁷ “Nostalgia for Ruins” to create her own definition of *ostalgie*. Berdahl details behaviors of East Germans (*Ossis*) to support Stewart’s claim that nostalgia for the GDR posits a ‘once was’ relation to a ‘now’, “nostalgia is about the

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⁶ Stewart is currently a professor at the University of Texas in Austin, writing and teaching on affect, experimental ethnographic writing, non-representational theory, post-phenomenology

⁷ Huyssen is a Villard Professor Emeritus of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, a founding director of the University’s Center for Comparative Literature and Society, and a founding editor of the *New German Critique*
production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past.”

Berdahl then borrows from Huyssen to show that Ossi societal behavior also shows an attempt to reclaim a romanticized and hazily glorified homeland. Essentially, Berdahl uses the precondition of dissatisfaction with the present to glorify a past homeland, thus developing nostalgia. Berdahl credits unemployment in post reunification East Germany, the reminiscence of the GDR state’s supplantation of the private sphere, and the relegation of East German products as factors which undermined the Ossi identity and personhood. Thus, igniting a discontent with the present and spurring a thriving nostalgia industry.

Post reunification, Eastern Germany experienced a surge in unemployment. For Ossis who were “all raised to be socialists, and we were taught that work is what separates humans from animals…to be without work [was] unthinkable.” The recantation of one’s identity as a producer through unemployment ignited the romanticization and glorification of the GDR homeland Huyssen highlights. Furthermore, the socialist GDR supplanted functions of the private sphere through social welfare. Notably, GDR factories typically housed a day care center, a general store, and a doctor’s office for its workers. While a post-reunification identity crisis led to glorification of the GDR, the German state’s separation from the private sphere following the transition led Ossis to hope for a present in which social welfare was again prioritized.

Ultimately, the devaluation and ridicule of East German products by West Germany further eroded Ossi identity, strengthening the romanticization of the GDR and the prescriptive nature of nostalgia. While Berdahl presents many examples of such relegation, that of the Trabant best

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 199.
11 Ibid., 194.
depicts the impairing effect on the Ossi identity. The Trabant provoked a sense of accomplishment and affinity among Ossis, as they typically waited on a 15-year long waitlist and spent two annual salaries to purchase the vehicle. Yet, when West Germans placed Trabants in storage warehouses and waste dumps, the vehicle became a symbol of backwardness, social inefficiency, and inferiority. Though the socialist past was not very free or prosperous, there was a sense of belonging among Ossis that provided them structure and comfort, making them crave this period both rationally and irrationally. The hostility towards and satirization of Ossi culture by the West further insinuated an undermining of Ossi identity. With such neglect toward Ossi identity post reunification, ostalgie flourished through the revival and consumption of GDR products in attempts for identity retrieval.

In essays adapted from her novel The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym, Slavic Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, relates nostalgia’s fruition to a dislocation in space and a changing concept of time. Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has existed… a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.” She ascribes the phenomena to three defining qualities: contemporary roots, arising as a result of new understandings of time and longing; covetousness towards a specific and internalized past; and a retrospective and prospective nature. In short, nostalgia is modern, subjective, and prescriptive. To Boym, political nostalgia arises when the subjective visions of an imagined reality colonize politics, history, and everyday perceptions. This initial colonization and birth of political nostalgia

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12 Ibid., 195.
14 Ibid., 7.
15 Ibid., 8.
16 Ibid., 8.
17 Ibid., 8.
occurred during the Enlightenment and, contemporarily, can best be seen through the popularity of the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* in post reunification Germany.\(^{18}\)

The Enlightenment connected a feeling of longing with a romantic nationalism. Intellectuals and poets during this time began claiming “they had a special word for homesickness that was radically untranslatable,”\(^{19}\) depicting the subjective nature of the phenomena. Although the Portuguese utilized *saudade*, the Russians *toska*, the Czech *litost*, the Romanians *dor*, the Germans *heimweh*, and the Spanish *mal de corazón*, the untranslatable words held a uniform grammar of romantic nostalgia: “I long, therefore I am.”\(^{20}\) The popularity of *Good bye, Lenin!* shows how such a longing transcended into an everyday perception and created societal divides in post reunification Germany. In the 2003 film, a mother, who was an East German true believer, experienced an accident inducing her into a coma during the fall of the Berlin Wall.\(^{21}\) Upon awakening, her children preserve her nostalgic illusion of the GDR through censorship of television reports and usage of East German products within their household.\(^{22}\) Though initially perceived as having a mimetic nature of *Ossi*, the *Ossi*’s warm reception of the film led the film to have a deeper societal impact. East Germans relished in their ability to preserve their nostalgic differences.\(^{23}\) *Good Bye, Lenin* provided nostalgia a contemporary status, allowed *Ossi* to romanticize specific aspects of their GDR past, and ignited hope for this romanticized past to exist in the present due to the film’s positive reception and popularity.

Ultimately, Dr. Mitja Velikonja, a Religious Studies scholar at the University of Ljubliana, Slovenia, focused on post-socialist nations to craft a definition of particularly socialist

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 12-18.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 12-13.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 12-13.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 17.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
political nostalgia in “Lost in Transition: Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-Socialist Countries.” Velikonja defines nostalgia as a “a complex, differentiated, changing, emotionladen, personal or collective, (non)instrumentalized story that binarily laments and glorifies a romanticized lost time, people, objects, feelings, scents, events, spaces, relationships, values, political and other systems, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the inferior present.”24 Similarly to Berdahl’s definition, Velikonja’s nostalgia is based on a discontent with the present. A unique aspect of Velikonja’s theory asserts that the glorification of the past is rooted in a belief that the people both do not want to and know they cannot return to it.25 Velikonja attributes the rise of political nostalgia to a series of events that occurred as a result of the transition out of socialism for Socialist states: the demolition of the welfare state, capitalism, rise of social injustices, repatriarchalization, retraditionalization, clericalization, and nationalist conflicts.26 He explores venerations of socialism in public places, consumption of socialist consumer goods and commercial brands, and public survey opinion polls to demonstrate his main claim regarding nostalgia: nostalgia is rooted in the present, not the past. While Velikonja refers to events in Russia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia to support his definition, the case of Slovenia is most pronounced in covering all aspects of his definition.

Following the fall of communism and the subsequent dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Slovenia aptly displayed Velikonja’s political nostalgia. Public commemorations of Josip Broz Tito, President of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and public opinion polls favoring socialism over capitalism contrasted against public opinions polls showing no desire to a return to communism. The Slovenia case supports Velikonja’s claim that

25 Ibid., 546.
26 Ibid., 537.
though political nostalgia glorifies romanticized periods and people, individuals flirt with nostalgia because they are sure it will not return. A historic exhibition in Belgrade titled *Efekat Tito* (The Tito Effect) drew individuals from all six ex-Yugoslav republics to commemorate his leadership.\(^{27}\) Furthermore, the controversial leader of the Slovene National party, Zmago Jelinčič, utilized praise for Tito as a way to generate support and credibly through calling him ‘the son of a Slovenian mother’, ‘leader of the partisans’, ‘Marshal of Yugoslavia’, and erecting a monument to Tito in his private backyard—as public opinion polls showed 90% of Slovenians considered him a positive historical personally.\(^{28}\) Such public events and the incorporation of Tito into political platforms exhibits nostalgia for the socialist Yugoslavia glorified through the people and political systems of it’s past. Furthermore, results of public opinion polls depicted how the public also glorified the values, relationships, and daily livelihood of the Socialist period. In 1995, 1998, and 2003, 88.1%, 88.2% and 86.1% of the Slovenian population described their life in Yugoslavia as either “good” or “very good”\(^{29}\) and a public opinion poll cast through televoting during a TV show in Slovenia in 2009 concluded that 60% of the population preferred socialism while only 40% preferred capitalism when asked “In what political system is life better?”\(^{30}\) Oddly enough, though, a 2001 public opinion poll concluded that 68.1% of the population “strongly disagreed” when responding to the statement that “we should return to the rule of the communists.”\(^{31}\) These results can only be explained through Velikonja’s assertion that the people are reminiscent because they are sure this regime will never truly return. Put simply, it is easier to glorify something you know will never occur again—the grass is always

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 542.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 543.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 545.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
greener. The people do not long for the communist regime, they long for the relationships, the objects, the people, the values, and the events of the time that gave them a greater sense of belonging. As Berdahl emphasizes, the people long for the sense of security regarding their identity the time period provided in retrospect.

Prior to ultimately framing my definition of political nostalgia, however, I would like to extend a methodological view of the two originating sources of nostalgia that Velikonja purports to strengthen the case as to why political nostalgia in Bulgaria is not only present, but continuously on the rise. According to Velikonja, nostalgia originates in two ways: naturally or artificially. A natural origination of political nostalgia occurs out of the aforementioned dissatisfaction with the status quo. This political nostalgia is considered “bottom-up” because it is a popular conviction that has amassed due to collective dissatisfied sentiments.\(^\text{32}\) Signs of naturally occurring political nostalgia appear through public opinion surveys showing discontent with the present, interviews with individuals displeased with their current state, and a rise in popularity of consumer goods from past times which fare better on a domestic market than the consumer goods produced in the present.\(^\text{33}\) As later chapters will detail, public opinion polls, interviews with Bulgarian citizens, and the consumption of consumer goods from past times will exhibit that all of these conditions persist in Bulgaria. Velikonja describes artificial nostalgia, on the other hand, as a top-down artificial sentiment imposed by a group to achieve a certain goal. The sentiment is artificial because dissatisfaction is not a personal attitude, but rather materialized in popular discourse through the infiltration of material to breed discontent with the present.\(^\text{34}\) Thus, artificial nostalgia is top-down. Artificial nostalgia aims to accrue political

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 539.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 541.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 539.
capital, gain popular support, or make a new commercial niche profitable. In short, individuals subject to such nostalgia are either not truly unsatisfied with the present or their dissatisfaction is capitalized on and intensified through influential actors. Artificial nostalgia can, therefore, utilize natural nostalgia for political gains. While understanding that nostalgia can occur naturally or artificially, I will argue that political nostalgia originally developed naturally within Bulgaria; however, political parties have noticed and capitalized on this nostalgia through artificial nostalgia to advance their political agendas, making Bulgarian political nostalgia a phenomenon which continues to persist and self-regenerate, acting as a positive feedback loop. While natural nostalgia originated during the period of the Ottoman empire, Bulgarian political parties in the 21st century have created artificial nostalgia that appeals to the backbone of their platforms, invoking more discontent in the present day, and, thus, more natural nostalgia as well. Natural nostalgia thus feeds into artificial nostalgia, creating a problem impossible to solve.

**Framing Nostalgia Politically**

Now that varying scholarly interpretations of political nostalgia and their applications in several nations have been discussed in depth, their theories will be used as building blocks to craft the following definition of political nostalgia unique to this thesis: Political nostalgia originates from a longing to return to a past home due to natural public dissatisfaction towards the present, even though dissatisfaction is artificially intensified by influential political actors. The phenomenon romanticizes a glorified selective past, which prescribes a utopia contrary to the status quo built upon the nostalgic individual’s glorified moments of history by attempting to recreate them through social movements, policy recommendations, and party platforms. Therefore, though political nostalgia’s romantic tone is universal, it often contains multiple

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35 Ibid., 535.
distinct utopian visions, thus making its execution infeasible as a result of competing nostalgias born out of differing societal discontents. I will define political nostalgia under the following qualifications: a retrospective and prospective view, a utopian undertone, and the lack of a universal perception. In later chapters, I will discuss the manifestation of each qualification within the Bulgarian narrative.

A longing to return to a past home, whether it no longer exists or never truly did, shows a discontent with the present. The present induces nostalgia, as individuals entirely satisfied with their present condition and state would not dwell in yearning to return to a past reality.\(^\text{36}\) Thus, nostalgia hints at one’s hopes for the future. In short, regardless of whether nostalgia dwells on a romanticized past or a past reality, it is prospective. In order to dispel the presence of nostalgia, elements of the past currently lacking in the present must manifest into future realities through political action. Political nostalgia naturally manifests when societal discontent invokes social movements or inspires politicians to develop policies and promises as a response to discontent, giving people hope that “there must be a society that is better than the current.”\(^\text{37}\) The artificial origination of nostalgia, however, arises when politicians either utilize their platforms as a way to breed or intensify public discontent with the present, to support already established policies they wish to act on. Under natural political nostalgia, policy is a means to quell discontent, while under artificial nostalgia, political action is a way to advance a political agenda.

The selective and prospective nature of nostalgia lends its application to hold great subjectivity, allowing politicians to draw on the mourning within the national narrative whenever it suits them best. Political nostalgia allows politicians to entertain the longings of the past

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\(^{36}\) Daphne Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,” Ethnos 64, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.1999.9981598

through policy proposals. If promises to entertain certain nostalgias are made but not met, a reactionary heightened public discontent results due to the perceived likelihood of a utopias actualization. Thus, as the public’s desire for the utopia grows, politicians can capitalize on this fervor and promise to be the change that the public desires. This becomes dangerous, as it grants individuals hope that their utopian nostalgic desires will fruition, spurring more fanatic utopian desires.

A people’s dissatisfaction and ability to romanticize the past grants nostalgia a utopian undertone. According to Boym, in order to escape the unsatisfactory conditions of the present “nostalgic desires turn history into private or collective mythology, [allowing one] to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.”\(^38\) Allowing one’s memory of the past to transcend accuracy and take on glorified and falsified myth-like characteristics makes nostalgia a cyclical phenomenon. The greater the discontent with the present and the unfulfillment of an individual’s expectations, the more romanticized the past will become. And the more utopian the past becomes through such romanticization, the higher the degree of nostalgia because of one’s infatuation with this idyllic glorified past.\(^39\) However, the inability to ever execute such utopian desires in the future due to their infeasibility only increases one’s dissatisfaction—allowing for the cyclical nature of nostalgia to begin once again.

**Bulgarian Political Nostalgia**

The belief in the ‘Bulgarian curse’ of backwardness following its transition to a democracy furthered the negativity in the national narrative, and led to varying utopian views of

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the past, showing its presence most within the agrarian society, extreme-right political parties, and Bulgaria’s imagined poor majority—which encompassed individuals who felt cheated and poor by the elite as a result of Bulgaria’s transition out of communism. The switch from a Soviet paternalism—which provided basic needs for the people—to a capitalist program that required greater degrees of self-initiative proved to be one of the largest changes to everyday life. The agrarian population felt it difficult to adjust to such expectations, and many economists, development experts, and politicians—both in the West and within the nation—blamed this on “their conservatism, their age, their ignorance, and their character.” Individuals felt the transitionary period did not provide the support necessary for them to acclimate, leaving them feeling left behind and dissatisfied with the nation’s ignorance towards their condition. The rise in natural dissatisfaction appears in public opinion polls, which showed that in 2002 three-fourths of Bulgarian respondents believed their social position had dropped since the end of the Communist regime in 1989. Such results support Velikonja’s aforementioned claim that natural nostalgia arises popular conviction amassed around a despondent national narrative from collective dissatisfied sentiments—though it will be exploited by current parties.

Furthermore, Bulgarian political nostalgia grew through varying romanticized accounts of the past, as subsets of the population developed conflicting utopias. As Volen Siderov—the most well-known Bulgarian far-right nationalist and leader of the nationalist party ATAKA—details in *Foundations of Bulgarism*, extremist right-wing parties cherish a Bulgarian nationalism that is }

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 30.

“an ethical defense of nationalism; an insistence on the ancient origins of the Bulgarians, who are one of the oldest autochthonic peoples and civilizations in Europe.”

Essentially, Bulgarian nationalists dreamed of restoring the apogee of the Second Bulgarian Empire and distorted the ethnic purity and zeal of this period. The first extreme nationalist parties in Bulgaria arose following Bulgaria’s transition to a democracy, as name-changing campaigns during the Balkan Wars and the Communist regime failed, appealing to the extreme nationalists’ fervor by promising their expectations would be met through the party’s prospective policies. Though the Turkish yoke naturally created nostalgia of a cultural and ethnical homogenous Bulgaria, the platform of ATAKA aimed to validate and intensify anger towards ethnic groups for political clout of its nationalist agenda—exhibiting exploitation of discontent through artificial nostalgia. Agrarians, on the other hand, were nostalgic of the state security they once had. Clearly, the policies political parties adopt when drawing on these nostalgic desires will vary and, potentially, conflict, as they require the fulfillment of different needs. Thus, the use of nostalgia as a basis for policy creation highlights the needs of different Bulgarian population subsets, making it nearly impossible to use nostalgia as a tactic to develop a reality best for all, and, thus, improve the Bulgarian narrative.

This leads us to the final qualifier for Bulgarian political nostalgia: Political nostalgia is subjective as Bulgarians are dissatisfied with different aspects of the status quo. Therefore, the utopia imagined within nostalgia will never be attained, as what is required to restore Bulgarian greatness alters among subgroups. The presence of nostalgia merges personal and collective

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45 Ibid.
memory, and even if the collective memory of a population may be quite uniform, no personal memory ever will be. Therefore, different memories breed different critiques of the present. And because varying personal experiences lead to different dissatisfactions, the utopian past one yearns for will never be the same as that of another. While nostalgia might tell us more about the present than the past, it does so through a subjective prospective lens—lacking a standard and objective perspective towards what must be done to attain a more agreeable future which satisfies all dissatisfaction with the present, even those sentiments at odds with one another.

Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova notes that the varying difficult circumstances the Bulgarian people endured produced “nostalgic hybrids with a significant dose of negativity and precautionary counter-discourses.” These hybrids and counter-discourses, however, created alternate utopias that, despite signifying dissatisfaction with the present, make it difficult to envision a more satisfactory future that appeases the demands of opposing nostalgic hybrids. While dissatisfaction breeds nostalgia, the counter-discourses Todorova highlights cannot be assumed to be complementary or universal.

*The Dangers of Political Nostalgia*

The largest danger of political nostalgia is the threat to progress its utopian nature creates and the threat to freedom and a common homeland its subjectivity presents. In sum, political nostalgia threatens an irreversible stagnation as a consequence of the utopian, prescriptive, and subjective nature of nostalgia. Combined, these allow desires of competing ideal futures to be manipulated for political clout through policymakers, making individuals even more fanatic.

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regarding an ideal future due to their adulation with the utopian past and a political actors power to selectively pursue aspects of their utopian dreams.\textsuperscript{48} Nostalgia colonizes politics because its romantic nature does not allow individuals to perceive reality past the utopian. As nostalgia breeds off of constitutional imagination, the mix of nostalgia and politics becomes explosive.\textsuperscript{49}

Recognition of political nostalgia by policymakers creates confusion between an imaginary and an actual home. Even more, the idealistic and unrealistic nation this recognition creates is so powerful that it can create an obsession with a phantom homeland, a homeland that is merely a figment of one’s imagination. To some, this phantom homeland can become so desirable and perfect, that it makes them ready to die or kill for.\textsuperscript{50} In the case of Bulgaria, the presence of political nostalgia allows fantasies to run rampant, making political parties, such as ATAKA and others Chapter Four will discuss, capable of pursuing divisionary societal policies in hopes of the resurgence of the homogenous and ‘superior’ Bulgarian identity of the Second Bulgarian Empire. Siderov’s statements regarding ATAKA’s vision for Bulgaria depict this. Therefore, political nostalgia allows a democracy to peacefully coexist with platforms supporting authoritarian qualities and an outdated nostalgic national identity.\textsuperscript{51} Democracy peacefully grants political actors or parties an attempt to attain the utopian past others romanticize, amassing into cult-like followings and creating a threatening environment for identities which do not fall under the subjective utopia. Mourning of a past that can never be reversed breeds an unreflective monster which allows for fanaticism and elongated melancholy to infiltrate the minds of a people.

\textsuperscript{48} Daphne Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,” \textit{Ethnos} 64, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): 203, \url{https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.1999.9981598}.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
and define their national narrative in unrealistic but irreversible ways. Such is the case with Bulgaria.
Chapter 2: The Past Is Prologue

The purely national Bulgarian, who has understood and seen the sorrows and troubles of our dear people, who has already felt in his heart the daily and bloody tears of our disgraced mothers, brothers and sisters from the tyrant, for him, there is no fear, no excuses, and his death is his very consolation and salvation of the soul. [This] death deserves the above-mentioned glory of the Bulgarian people. Otherwise [if he does not act in this way] he is not a Bulgarian, he is not a Christian, he is not a man. Therefore, to him death, death and death.

—Vasil Levski

The Ottoman Occupation

Known throughout Bulgaria as the Apostle of Freedom, Vasil Levski’s sentiments represent the fervid antipathy of the Bulgarian people towards their five-century Ottoman Occupation. Bulgarians still resent the period of the Ottoman Occupation, spanning from 1396 to 1878, due to it’s being laden with injustice and bloodshed as a result of forced Muslim conversion. The Ottoman Empire—the “tyrant” Levski refers to—became so hated within the Bulgarian narrative that many considered dying for Bulgaria’s freedom more honorable than succumbing to the power and religion of the Ottomans. While there are disputes among scholars over the degree of tyranny during the Ottoman rule, distinguishing the Bulgarian sentiment is necessary to understanding the origination of an increasingly despondent national narrative and its influence on igniting political nostalgia.

Prior to Bulgaria’s subjugation by the Ottomans, the First and Second Bulgarian Empires, aside from a short conquest by the Byzantine Empire, were periods of great prosperity for an ethno-homogenous and ethno-religious Slav population. The First Bulgarian Empire, under

Simeon the Great, witnessed the adoption of Christianity and a flowering of literature.\textsuperscript{53} The Second Bulgarian Empire, under Ivan Asen II, led Bulgaria to its most eminent period through extending the kingdom to its greatest geographical extent, defeating both the Magyars and the Crusaders, establishing adept diplomatic ties, and enriching Bulgarian culture.\textsuperscript{54} Bulgaria was the master of its own fate and the power of the Bulgarian Empire was held together through its powerful monarchs. Following the death of Ivan Alexander, the Bulgarian dynasty was deposed and the state was dissolved with the invasion of the Ottomans.\textsuperscript{55} Bulgaria would not exist as a state for almost half a millennium.

Transitioning from a period of economic, cultural, and diplomatic, and political affluence to one of subordination during the Ottoman Occupation led Bulgarians to demonize the Ottomans. Of the changes, the greatest offenses to the Bulgarian people were the coercive and assimilative mass Islamic conversions. To spare their lives, some Bulgarian Christians converted to Islam. Surviving Bulgarian Christians who escaped conversion classified those who converted as “Pomaks.”\textsuperscript{56} The Bulgarian narrative portrayed Pomaks as victims and the Ottoman Empire and Muslims as the perpetrators of these grievances. In the 1893 novel \textit{Pod Igoto} (Under the Yoke), Ivan Vasov “paints a picture of pre-liberated Bulgaria as a society crushed under the weight of an oppressive and arbitrary yoke of Oriental Ottoman despotism. Vazov’s image of the Turk is that of an unequivocally cruel, if not bestial, alien interloper, occupying and preying on

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Neuburger, Mary. “The Bulgarian Figure in the Ottoman Carpet: Untangling Nation from Empire.” In \textit{The Orient Within}, 37–38. Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria. Cornell University Press, 2004. \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvrf89ms.7}.
\end{itemize}
essentially ‘Bulgarian’ cultural and material belongings.” Thus, the negative trend of the national narrative was born as a dissatisfaction to the jarring alteration in status quo.

Several newer Bulgarian sources and foreign scholars, however, conclude that Islamic conversion was the product of “gradual and voluntary intermarriage, or mass voluntary conversion in the case of the Pomaks.” While the coercive nature of the conversions is contested, “most Bulgarian sources still adhere to the forced conversion thesis” and several foreign historians, such as Peter Sugar, accept the theory of forced conversion. While acknowledging this contention is important, for the purposes of this thesis and its focus on the Bulgarian narrative, forced conversion will be presumed.

The Ottomans’ coercive assimilative practices led most Bulgarians to flee to remote villages in the mountains. These settlements were all between 150-200 inhabitants and were rarely visited by Ottoman officials for purposes other than tax collection. So many Bulgarians fled to the mountains that only one-in-fifty Christian Bulgarians resided in towns. These isolated and ethnically homogenous villages preserved the Bulgarian language, Bulgarian names, folk tales, legends, festivals, and traditions. Along with safeguarding Christian Bulgarian life, these villages inoculated an intricate peasant tradition. The remote settlements’ role in preserving

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 21.
59 Ibid.
60 Peter Sugar is an American historian and recipient of a lifetime achievement Award for Distinguished Contributions to Slavic Studies from the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.
63 Ibid., 35.
64 Ibid., 38.
Bulgarian culture ingrained a sense of honor and respect of the peasant tradition within the Bulgarian narrative. The Bulgarian peasant tradition upheld the memories of the apogee from the Second Bulgarian Empire. The homogenous nature of these villages, however, institutionalized a ‘herd’ mentality which also infiltrated the Bulgarian narrative.\textsuperscript{65} The privacy and sanctity of the remote mountain villages functioned as a survival mechanism for Christian Bulgarians, portrayed through the Bulgarian proverb “Slonena glavica, sabj ne j seche” (A bent head, no sword can cut).\textsuperscript{66} Peasants developed a belief that keeping their presence discrete was the only way for the Bulgarian people to survive the occupation.\textsuperscript{67} This insular groupthink persisted throughout the entire occupation and adumbrated the reasons for its lengthy duration. While the preservation of Bulgarian culture can be credited to this cautious nature, the development of this herd mentality also explains why Christian Bulgarians lacked incentives for liberation sooner. Thus, Bulgarian peasants both spurred Bulgarian nationalism into the narrative and negativity regarding complacency of the Bulgarian people.

While Christian Bulgarians sheltered in these homogenous peasant villages, the Habsburg and Russian Empires made advances and defeated the Ottoman military several times—in 1699, 1718, and 1774—leading to the secession of Ottoman territories.\textsuperscript{68} These were the first military defeats of the Ottomans, granting Bulgarian peasants an opportunity to abandon their self-contained herd narrative of avoidance and hope for change. Around this period, in 1762, Saint


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.


Paisius of Hilendar composed *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarksaya* (History of the Slav-Bulgarians)—the first work on Bulgarian historiography which accentuated Bulgaria’s greatness.\(^{69}\) Paisius’ work and validation of the Ottoman’s weakening grip over occupied territories revived the Bulgarian spirit and enlivened hopes towards liberation, coining this period as the Bulgarian National Revival. While the revival began as decentralized buzz within Christian Bulgarian villages, the synchronicity in the rise of Bulgarian pride and hope culminated into a more centralized Bulgarian nationalist movement in the 1800s, and, eventually, the Liberation of Bulgaria.\(^{70}\) Not only this, but reminiscence of Bulgarian greatness further brewed in the national narrative. However, actions of the West would soon pivot this hope into resentment, making Bulgarian greatness a utopian belief, kickstarting nostalgia’s birth.

Beginning in the 1800s, Western nations started drawing explicit distinctions between ethnicities, nationalities, and geographical locations to undermine Eastern and Asian identities as their less-developed subordinates.\(^{71}\) Such sentiments portrayed Bulgaria, similarly to Russia, as “semi-European at best” and a hybrid, incomplete nation within Europe.\(^{72}\) This only furthered the Bulgarian National Revival, fueling a passion to show the “European-ness” of Bulgarians, despite their being under Asiatic occupation. While aspiring to develop to the standard of Western European nations, Bulgarians believed that the impositions from Ottoman rule held them back, rendering their status in Europe tentative. Such perceptions only increased Bulgarian desire to separate from the “barbaric” Muslims. Even though Bulgarians saw themselves as some

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\(^{71}\) Ibid.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 23.
of the oldest autochthonic civilizations in Europe, dissatisfaction arose within the narrative as the rest of the West would not acknowledge this fact.

Despite attempts to display Bulgaria’s European-ness to Western nations, Bulgarian resentment towards the West simultaneously intensified. Western constructs of Europe “as a paragon of progress and Christendom as opposed to Turco-Muslim barbarism,”73 spawned Bulgarian expectations for European assistance towards gaining freedom from the Ottomans. Western nations, however, never came to the aid of their Christian Balkan neighbors—seemingly only reveling in their own development. In an 1857 poem, Bulgarian revolutionary leader Lyuben Karavelov’s words about Europe’s lack of action accurately portray the sentiments of the Bulgarian people towards the West: "Don't raise your head so high holy Europe, don't be so proud of your civilization and your Christianity when you don't have a pure heart or a clear conscience."74 The West’s five centuries of silence led Bulgarians to believe that Western powers only intervened in the Balkan region when competing for spheres of influence.75 The West was a role model yet an anathema for the Bulgarian people. Dissatisfaction of the status quo increased in the narrative, as the utopian vision of a Great Bulgaria became stronger, due to a lack of fulfillment of expected promises.

While the Bulgarian National Revival began as a decentralized desire to revive the Bulgarian spirit, this nationalism was institutionalized through the formation of the Bulgarian National Liberation Movement by the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee (BRCC) in 1869, a movement that “envisaged liberation through revolution, mass participation of the people, destruction of Ottoman feudalism, and the fundamental social and political restructuring

73 Ibid., 25.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 24.
of Bulgarian society.” The BRCC’s goal to prepare the Bulgarian people for a revolution incited a rise in egalitarian thought and culminated in the BRCC-organized April Uprisings of 1876, a staged massacre of Muslim civilians which then led to the slaughtering of 12,000—15,000 Bulgarian Christians. Despite immense loss of life, Bulgarians achieved their goal of “urg[ing] outside intervention [to address the occupation] by provoking the Turks into bloodshed” and coined the event “the epic of the forgotten”—one of “the most glorious pages of modern Bulgarian history.” Although the Uprising signified the moment Western Europe’s silence ceased, the Bulgarian people would continue to resent the human cost that was required to garner Western attention. William Gladstone, a nineteenth-century British Prime Minister, “helped raise public indignation over the ‘Turkish atrocities’ against Bulgarians with images of the ‘Turkish infidel’ lording over ‘European Christians.’” Gladstone’s campaign was rooted in the prominent Western propaganda which undermined Eastern and Asian identities; the long-awaited Western support towards dismantling the Ottoman regime, therefore, arose from a self-interest to preserve the exemplar status of Western nations and further demote opposing identities, not secure autonomy for the Bulgarian people. The West did little other than protect their own status. Despite vocally announcing their support, Western Europe did nothing to support Bulgaria in terms of manpower. If actions speak louder than words, the West was still

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79 Ibid., 198.
radio silent. Soon after however, with the implicit support of the West, the Russian Empire’s invasion of Ottoman Bulgaria led to the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War. After winning the war, Russia sponsored the Treaty of San Stefano on March 3rd, 1878, establishing an autonomous Bulgarian polity and expanding Bulgaria into modern-day Macedonia and Thrace—territories held by the Bulgarian Empire prior to the Ottoman Occupation. Russia’s influential role towards Bulgarian liberation and revival of Bulgarian greatness through the territorial expansion within the treaty popularized the folklore of the Russian Christian protector “Diado Ivan” (Grandpa Ivan), the liberator of the Ottoman oppression. The importance of this fable and alignment with Russia was because it reversed some of the nostalgic thought which perceived revival of greatness as solely utopian. For a mere moment, it seemed plausible.

Bulgaria’s affinity with Diado Ivan perturbed Western Europe. On June 13th, 1878–three months following the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano—Western powers summoned Russia and the Ottoman Empire to the Congress of Berlin with the goal of restructuring the Balkan map, in hopes to curtail the expansion of Russian influence over a larger geographical region. Bulgarian affinity of Russia concerned The meeting produced the Treaty of Berlin, an agreement which severely truncated Bulgaria’s newly regained territory. Bulgarian animosity towards the West only amplified, affirming previous assumptions that Western involvement in the Balkans materialized only when they were concerned with losing influence in the region. The Bulgarian narrative pummeled. To date, this would be the smallest geographical reach of Bulgaria.

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81 Ibid., 35.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 34.
Bulgarian dissatisfaction of the status quo was at its peak and a powerful Bulgaria again became only a utopian dream.

**Post Ottoman Occupation**

Upon gaining independence on March 3rd, 1878, Bulgaria adopted a democratic constitution and elected Stefan Stambolov, of the Liberal Party, as Prime Minister. Despite popularity amongst Bulgarians, the Russian Empire was not fond of Stambolov’s liberal policies. Bulgaria’s monarch history prior to the Occupation, as demonstrated through the prosperity of the Bulgarian empires, led the nation to appoint a Prince, despite there being no surviving Bulgarian heirs to the throne due to the Ottoman Occupation. Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was appointed, and Bulgaria became a constitutional monarchy. Ferdinand’s more conservative policies pleased Russia and led to the assassination of Stambolov, due to their frequent disagreements. In 1908, Ferdinand declared himself Tsar and Bulgaria an independent kingdom.

**The Turkish Yoke**

The West’s hesitance towards Bulgaria’s belonging in Europe furthered an inferiority complex in the Bulgarian narrative that bred anger and frustration. These sentiments of betrayal, abandonment, animosity, and helplessness amalgamated into the aforementioned theory of the Turkish yoke. To reiterate, the Turkish yoke was modeled the Russian “Tatar yoke,” which posited that Russian backwardness was a direct result of over two centuries of Mongolian-Tatar

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87 Ibid., 131.
rule… [and that] the Mongols held Russia back from the general path of ‘Western civilization,’
but Russia had actually saved Europe by holding back the Mongols. The Turkish yoke consists
of an accusatory tone and hints at an over compensatory superiority complex. In addition to
understanding the growingly negative national narrative, the feelings behind the Turkish yoke
are pivotal to understanding Bulgaria’s reception of Marxism, their role in WWI and WWII, the
Communist regime, and the nation’s slow and bumpy transition to a democracy.

Despite gaining independence, the Turkish yoke still persisted in the minds of the
Bulgarian people. As generations of Pomaks gradually accepted Muslim practices, their adoption
of Turko-Ottoman names—both in their persons and landmarks—were constant reminders of
Bulgarian hardship and Bulgaria’s inferior status in Europe. Thus, many nationalist thinkers and
organizers believed that the shirking of the Turkish yoke was necessary for Bulgarian prosperity.
Removing all remnants of the Ottomans would also purify the Bulgarian image in the West.
Likewise, lifting the Turkish yoke would unite Bulgarians and avenge the maltreatment of the
Pomaks. While extreme policies to remove the Turkish yoke would not be pursued until the
1900s, the notion of removing the yoke came following Bulgarian independence and remains
relevant throughout every stage in Bulgaria’s development. Bulgaria became overshadowed by
the yoke, it not only instilled negative sentiments within the narrative but initiated beliefs that
hope was useless.

The Birth of a Culture of Oplakvane (Complaining)

In addition to the torment from the Turkish yoke, the practice of oplakvane (complaining)
about the Bulgarian condition emerged among its people, furthering the concept of hope as futile.

88 Neuburger, Mary. “The Bulgarian Figure in the Ottoman Carpet: Untangling Nation from Empire.” In The Orient
Within, 24. Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria. Cornell University Press,
Bulgaria’s long occupation, hope for a Western rescue that wouldn’t come, and betrayal by the Treaty of Berlin made the nation distrustful of many, if not all, European nations. Katherine Verdery, a prominent socialist scholar, alleges this developed a strong “Us vs. Them” mentality in Bulgaria and other Balkan nations, such as Romania, who fell under the Ottoman Empire. This mentality arises from the belief that the nation—Bulgaria, in this case—is an innocent victim subjugated and oppressed by another nation. The effects of this mentality and oplakvane also appear in the Turkish yoke through frustration towards the West’s ignorance of Bulgaria’s tacit contribution towards their development. Through attributing Bulgaria’s backwardness to the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria identifies as the innocent victim oppressed by the Ottomans and complains that, had it not been for the Ottomans, Bulgaria would not have fallen victim to scrutiny from the West and such underdevelopment.

The Ottoman Occupation’s final lasting effect on the Bulgarian narrative was the formation of a hyper self-deprecating nature, making the practice of oplakvane more prevalent. The truncation of Bulgaria in the Treaty of Berlin led to further frustration regarding Bulgaria’s inability to regain the power and influence that they had during the First Bulgarian Empire between the 8th and 9th centuries. Many Bulgarians view the continued failures towards restoring the nation’s previous might as something “genetically wrong with the nation.” Oplakvane, however, instilled the perspective that the West’s ignorance and Turkish oppression

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89 Verdery is an anthropologist, author, professor, and prominent Socialist scholar.
were responsible for Bulgaria’s underprivileged nature, not the Bulgarian people themselves. *Oplakvane*, therefore, developed as a mechanism to cope with a growing self-deprecat ing nature. This can be seen through the underlying chagrin towards isolationist practices of Christian-Bulgarians during the occupation and the redirection of this sentiment through frustration towards the West and the Turks. Thus, *oplakvane* involved a frustration not only with the “Them” but also with the “Us,” though the former was a defense mechanism avoiding the latter. Perhaps that is why interviewees prescribe going to a “normal country” and not dedicating one’s life to improving the Bulgarian condition. The exacerbation of *oplakvane* drives the rise of political nostalgia. As this section shows, the worsening of the national narrative spurred the utopian perception of Bulgarian history, igniting nostalgia. In the following sections, the subjective and prospective qualities of nostalgia will be introduced through their fabrication as a result of war and the platforms of political parties, ignited by the initial romanticization of a utopian past.

*Ferdinand’s Plan For Recovery*

The over-compensatory nature of the Bulgarian people represented by the Turkish yoke and *oplakvane* placed the solidification of Bulgaria's legitimacy and status in Europe on the forefront of Prince Ferdinand’s agenda. Following liberation from Ottoman rule, Ferdinand initiated national development projects from 1887-1897, financed through borrowed money from foreign markets. To fund such development, Ferdinand frequently increased peasant taxes. However, the influence of the Bulgarian National Revival, it’s admiration of peasantry, and its accentuation of Bulgarian greatness resulted in “three-fourths of the population [living] in villages and [engaging] in small scale farming, with agriculture contributing 59% of net material
output in 1948 and industry just 23%.” Bulgarian peasants thus developed a growing displeasure towards Ferdinand because they received the brunt of the cost of development. This frustration was compounded by the fact that Ferdinand was viewed as an outsider, having no Bulgarian roots and lacking as fervent a desire towards Bulgarian nationalism. Unlike the Christian-Bulgarian peasants of the Occupation, however, peasants frustrated with Ferdinand did not abide by the herd-mentality which deferred to the passing of time to appease unsatisfactory conditions. Instead, the increased nationalist zeal for peasant admiration led peasants throughout rural Bulgaria to congregate and establish the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU). While initially the BANU was an organization set to peacefully protest Ferdinand’s taxation policies, its widespread peasant support convinced its leaders to become a political party. Aleksandur Stamboliiski would become the most prominent figure in the movement. The rise of the BANU pushed discontent with self-induced backwardness aside and instead propelled a revolutionary and nationalist sentiment into the Bulgarian narrative that continued to portray the West and Turks as our persecutors, exacerbating oplakvane. This signifies the first rise of subjectivity and perspectivity to promulgate the political framing of nostalgia. Bulgarian peasants remained nostalgic for a utopian Bulgarian peasant history, creating a subjective interest for nationalism which deviated from the desire for development to prove Bulgarian European-ness to the West. Instead, the peasants wanted to accentuate their Bulgarian identity. This nostalgic account allowed the BANU to establish a platform with prospective policies to return to this reality. While Ferdinand’s actions were also motivated by the shirking of the yoke, the utopia Ferdinand aimed to actualize was one that shirked the yoke through westernization.


94 Ibid.
BANU, on the other hand, prioritized a different aspect of Bulgarian history and pursued actualizing an alternate political nostalgia.

*The Balkan Wars and WWI: Furthering the Perception of Bulgarian Damnation*

While these political groups were evolving in Bulgaria, Ferdinand, alongside all other Balkan nations, was focused on restoring the Bulgarian narrative and shirking the note through improving Bulgaria’s standing on the international stage. Of the Balkan nations under Ottoman rule in the 19th century, Macedonia was the only nation yet to gain independence by 1912. Distrust towards the West and regional Balkan concern that Western intervention in the region would result in greater truncations of Balkan borders led Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro to negotiate and free Macedonia together. Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire on October 8th, 1912, with the remaining Balkan allies joining ten days later.

The desire to remove the Turkish yoke through the war, however, was so strong that Bulgaria’s actions extended past solely seizing the remainder of the Ottomans’ Balkan territory. The First Balkan War led to the first Pomak name-changing campaigns. As Bulgarian forces entered the Ottoman-occupied land, they perceived themselves as “liberators” of the Pomaks. Accompanied by Orthodox priests, Bulgarian forces converted over 200,000 Pomaks from Islam to Christianity in the Ottoman-contested areas of Thrace, Macedonia, and the Rhodope Islands. For Bulgarians, the Pomak renaming was symbolic of marking territory with Bulgarian ownership, thus reclaiming heredity and reinstating Bulgarian greatness through the shirking of

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96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 133.
the Turkish yoke. While agrarians were displeased with Ferdinand’s past taxing methods, such policies aligned with elements present in their nostalgia. Not only were Pomaks converted to Christianity, but they were also forced to take Bulgarian names and surnames, replace their Turkish fezzes with traditional Bulgarian hats, and cover their homes with crosses, bibles, and other objects which held Bulgarian meaning.99 Restoring Bulgarian dominance through such aggressive measures was not only an attempt to reassure the Bulgarian people that the nation’s revival was feasible, but also to prove that Bulgaria deserves legitimacy in the eyes of Western Europe. Essentially, an attempt to appease the worsening narrative.

Bulgaria’s well-trained and well-equipped army represented the military might of the Balkan allies and led to the gradual decline and massive defeat of the Ottoman Empire, which lost 83% of its remaining European territory.100 Following Balkan victory, the Treaty of London signed on May 30th, 1913 declared that the former Ottoman territories would be divided amongst the Balkan allies as they saw fit.101 Bulgaria was not pleased with this outcome, as the nation believed the territorial split ought to be proportional and that it deserved a larger share because it committed the most soldiers to the war. Greece and Serbia, however, believed the split should be an equal balance to portray the Balkans as victors “equal in strength.”102 The intentions of Greece and Serbia, however, were not as pure as their claims to unity made them seem. Concerns over Bulgaria’s potential expansion and military power arose as a result of Bulgaria’s influential role in the Ottoman victory, leading Greece and Serbia to secretly signed an agreement to settle

99 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 133-134.
102 Ibid., 134.
the contested Ottoman land without Bulgaria’s consent. This secret treaty amplified Bulgaria’s distrust towards other nations present in the question of “Why Us?” How could Greece and Serbia betray Bulgaria through hidden agreements when the Balkan nations when they all wanted to unify to gain Western respect? Now even Bulgaria’s Balkan neighbors seemingly did not view Bulgaria as deserving of reclaiming its greatness and being deemed truly “European.” The Bulgarian narrative not only worsened, but deepened in beliefs of a loss for hope—the nation could not even garner the support of its Balkan brothers.

This heightened distrust further charged Bulgarian desire to restore itself and prove wrong all nations who had only mistreated the Bulgarian people. As the utopian quality of nostalgia purports, Bulgarians refused to surrender to the irreversibility of time. Thus, Bulgaria declared war on Greece and Serbia on June 29th, 1913, in hopes to restore territorial loss. The Balkan brotherhood was destroyed, but, of course, Greece and Serbia were liable for the unfortunate situation within the Bulgarian narrative. With Romania’s mobilization against Bulgaria, the Second Balkan War was disastrous for both Bulgarian morale and prosperity. Bulgaria conceded territory that it had acquired when gaining independence and witnessed more lives lost than in the First Balkan War, a terrible blow to hopes of a revived Bulgarian greatness in the Bulgarian narrative. Furthermore, Pomak name-changing operations fell flat. In masses, Pomaks migrated out of Bulgarian territories that they had inhabited for more than a thousand years, signaling that Pomaks might not have felt as “Bulgarian” as Bulgarians

103 Ibid., 126.
104 Ibid., 135.
106 Neuburger, Mary. “The Bulgarian Figure in the Ottoman Carpet: Untangling Nation from Empire.” In The Orient Within, 42. Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria. Cornell University Press, 2004.
previously thought. After Bulgaria’s defeat in the Second Balkan War, the interim regime announced Pomaks could convert back to Islam, reclaim their former names, and adorn their tradition clothing—measures that most Pomaks decisively embraced.\textsuperscript{107} This was a sign that, despite forceful efforts, the Turkish yoke was a stain Bulgarians could not wash out. The narrative had officially transitioned from one reminiscent with tones of dissatisfaction to one of irreversibility.

As Bulgaria was dealing with managing its casualties, restoring the nation, and paying for the Balkan wars, World War I (WWI) erupted. Bulgaria’s dire conditions following the Balkan Wars led Ferdinand to declare a strict and loyal neutrality and a state of emergency.\textsuperscript{108} As Bulgaria actively sought loans from Western nations to get back on its feet, the West’s precondition to lend Bulgaria money only if the nation agreed to follow a policy favorable to the West in WWI disillusioned Bulgarians. Thus, the thesis that Bulgaria was incapable of proving it’s worth and gaining the trust of the West was reinforced. Upon securing a loan through a consortium of German banks with no preconditions, the Allies and Central powers continued to court Bulgaria due to its strategic position in Europe.\textsuperscript{109} Ultimately, Bulgaria joined the Central Powers on October 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1915 for two reasons: greater territorial promises and the perceived likelihood of a Central Powers victory in the summer of 1915.\textsuperscript{110} Bulgaria’s decision to enter the war was detrimental to everyday living conditions in Bulgaria. WWI would exacerbate the already-present supply issues that inundated the nation following the Balkan Wars. With the cost


\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 138.
of living increasing 847% from 1914 to 1918, the lack of civilian and military morale was no surprise.\textsuperscript{111} Britain and France’s offensive against Bulgaria on Sept.15\textsuperscript{th}, 1918 led to Bulgaria’s impending collapse and armistice.\textsuperscript{112} As a result of WWI, Bulgaria had lost 9,000 square kilometers of territory and 9,000 Bulgarians now found themselves under foreign rule.\textsuperscript{113} Ferdinand’s oversight of two wars which resulted in significant territorial loss in less than half a decade cemented Bulgarian hatred towards him and resulted in his abdication and departure from Bulgaria. His son, Tsar Boris III, succeeded him. If a sliver of hope was left remaining within the national narrative, it was now surely exhausted.

The living conditions during World War I radicalized and infuriated the peasantry. Concerns of another revolutionary upheaval led the postwar interim regime to invite Stamboliiski, leader of the BANU, to form a coalition cabinet. As discontent rose, the romanticization of the past increased, resulting in this radicalized peasantry and a higher degree of nostalgia. From 1919 to 1923, the agrarians and the communists were the most dominant political forces.\textsuperscript{114} At the time, the BANU and BCP were the only parties truly competing for vacant seats in elections. As democratic parties grew fearful of the Left’s growing political authority and the prospects of a one-party state, they established the Constitutional Bloc, a coalition of Bulgaria’s right-leaning democratic parties.\textsuperscript{115} Stamboliiski’s actions in April of 1923 further intimidated the Constitutional Bloc. He abolished proportional representation and the BANU seized 212 seats while the BCP and the Constitutional Bloc only won 16 and 15 seats, respectively; thus, the reality of a one-party state seemed even more likely and the Constitutional

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 140
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
Bloc became determined to dismantle its prospects. Members of extreme right-wing factions supported by the Constitutional Bloc brutally tortured and murdered Stamboliiski on June 14th, 1923 and established a new government under Aleksandur Tsankov, an economist of the Constitutional Bloc. Following a failed attempt at a Communist uprising in September of 1923, the Constitutional Bloc placed severe restrictions on the political liberties and individual rights of left-wing parties. The Constitutional Bloc had successfully immobilized the two most prominent leftist parties in Bulgaria. As previously discussed, suppression and lowered prospects of leftist ideas would only result in their romanticization and radicalization through nostalgia.

From the period of 1923-1931, The Democratic Alliance—a coalition of Democratic and Nationalist Parties—ruled Bulgaria. The BANU and BCP were inactive during this period, mainly due to continued democratic attempts to cripple their political participation. Poor economic conditions throughout the Democratic Alliance’s rule, however, renewed public dissatisfaction, allowing the Communists to rise to prominence once again when they secured local elections in 1931 and 1932 and took control of the Sofia city council in 1932. Despite this frequent political turmoil, Tsar Boris III—along with the rest of Europe—focused his attention on the Nazi seizure of power and Germany’s rapid expansion. Many Bulgarian nationalists aligned with German foreign policy due to similar frustrations with territorial loss from the Treaty of Versailles, but Boris was fearful of another European war and believed in neutrality without commitment. He was once famously quoted as saying that “‘[his] army is pro-German, [his] wife is Italian, [his] people are pro-Russian. [He] alone [is] pro-Bulgarian.’” Boris perceived neutrality best for the nation, not allowing attractive alliances to sway his vision.

116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 165.
Despite Boris’ sentiments, Bulgaria’s economic dependency on Germany would seal its entrance and alignment in World War II, despite a “deep pro-Russian tradition in every section of society”\textsuperscript{119} present following Germany’s termination of its pact with the Soviet Union in the summer 1941. Bulgaria was, essentially, cornered into this alliance. Bulgaria declared war on Britain and the United States on December 13th, 1941.

Despite being militarily tied to Germany, the Bulgarian narrative still aligned with leftist ideals, reflected in public support for the Soviet Union. Thus, Boris remained unwilling to declare war on Russia despite German military advances in Eastern Europe,\textsuperscript{120} further proving the facetious nature of Bulgaria’s alliance with Germany and his “pro-Bulgarian” rhetoric. So, when Comintern—the Soviet-controlled international organization for communist advocacy—demanded the development of an anti-fascist people’s front in Bulgaria, the Fatherland Front (FF) was founded on July 17th, 1942.\textsuperscript{121} The FF “called for absolute neutrality … withdrawal of Bulgarian troops from operations against the partisans in Yugoslavia, the removal of the army from royal control, a ban on the export of food to Germany, the guarantee of a decent standard of living for all Bulgarians, the full restoration of civil liberties, and a ban on all fascist organisations.”\textsuperscript{122} The FF gained popularity within the nation due to its larger progressive vision for the Bulgarian proletariat. Viewing themselves as the cultural avant-garde to the toxic and suppressive fascist culture groups like the Democratic Alliance, the FF urged the civilizing mission for men to become “disciplined, rational, modest, prudent, thoughtful, and cultured,”\textsuperscript{123} a

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
“New Man.” The New Man possessed “the values and behavioral norms of socialism”\(^{124}\) that brought this ideology into reality. If Bulgarians acted in accordance with the New Man, they would harmoniously embrace the socialist way of life. Therefore, widespread adoption of the New Man did not require the BCP to impose communist ideals onto the public; instead, cultural hegemony would be a product of its adoption. The peasantry’s egalitarian mindset resonated deeply with the values of the New Man. As the war continued, the Bulgarian public’s pro-Russian sentiments led to the FF’s popularity and to disdain towards Boris’ regime. Nikola Petkov, General Secretary of the BANU, famously said “There is no Bulgarian, whatever his politics, who does not believe that friendly Soviet-Bulgarian relations and sincere cooperation with the Soviet Union represent the foundation stone of Bulgaria’s foreign policy. The whole Bulgarian nation, and especially we in the Opposition, believe that this policy best guarantees both the peace of the Balkans and the interests of Bulgaria.”\(^{125}\) But as Vasil Levski said, “He, who frees us, will later enslave us.”

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 72.
Chapter 3: Enslaved by the Protector

*All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.*

--George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Although widespread adoption of the New Man might seem to be rather sudden, Bulgaria introduced itself to the seeds of Marxist thought far earlier in its history. Marxist thought was first introduced in Bulgaria in the middle of the 19th century, gaining popularity predominantly due to its similarities to the Bulgarian National Liberation Movement. As aforementioned, the movement was founded on the premise of revolutionary liberation, mass civilian participation, an end to Ottoman control, and social and political restructuring of Bulgarian society. Considering the movement’s revolutionary and democratic tones, it is not surprising that Marxist thought surpassed developing capitalist theories in popularity from the 1850-1890s. Marxist tones resonated with the utopian interpretation of Bulgarian history peasants held. Initially, Marxist thought occupied the Bulgarian intellectual life, with scholars like Emilia Mineva coining this the romantic-educational phase of Marxist reception in Bulgaria. Beginning in the 1880s, Bulgarian teachers, lawyers, physicians, and other members of the intelligentsia gathered in educational societies and reading circles to discuss varying socio-political ideas predominant during the period. With the platform of the Bulgarian National Liberation Movement closely aligning to Marxist thought and the presence of intellectual hubs to stimulate conversation and disperse knowledge, the spread of Marxism in Bulgaria was unintentional yet steadfast.

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127 Ibid., 63.
128 Ibid.
As Marxist ideas were published in several Bulgarian journals and newspapers, such as the Bulgarski Nizhitiz journal, Pravo newspaper, and Social-Democrat (the first Marxist journal in Bulgaria), Bulgarian Socialists were recognized internationally. Notably, Friedrich Engels wrote to Stoyan Nokov, editor of Social-Democrat and student in Geneva, personally thanking him for “carrying the Marxist banner of today’s proletariat to the coasts of the Black and Aegean Seas.”

Engagements with Bulgarian youth abroad and the dispersion of Marxism in Bulgarian publications extended the discussion of the ideology past solely the intelligentsia. As a result, intellectuals began connecting the philosophy more directly to the working class for greater receptibility. Bulgarian socialist students abroad and members of educational societies within Bulgaria interpreted Marxism to call for mass mobilization of the working class. Meanwhile in St. Petersburg, the rise of a different interpretation of Marxism gained prominence. Dimitar Blagoev, another Bulgarian student abroad, disseminated the interpretation that Marxist thought called for the mobilization of the entire society, irrespective of economic class, through the formulation of “Blagoev’s Group” or “The Party of Russian Social-Democrats” in 1883. The Blagoev Group became the first Social Democratic group in Russia. Tsar Nicholas II of Russia was unhappy and threatened by Blagoev’s revolutionary activity and extradited him from Russia in 1885. Blagoev’s propagation of Marxist ideas continued upon his return to Bulgaria, through initiatives to unite the social democratic circles within all Bulgarian cities.

Blagoev’s efforts towards social-democrat unification culminated into the creation of the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party (BSDP) in 1891, signaling the end of the romantic-educational phase of Marxism. While some Bulgarian socialists viewed the creation of the BDSP
premature due to the already present discrepancies in Marxist interpretation, skeptics believed it was more important to present a united Socialist front to other parties.\textsuperscript{133} The rushed creation of the party led to a brief schism in 1892, during the Second Party Congress—only the party’s second meeting. Political pressure in Bulgaria led the group to reconvene in 1894, but the distinct interpretations would soon be unavoidable.\textsuperscript{134} Those who interpreted Marxist thought to call for the mobilization of solely the working class became known as “Broads” for their liberal interpretation of Marxism. Blagoev’s followers, on the other hand, became known as “Narrows” for their rigid Marxist views. Two further dividing factor that propelled the split were attitudes towards revolution and collaboration with the bourgeois (“Collaborationism”). While Broads believed revolution was to be viewed with anticipation but not incited and favored Collaborationism, the Narrows believed it was their responsibility to enact the revolution and gaffed at the thought of Collaborationism.\textsuperscript{135} Such radical differences led to Broads and Narrows to struggle for party control throughout the rest of the 1890s.

Divisions over Marxist interpretation were also exacerbated on an international level; the question of Collaborationism led to an international debate among socialists. Thus, 384 delegates from over 300 labor and socialist organizations in 20 countries convened at the Second International on July 14th, 1889 to reach harmony among interpretations and work towards International Socialism.\textsuperscript{136} Unity was not reached. At the Fifth Congress of the International, “the majority of the delegates upheld the tenets of orthodox Marxism by rejecting collaboration with


\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.


bourgeois parties.” The Second International brought about two global factions of Marxist thought: Western Social Democrats (favoring Collaborationism) and Communists under Vladimir Lenin and the Russian Bolshevik Party (opposing Collaborationism).137

These distinct global factions led to a second and permanent schism of the BDSP in March of 1903, when the Narrows and Broads split into distinct parties: the Bulgarian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (Narrow Socialists) and the Bulgarian Social Democratic Workers Party (Broad Socialists).138 The Narrow Socialists experienced an organic increase in popularity among the Bulgarian people, while the Broad Socialists lacked momentum. The Western Social Democratic Faction—whom the Broads aligned with—was spurred by a western proletariat receptive to Collaborationism due to Western Europe’s superior industrial development. Bulgaria’s industrial backwardness and significant peasant population, however, meant the nation lacked a substantial working-class proletariat population to support Collaborationism.139 The resentful sentiments towards the West present in the Turkish yoke also allowed for minimal expansion of the party. The Bulgarian narrative prioritized Bulgarian nationalism and returning to its utopian greatness, not conforming to the West. The similarly strict interpretations regarding Collaborationism and revolution of the Narrow’s and Bolshevik’s naturally led the Narrow’s to strongly align with the platform of the Bolsheviks.140 Despite the two parties operating separately for around 15 years, the Narrows officially adopted the Bolshevik ideology of Marxist-Leninism and renamed itself the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) in 1919.141 This natural alignment and

139 Ibid., 526.
140 Ibid.
popularity of the Narrows was influenced by the more sympathetic perception Bulgarians had of Russia due to the Occupation. The effortless adoption of the Narrows also signifies the natural origination of nostalgia. The Russians had, after all, helped Bulgaria in attempts to regain the greatness of the Second Bulgarian Empire many were nostalgic of. Adopting Marxist-Leninism officially did not lead to any significant changes in the beliefs of the BCP. The most distinct interpretation of Marxist-Leninism is militant materialism—the belief in the need to ignite an interest in the revolutionary force of the proletariat in the struggle against capitalism. This, however, was already a belief of the Narrows, one of the contentions that led to the schism in Bulgarian Socialism in 1903, and a belief of the Bulgarian National Liberation Movement. Bulgarian Socialism officially viewed revolution as a necessary means to a Socialist end. This adoption allowed for artificial nostalgia that furthered discontent with the current societal divides and yearned for the revolution.

The introduction and popularity of the Marxist movement, alongside the popularity of the BANU discussed in Chapter Two, is deeply rooted in Bulgaria’s Ottoman history. While the rise of Marxism aligned with the revolutionary attitudes reminiscent within the Bulgarian National Liberation Movement, the popularity of the BANU was rooted in the respect of the peasant tradition, which preserved Bulgarian culture for five centuries. The tendency to gravitate towards left egalitarian principles also illustrates why Marxist thought predominated in popularity over capitalism in the 19th century. This trend would continue, as “three-fourths of the population lived in villages and were engaged in small scale farming (Bell 1990, 418), with agriculture contributing 59% of net material output in 1948 and industry just 23%.”

such groups further cemented the revolutionary and nationalistic sentiment into the Bulgarian narrative.

**Bulgaria’s Communist Regime**

The consolidation of Communist power did not come without struggle. Bulgarian peasants and townspeople resisted as few other East Europeans did. The anti-Communist opposition was not appeased. Rather, it was subdued and crushed by force. From the outset the contest was between unequals. The Red Army did not intervene directly. It did not have to. Its mere presence provided the Communists with an overwhelming advantage which their opponents could not overcome.

--Nissan Oren, *Bulgarian Communism: The Road to Power*

Due to this popularity, when a power vacuum appeared in the summer of 1943 with Boris’ sudden death, and Bulgaria was left with no monarch, an increase in pro-Soviet sentiment was imminent. Four Prime Ministers would serve in office from his death to the end of WWII: Bodgan Filov, Petur Gabrovski, Dobri Bozhilov, and Ivan Bagryanov.143 As impoverishment and inflation plagued Bulgaria and the FF’s popularity grew, the Soviet Union capitalized on pro-Soviet sentiment to impose an ultimatum: Break with Germany or suffer Soviet occupation.144 However, if Bagryanov followed Soviet instruction, Bulgaria would suffer German occupation. In attempts to appease relations with the West, Bagryanov reintroduced strict neutrality on August 17th, 1944.145 The Soviet Union did not deem neutrality drastic enough and did not respect Bagryanov’s decision. The public was enraged with his decision as well, leading Bagryanov to resign and allow Konstantin Muraviev, a left-wing agrarian, to assume the Prime Ministry.146 Muraviev decisively broke diplomatic relations with Germany on September 5th, but

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144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., 178.
he was too late. The Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria on September 5th, knowing the popularity of the FF, other leftist groups, and the presence of a sudden and weak temporary government would allow for a swift assumption of power. The Soviets assumed correctly, and an FF and BCP coalition removed the temporary government in a peaceful coup on September 9th.

All of Bulgaria’s previously censored left-wing parties were incorporated into the new FF coalition: Communists, left-wing Agrarians, and left-wing Social-Democrats. Through directing all previously censored, illegal, and underground organizations into a mass party of industrial workers and laborers, the coalition formed approximately 90 district committees within six weeks. The FF began publishing the newspaper Rabotnichesko Delo on September 18th, and it quickly became the widest circulated newspaper in Bulgaria. With the circulation of this new paper, the government expanded the breadth and reach of its influence. Negotiations between Stalin and Churchill at the Tolstoy Conference on October 9th, 1944 agreed to allow for greater communist influence. Churchill’s “percentages” proposal—under which Britain would concede 90% control of Romania to the USSR in return for British oversight over Greece—was extended to Bulgaria. Initially, this was not of concern to many Bulgarians due to Western resentment. Stalin favored the FF’s governance in Bulgaria as an immediate postwar strategy: the party was not overly aggressive, but they did share his goals of a socialist society trumpeted by

147 Ibid., 176.
149 Ibid., 51.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid., 78.
the ideals of the New Man. For Stalin, this was the perfect way to “maintain Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe without falling apart with the Western Allies.”

The BCP and FF were expanding rapidly. By the end of 1944, there were 7,292 FF committees with 26,255 members and 54% of them were Communists. The party’s youth organization grew from 15,000 to 225,000 members between September 9th and the end of 1944. While the other left-wing parties, like the BANU, coexisted within the FF government, the Communists would amplify aggressive methods towards full government control following directives from Moscow. After Traicho Kostov, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the FF, visited Moscow, the party structure and leadership of the FF was amended with Soviet input and direction. Anton Yugov, a BCP leader appointed as the Ministry of the Interior of the FF, played a large role in the consolidation of the Communist regime—most notably through discharging approximately 30,000 local officials and replacing them with state militia under communist direction. By the end of 1945, he had successfully turned over all local administration to a communist orientation.

The appointment of a prominent BCP member as the Ministry of Justice granted the Communist’s jurisdiction regarding who could be tried under the Bulgarian People’s Courts. While the prosecution of war criminals was required by the terms of Bulgaria’s armistice with the Allies, the Communists expanded the definition of “fascist” and “war criminal” to try any individual who did not share their communist ideals. Instead of promoting justice, these courts became a political means to consolidate and achieve a unified Communist state with no

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155 Ibid., 83.
outspoken opposition. By April 1945, “2,730 [individuals] were condemned to death, 1,305 to life imprisonment, 5,119 to terms up to twenty years, and 1,516 were acquitted; the fates of 452 defendants could not be determined.”

In the same year, the Communists convinced the FF to establish a National Guard which brought 28,581 Communist troops into the army, commissioned 718 communists with militaristic or partisan tasks, and enrolled another 334 communist youth members into the military academy. The censorship of dialogue through stifling individuals who did not share communist ideals and securing military control paved the way for Communists to establish a one-party regime.

Vocal opposition from the leaders of the Broad Socialists and BANU regarding Communist aggression led the Communists to deprive left-wing parties of FF union funds, access to the press, and party recognition independent from the FF—mimicking the censorship placed on left-wing parties by the Democratic Alliance the Communists deemed fascist in the 1930s. Deprivation of party liberty and autonomy led Petkov, once an ardent supporter of Bulgarian alignment with the Soviet Union, to address a letter to the Allied Control Commission stating that conditions in Bulgaria did not permit free and fair elections—a requirement under the Yalta Declaration. In response, Britain and the United States claimed they objected to the conditions of the upcoming elections but did not say they would withhold recognition of the results. The narrative of Western neglect plaguing the Bulgarian narrative continued to increase as American Diplomat James Byrnes later affirmed that American diplomacy was using Balkan nations as “bargaining chips, to be traded off for the exclusion of a Soviet voice in the

156 Ibid., 85.
157 Ibid., 86.
158 Ibid.
occupation of Japan.” The perception of the helpless Bulgarian condition was only promulgated during this period as Bulgaria was slowly enslaved by its previous savior and further neglected by the West. This time around, even though nostalgia of the utopian past was present, it could not be expressed politically due to the Communist’s suppressive power.

The Communist Party’s complete takeover of the FF began in the summer of 1947, amplified due to Petkov’s efforts. After a state report linked the BANU to an underground terrorist organization on June 4th, 1947, 23 Agrarian deputies were expelled from their posts on June 9th and Petkov was tried for treason in August. In August, Petkov was sentenced to death, the BANU was outlawed, and all its assets were confiscated. The once ardent proponent of Soviet-Bulgarian cooperation was tortured, murdered with a hammer, and his body hung by the Soviet-backed Communists on September 23rd. The United States merely extended its diplomatic recognition on October 1st, it’s feeble intervention in the Communist suppression of other parties ensured Stalin that he had succeeded in securing a one-party domination of the FF. The Bulgarian narrative was entirely hopeless, the neglect from the international community was undisputable.

The BCP’s one-party dominance dissolved all opposing political parties and demoted the FF to a “socio-political organization for the patriotic unity of the Bulgarian people,” which operated under direct control of the Communists. The FF’s became the “embodiment of the alliance and friendship, unity of purpose and aims, brotherhood and joint work of communists,

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160 Ibid., 97.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
agrarians and non-party people, a brilliant manifestation of the ideological, moral and political unity of the Bulgarian people, who are building a socialist society.'”

Despite the FF’s Communist reorientation, the principles of the New Man still aligned with the peasant tradition and their desires that led to the popularity of left-wing parties in the 1920s and 1930s. This developed a selective nostalgia among the agrarians, clearly torn by the suppression of other leftist parties but ardent to pursue their radicalized nationalism and thankful for the sense of identity and belonging Communist ideals of brotherhood and work provided them.

While there were several Communist leaders following the establishment of a one-party dictatorship, the most prominent Communist leader gained post in 1954: Todor Zhivkov. Zhivkov would serve as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the BCP for 35 years, until his removal from the position and end to the Communist regime in 1989. Despite his lengthy rule, interviews with ordinary Bulgarian citizens who lived during this period exhibit the public disdain towards Zhivkov. The following quote from Robert Castle’s interview with university lecturer Rumiana Petrova—one of many as a part of his dissertation titled “Bulgaria’s Delayed Transition: An Analysis of the Delays in Bulgaria’s Political and Economic Transition from Socialism to Liberal Democracy”—is representative of most Bulgarians’ views: “it was such a beautiful surprise to know that Todor Zhivkov is no longer there. We hated him. All of us. The whole country.”

164 Ibid.
Life Under Communism for the Ordinary Bulgarian

Following the successful establishment of a one-party Communist government, the Zhivkov regime focused on increasing industrial production to reverse Bulgaria's growing backwardness. Unlike Ferdinand, however, the Zhivkov regime placed focus on involving and addressing the proletariat in industrial initiatives to avoid the upheaval of the peasantry experienced in 1899. The regime also initiated projects towards electric power plants, shipyards, chemical work and metallurgical complexes, electrification of railways, new road construction, and new bridges in cities throughout the nation. In addition to establishing some trust towards socialism in Bulgaria, these projects led to a visible improvement in the standard of living experienced during the Balkan Wars, WWI, and WWII. The proletariat was given free medical care, free education, prophylactic health-care facilities, and mountain and seaside vacations in the vacation homes run by trade unions. The professional biography of a Bulgarian miner claims that mines prior to 1944 were miserable and “the whole place was dripping,” After September 9th, 1994 and the introduction of new production technologies in the mines, however, being at the mines “feels like working and singing.” Historians credited communist industrialization plans for making Bulgaria the Eastern European nation who witnessed the most rapid and drastic change from a rural to an urban, industrialized society. Such a rapid industrial shift provided some relief to the Bulgarian narrative, proving both that Bulgaria was

166 Ibid., 35.
168 Ibid.
capable of persevering past the backwardness imposed from the Turkish yoke and that it did not need the neglectful West to do so.

The communist actions that improved the Bulgarian narrative most, perhaps, were due to the facilitation measures of these projects. The introduction of the Brigadier movement, under which young Bulgarians left their lives to build such projects, made a generation of Bulgarian’s feel ownership and pride over their contributions to Bulgaria’s steep development.170 Rather than imposing higher taxes on the peasantry to fund national development as Ferdinand had, the peasantry felt responsible for Bulgaria’s growth. The brigadier movement conveniently propelled the vision of the New Man in society, as the young Brigadiers embodied a brotherhood and unity towards (quite literally) building the communist Bulgaria. While the betterment of conditions within the mining industry and national projects ameliorated Bulgaria’s narrative, Bulgarian peasant farmers had varying experiences with communism due to collectivization.

The collectivization of farming was one of the largest systemic changes imposed by the Zhivkov regime. To achieve a unified, proletariat, and socialist society, the Communist Party created The Labor Cooperative Agricultural Farms (TKZS) in 1948 to establish an equal and hegemonic working class. From 1948 to 1958, peasants were pressured to enter their lands into TKZS cooperative farms through economic coercion and physical violence—despite being promoted as “voluntary” by the BCP.171 Peasants whose lives were centered around tending to their land and providing for their families through their private property were shocked.

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The older generation of peasants was more negatively affected through such policies than young peasants due to the career opportunities the BCP created out of the TKZS. If young peasants were loyal to the party and cooperative in the establishing of TKZS farms, they could be promoted to managerial positions in the agriculture or industrial sectors—an incentive to abide by the new regime’s collectivization measures. Similarly, if peasants did not cooperate with the party, opportunities to advance the corporate ladder or achieve prestigious social standing were nonexistent. Unfortunately, success during the Communist period was “largely unrelated to effort, skill, or honesty on the job” but dependent on party loyalty. While the party promoted a homogenous proletariat, some workers truly were more equal than others depending on their behavior. Even further, different classes of workers were treated with more equity than farmers, considering miners were not subject to the collectivization farmers experienced.

While overall equity was promoted during this period, through successful and harsh measures, the lives of regular Bulgarians were uniform and constrained. Bulgaria, alongside all Soviet Bloc nations, experienced chronic and deep shortages—though they varied in length and product. Shortages were so prominent during this period that the condition inspired the creation of the term “shortage economies” by Janos Kornia, an internationally acclaimed Hungarian economist. The story of Boyan Chinkov, a Bulgarian architect from Plovdiv, aptly illustrates both the shortages and limitations on free speech present during Communism:

There is a large gathering of people in front of a bakery and a fight breaks out. A policeman promptly arrives at the scene and asks the shopkeeper what has happened. The shopkeeper points at Chinkov and says that he bought the days’ worth of fried dough and

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172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., 295.
told him to give it away for free which caused a stampede. The policeman heads towards Chinkov who is standing aside with a smile on his face.

Policeman: “What is this? Some kind of provocation?”

Chinkov: “Nothing of the sort. I just wanted to see what life would be like under communism when everyone will receive according to their needs.”

Allegedly, when Chinkov was sentenced to a jail term for telling jokes, he again responded with a joke telling the judge: “Thank you for sending me to the only place in Bulgaria where there is no line to get in.”

Despite providing Bulgarians with more work opportunities, the communist regime also led to a great number of limitations on the basic needs and personal liberties of the Bulgarian people. From Chinkov’s story, a displeasure with the potential inability to receive bread for one’s family dependent on one’s place in line led to a jail sentencing. As Orwell inferred, despite promoting equality, there were always individuals who were more equal than others during the Communist era. And often, the distinction would be made as irrationally as through one’s place in line.

Like the silencing of many opposition groups from 1944-1947, to achieve consolidation of the regime, individuals suffered reductions in their personal freedoms. Notably, the regime outlawed religious worship and transformed religious holidays to have new socialist meanings. An atheist worldview was promoted mainly through the banning of celebrations of holidays. The holiday ban towards any celebrations requiring Christian service or the use of a church. Baptisms were banned, civil marriage was considered the only valid marital union, and funerals and memorial services were outlawed. St. George’s Day, previously linked to fertility and health for sheep and observed by shepherd families, was transformed to “Shepherd’s Day” and celebrated by all TKZS members. While families did not go to church or attend to Christian

\[174\] Ibid.
\[175\] Ibid., 303.
\[176\] Ibid., 303.
services, many of them reproduced customs and rites they had learned from their parents within confined walls, similarly to how the peasantry sustained Bulgarian tradition during the Ottoman Occupation. The birth of secret practices exhibits natural nostalgia reminiscent of the Christian-Bulgarian experience.

In exchange for better living conditions in comparison to wartime conditions, job security, health care, and pensions, Bulgarians experienced limitations to certain elements of society and consumer indulgence. Many Bulgarians rationalized that that was the price they had to pay for such benefits because they favored free education, health care, and welfare programs. Thus, a culture of Nashism (or “Our People”) among ordinary Bulgarians was born to cope with frustrations with the regime; Families developed a circle of family, friends, and close colleagues in which they would express their discontents. The practice of establishing private vruski (ties) would lead to families, friends, and colleagues executing uslugi (favors) for one another, both economic and political, to overcome some of the hardships and shortages imposed by the regime.  

Similar to the herd mentality developed during the Ottoman Occupation, Bulgarian’s believed it was better to just keep their head down rather than outwardly critique the regime. The risk of party expulsion, internal exile, or imprisonment was not worth the trouble for ordinary Bulgarians. The social benefits the Zhivkov regime extended were unthinkable during the period between the Balkan Wars and WWII due to Bulgaria’s impoverished state—making the exchange of political and economic favors more promising than risking dissent and being faced with political reprisals from the state. The Bulgarian narrative improved during this period; this

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improvement, however, would later induce strong sentiments of the ‘Bulgarian curse’ following a terrible transition to democracy and explain why political nostalgia only intensified.

*Nashism* also arose among Bulgarian intellectuals. Observance of what the BCP was capable of through the brutal execution of Petkov and many others under the People’s Courts, a culture of protest never developed. Attentism, the act of playing a waiting game to keep oneself safe, accompanied Nashism.\(^{178}\) The herd mentality which stalled Bulgarian prospects of earlier liberation during the occupation influenced the high threshold of Bulgarian patience towards the limitation of personal liberties; but, at this point in time, this seemed to be preferred over a growing negative and hopeless narrative.

*Turkish and Pomak Relations During the Communist Period*

With the desire for a unified Bulgarian consciousness underlying the concept of the New Man and a socialist Bulgarian, the stain of the Turkish yoke gained relevance once again. Efforts to create a unified national consciousness were accompanied by USSR demands to create a new unified “historical community – the Soviet people.”\(^{179}\) This historical identity was meant to transcend national, ethnic, and religious identities; naturally, the Turkish names of Pomaks were perceived as harmful towards a unified national consciousness and Soviet people. Name-change campaigns captured the Marxist-Leninist idea of “proletarian internationalism”, which claimed that the unity of the socialist state would only occur through combatting the manifestations of bourgeoisie nationalism.\(^{180}\) Granting name-changing campaigns this political relevance was

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\(^{180}\) Ibid.
artificially nostalgic. Despite the Communist regime’s authoritarian nature not necessitating public approval to institute policies, its framing was meant to redirect discontent towards Turks, not Communists, in Bulgaria and disaggregate tensions towards Communist oppression due to Communist attempts of shirking the yoke. Vigorous renaming campaigns began in villages throughout Bulgaria in 1964. Once 80% of Pomaks had submitted to these campaigns, revolts arose in the village of Ribnovo. Pomaks injured and disarmed police officers, put fezzes and wrapped turbans around the heads of soldiers, hung a Turkish flag from the mayor’s building, cut telephone lines and blew up the bridge connecting the only road into the village.

Despite the uprising in Ribnovo, the BCP fervently deemed name-change campaigns crucial for the development of the national consciousness and unity. Instead of relaxing the forceful nature of these campaigns, the BCP passed a resolution which called for the total, mass name changing of all Pomaks in 1970. Refusing a name-change was considered a traitorous and punishable offense. Protests broke out in the town of Madan and the village of Kornitska went on strike. This response led Sofia authorities to take direct action, quell the revolts, and state that name changes were “voluntary.” As the violent uprisings gained notoriety and led to the relaxing of name-change policies for a decade, the BCP would re-introduce such policies in a radical and, some claim, a self-destructive manner shortly. While the end goal of the BCP was to promote and create an equal society, the Pomak people were not treated through a lens that sees past national, ethnic, and religious distinctions. Despite dissatisfaction with some aspects of

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182 Ibid., 157-158.
183 Ibid., 159.
184 Ibid., 161.
185 Ibid.
Communist suppression, Bulgarian nationalists favored the hawkish approach the Communist dictatorship could take, hoped to reprimand the Ottomans, and remove the Turkish yoke for good. Nationalists perceived this as the first step towards attaining the nostalgic utopia they romanticized, manifested politically through the regime’s aggressive policies.

The Fall of Zhivkov and the End of Communism

Two distinct policy actions of Zhivkov’s would serve as a catalyst for opposition to his rule from both the Communist party elite and ordinary Bulgarians: the policies of Turk “Bulgarification” and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. In 1984, Zhivkov introduced what he termed the “Rebirth Process.” Zhivkov promoted the process as a “voluntary” change of Turkish names to Bulgarian forms. The “voluntary” process, however, was one that prohibited Turks who lacked new Bulgarian-name identity cards the ability to collect salaries and receive salaries. While these campaigns were similar to Pomak name-changing operations, the Rebirth Process came as a surprise to all because the justification of freeing individuals of injustices committed by the Ottoman Empire was not relevant, as these individuals were natively Turkish and had no Bulgarian ancestral connection or history of Christianity. Rather than creating a united Soviet community, the Rebirth Process undermined the Communist system significantly. This name-change process was the first to catch the eye of the West and was condemned by the Helsinki Watch Report as “‘one of Europe’s largest refugee flows since WWII and threatening to annihilate Turkish culture.’” If Turks did not accept Bulgarian heritage willingly, the militia

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and the army was tasked to assist them with Bulgari
cification at the Belene labor camp—
Bulgaria’s largest military operation since WWII. Zhivkov shut
down Turkish newspapers, radio broadcasts, and banned the speaking of
Turkish in public. After peaceful protests resulted in arrests, beatings, impriso
nments, and the deaths of individuals in the villages of Benkovski, Momchilgrad, Haskovo, Gorno Prakho
vo, Mlechino, Razgrad, and Iablovono, Zhivkov ordered all Pomaks and Turks who felt they would be better off in Turkey to leave Bulgaria. This crippled the domestic economy almost instantly, with crops left to rot across the nations countryside due to the exodus. Despite the drastic Turk exodus, party officials publicized that the campaign was successful and “an essential barrier to the unification of the Bulgarian nation was overcome.” Yet in reality, the BCP was grasping for legitimacy, on the national and international stage. The BCPs mishandling of Chernobyl would be the last straw for the regime.

When the Chernobyl nuclear disaster erupted in April of 1986, the explosion of the reaction was so close to Bulgaria that the nation ranked first in terms of effective radiation exposure following the disaster. Radio Free Europe and BBC reported radioactive clouds over Bulgaria but Zhivkov did not advise citizens on how to protect themselves. Instead, he secretly imported anti-radiation drugs for party leaders. After denying the urgency of the situation for over a year, poisonous gas clouds which circulated the city of Rousse sparked the first organized

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190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
protests in Bulgaria in over 40 years of Communist rule. On September 28th, approximately 600 mothers accompanied by their children carried signs saying “Air for Rousse,’ ‘Life for Our Children,’ and ‘Stop Ecological Genocide.” This movement led to the creation of the first civil environmental group in the nation, The Committee for the Environmental Protection of the City of Rousse, and the environmental NGO, Ecoglasnost, in Sofia. For the first time, Communist intellectuals broke with the practice of attentism and joined the Rousse Committee and NGO—signaling outward disapproval of the Zhivkov regime. Upon banning public meetings of Ecoglasnost in Sofia, the ordinary people’s and political elite’s resentment towards Zhivkov intensified. The BCP could sense the growing antipathy towards Zhivkov and knew it was time for him to leave, he was quickly nullifying progress the BCP had made towards having the ordinary citizen view the Communist regime as a net positive.

On November 10th, 1989, Zhivkov resigned through political pressure from Petar Mladenov, Foreign Minister and Zhivkov’s closest associate, and Dobrin Djurov, Minister of Defense. Mladenov took his place, apologized for the abuses of the Zhivkov regime, and suggested open elections. The BCP’s decision to publicly apologize for forced exodus of Bulgarian Turks was instigated by international pressure and the realization that the Zhivkov regime had come to an end—promoting reconciliation seemed like the only way the communists could gain legitimacy in an electoral process on the international scale. Bulgarians stained by the Turkish yoke, however, did not welcome these statements. By the end of the year, the BCP agreed to host roundtable discussions regarding the country’s political structure, gave up political monopoly, promised a multi-party democracy, and renamed itself the Bulgarian Socialist Party

195 Ibid.
196 Ibid., 54.
(BSP). 50 opposition groups formed the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and agreed to send 14 groups to participate in the discussions.\textsuperscript{197} The only thing the groups comprising the UDF had in common was the desire to transition away from communism. Aware of the disconnect and lack of organizational capacity the UDF had, the BSP urged an early election date to maximize their competitive edge.\textsuperscript{198} The consensus reached at the roundtable talks was the creation of a Grand National Assembly (GNA), functioning as a regular parliament and constitutional convention. Ultimately, the Communist preference towards early elections prevailed. As the roundtable talks concluded at the end of January in 1990, parliamentary elections were set to June 10th – 17th, 1990.\textsuperscript{199}

\textbf{Bulgaria’s Democratic Transition}

\textit{Bulgaria’s First Democratic Election}

Bulgaria’s end to Communism was starkly different than that of other nations in the Soviet Bloc. Although Ecoglasnost had emerged as the first public movement against the regime, Bulgarian citizens did not seek to overthrow the Communist regime through protests. The exit from communism pursued by the political elite was due to discontent with Zhivkov, not with communism. Had the elite not been so dissatisfied, the Bulgarian herd mentality could easily have allowed for a lengthier dictatorial rule. Thus, The UDF’s campaign strategy towards the first democratic election was retrospectively bound to fail due to the nature of the exit of communism in Bulgaria. Campaign slogans focused on positioning members of the BSP as murderers and mafia members who had made no changes other than changing the name of their

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
party. Despite receiving $1.3m of campaign finance from the United States, the UDF depleted campaign resources by over concentrating UDF supporters in major cities like Sofia, considering the effective grassroots organizations the BSP had cemented in the rural countryside.

Contrastingly, the BSP successfully structured its campaign towards safeguarding “the economic and social gains of socialism while overseeing a gradual transition to a market economy.” Combined with the UDF’s lack of attention to the countryside, BSP leaders played on the peasantry’s fear of a market economy transition deeply rooted in their distrust of the West. Cognizant that the end of the regime came due to the public and elite’s dissatisfaction with Zhivkov, not Communism directly, the BSP drew on the distinctions between the new party and the fallen Communist leader Zhivkov, mainly the abuses of the Turkish people. The new BSP wanted to divorce itself from the image of maltreatment, and chose reconciliation over ultranationalism post-1989 through inviting Turks back to Bulgaria alongside the readoption of their old names and reclams to their property. While such policies led to a drop of party membership from nationalist communists whose priority was the shirking of the yoke, the drop in membership was far lower than that of other Soviet Bloc nations due to the protection of agrarian workers: membership declined to 73% in 1990 but remained steady thereafter.

In short, the BSP leaders effectively read the room while the UDF appeared seemingly tone deaf. The BSP won 211 seats in the 1990 election, with the UDF securing 144 seats.

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201 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
Despite being declared a free and fair election by Western observers, these results increased Western disdain towards Bulgaria. Not only was Bulgaria “semi-European” at best, but it was now also a nation uncommitted to a democratic transition. Bulgaria’s Western aspirations grew weaker and the Bulgarian narrative only intensified its perception of Bulgaria as the pariah of the EU and the Africa of Europe.205

With an organized campaign, strong organizational capabilities, and more positive messages geared towards Bulgarian progress—as opposed to UDF campaign slogans targeting the ethos of BSP politicians—the BSP appealed to more Bulgarians. The UDF’s grave misinterpretation that Bulgarians of all backgrounds held a similar disdain towards the Communists led to its partisan loss. Most importantly, however, a lack of consensus for Bulgaria’s democratic future due to the heterogeneity within the UDF resulted in the inability to effectively exhibit what the alternative to Communism would look like to the Bulgarian people. The UDF struggled due to the subjectivity on which they based their political nostalgia. The UDF could not create a unified version of Bulgaria because it amalgamated Bulgarian subgroups nostalgic towards varying aspects of Bulgarian history. With the already present skepticism towards democracy, the UDF did not provide a better alternative for Bulgarians who benefitted from the extended social benefits during Zhivkov’s regime.

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Governance Following Bulgaria’s First Democratic Election

Despite the BSP’s win in the first democratic election, the next 7 years were filled with tumultuous political transitions—with no Prime Minister elect serving a full term. Following the first election, video surveillance of the new BSP President Mladenov claiming that it would be “better if the tanks were to come” and end public demonstrations over Chernobyl in December 1989 led to his resignation. On August 1st, 1990, the GNA reassembled and made its largest compromise yet: appointing Zhelyu Zhelev of the UDF as President and Andrei Lukanov of the BSP as Prime Minister. The UDF, however, was still unable to grasp that many Bulgarian’s did not share the same levels of abhorrence as the UDF politicians did towards the Communists. Zhelev continued to reject coalition with the BSP, despite the BSP’s willingness, and made it a goal to “enter the National Assembly as an opposition that will confront the Communist Party with its crimes, and insist it take responsibility for everything it has done under its rule.” The UDF’s strategy geared towards urban areas shines through in Zhelev’s statements, due to the constant disregard of the peasantry sentiments which propelled left-wing parties.

The back-and-forth transitions of power between the UDF, BSP, and interim caretaker regimes highlights the greatest issue following the dissolution of Bulgaria’s communist regime: social cohesion. Unlike the FF’s goal of the dispersion of the New Man, new democratic parties lacked a unifying principle. This made it easy for average Bulgarians to invest less into their platforms, as the motivation to entrench oneself in politics was not clearly outlined. The lack of

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207 Ibid.

208 Ibid., 63.
social consensus during Bulgaria’s transition had many negative effects: the UDF’s downfall, corruption through the culture of Nashism and a lack of competitive ethos, and the 1996-1997 economic crisis. These events would further aggrieve the Bulgarian narrative and reinvigorate the practice of oplakvane, ultimately coalescing into the ‘Bulgarian Curse’ and heightening political nostalgia to a peak in the present day.

*The Fall of the UDF*

The UDF’s staunch opposition to anything associated with Communism led the organization to focus on establishing a democracy like that of the United States, despite public opinion polls predictably lacking commitment to such drastic changes. Not much had changed since the UDF’s inception, Zhelev lacked the political authority to create cohesion among the UDF’s heterogeneous groups, and, therefore, the party still failed to provide a clear enough vision of the future to the public.\(^{209}\) Zhelev’s efforts to reprimand the Communist party led to his dismissal towards something far more important: Bulgaria’s worsening economic conditions.

In the summer of 1990, national debt soared, economic conditions worsened, and Bulgarians protested Zhelev’s dissatisfactory governing. A caretaker regime under Dimitar Popov, a non-party Bulgarian judge, was appointed and Popov called for a 200-day social pact – under which trade unions agreed to end protests and allowed economic reform to begin. At the end of the social pact, not much had changed. In 1991, 62% of Bulgarians favored a social-democratic system like Sweden, while only 12.3% indicated an interest in a U.S. style democracy.\(^{210}\) Despite being granted one more chance to portray a united party front once returning to power in 1991, the UDF government made unity impossible due to their ardent

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\(^{209}\) Ibid.

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 78.
policies seeking retribution against former Communists. The UDF government “confiscated the property of the Communist party and related organizations such as the Communist Youth Organization and the FF; banned top Communists from serving on governing bodies of banks and other financial institutions; restricted pension payments for paid Communist party activists; introduced the ‘decommunization of Science and Education’; and mandated the restitution of all properties seized by the socialist regime since 1944.”\(^{211}\) The UDF’s disregard for the needs of the Bulgarian people through economic reform and fanatic anti-Communist policies cost the party its legitimacy. The UDF was not as in tune as it ought to have been towards the subjective nostalgia of its followers. The UDF lost members at an increasing rate, none of its original founders were present at the party’s fifth-year anniversary, and 39 UDF deputies refused to sign their new constitution in 1991.\(^{212}\) Not only was the UDF viewed as a party divorced from reality, but its neglect of Bulgaria’s worsening condition reinstituted the Bulgarian psyche’s perception of its inescapable backwardness.

The drop in UDF popularity amongst Bulgarians made them reliant on tacit support of from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), representative of Pomaks and ethnic Turks, still scarred by the BCPs actions through renaming campaigns.\(^{213}\) The UDF’s focus on retaliatory policies, however, displeased many MRF members as they felt their calls for land restitution were not adequately addressed, responded to, and met. This led the MRF to reconsider the BSP’s new commitment to reconciliation, and, ultimately, vote against the UDF in 1992—pushing the UDF out of power.\(^{214}\) By 1992, the UDF had lost most of its outward support from

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\(^{211}\) Ibid., 81.  
\(^{212}\) Ibid., 154.  
\(^{213}\) Ibid., 85.  
\(^{214}\) Ibid., 85.
ethnic Bulgarians and the tacit support of ethnic Turks and Pomaks which acted as it’s lifeline as a result of its aggressive retaliatory dialogue.

Corruption Exacerbated through Nashism and a Lack of Competitive Ethos

The culture of Nashism was reestablished as the democratic governance proved it could not provide for the Bulgarian people and private social ties seemed more reliable. Furthermore, frequent government turnover led Bulgarian politicians to prioritize their personal gain as opposed to the economic improvement of the nation. Instead of employment and political appointment decisions made based on merit and qualifications, employment depended on whether “the individuals in question were ‘ours’.”

Politicians assumed the tumultuous government transitions would continue and prioritized increasing their personal gain rather than attending to the needs of the ordinary Bulgarian people. The Bulgarian narrative grew dismal once again. Before, it was fraught with betrayal from the West, then it’s Balkan neighbors, and now, its own people.

Exhibited mainly through the UDF’s rule, Nashism was one of the most influential factors for the rise in some ordinary Bulgarian’s reminiscence of Communist times. When a new government was selected, 62 positions were also up for appointment as a new party took over. Nashism became obvious to the ordinary Bulgarian, as politicians would appoint colleagues unqualified for certain government position to grant each other favors with every turnover. The dismissal of the standard of living for the ordinary citizen resonated with the yearning for mass civilian participation and social restructuring of society present in the Bulgarian National Liberation Movement which led to the mass adoption of Marxism in the late 19th century.

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215 Ibid., 94.
216 Ibid.
A lack of social cohesion towards a democratic future forged a disinterest in arduous work ethics and corruption-free modes of professional standards—two principles necessary for a young democratic nation to thrive. The lack of a competitive ethos correlated to the job security present during the Communist period, as promotions and success did not depend on internal motivation but adherence to Communist orders. Independent thinking and personal initiative resulted in negative attention from superiors and the State Security. Furthermore, Nashism during the democratic transition made it easy for the proletariat to extend and receive favors from one’s private social circle than develop a skill set for a role. The reliance on one’s intimate circle during and after the Communist era for increased personal gain, made personal initiative seem unnecessary. This, therefore, led to the rise of political nostalgia within varying subgroups outside of the elite. Even though, Nashism still benefitted some members more than others during the Communist period, the security blanket of societal welfare was present. Following the transition, a lack of societal welfare and an increase in political favors made Bulgarians reminiscent of the Communist period.

*The Economic Crisis of 1996-1997 to Today*

The preoccupation with personal gain, Communist reprimand, and dismissal of growing economic issues soon caved in. Despite the creation of the Privatization Agency in 1992 to implement the first law on the privatization of state-owned assets, a lack of government dedication led to feeble progress. Between 1992 and 1997, privatization laws were amended and experienced deletions and additions 170 times, due to the turnover of five governments. This led the agency to successfully carry out only 4 privatization deals. By 1996, only 6% of state

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217 Ibid., 97.
218 Ibid., 139.
enterprises were privatized and 27.8% of industrial output came from the private sector. In short, poor prioritization of various regimes made privatization in Bulgaria a dire failure and the largest contribution to the economic crisis of 1996-1997—solidifying that Bulgaria’s democratic transition attempts was a complete disaster. Bulgaria indeed was doomed. Though small bursts of hope had occurred, the hurt on the people following such bursts was exacerbated. Between 1996 to 1997, “GDP fell by 10% in 1996 and 6% in 1997, inflation hit 123% in 1996 and 1082% in 1997, unemployment reached 13.7% in 1997, and the value of the Bulgarian currency depreciated sharply against the dollar.” While Zhivkov might have been incredibly unpopular towards the end of his rule, no one preferred the disastrous economic conditions of 1997 to the freedoms they gave up for significant improvements in their quality of life during the Communist era. The Bulgarian people truly seemed cursed by backwardness.

In 1997, the Gini index of inequality increased by four points and the levels of poverty were six times higher than 1995 levels. These were the worst conditions of inequality and poverty Bulgaria ever experienced. Following 1997, poverty and inequality rates decreased substantially. After hitting rock bottom in 1997, Bulgaria would also recover in an economic sense. The path to recovery is not greatly significant, however, because Bulgarian sentiments towards a prosperous democratic future were irreversibly spoiled. People’s perceptions of the state only worsened because of the irreparable damage done to the self-critical Bulgarian psyche through the mishandled transition, as Chapter Four will elucidate.

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219 Ibid., 71.
220 Ibid., 73.
The disastrous transition to a democracy developed an “imagined poor majority” and the “Us vs Them” mentality which fueled oplakovane during the Ottoman Occupation was revived. Individuals who felt poor, cheated, voiceless and victimized by the elites constituted the “Us” majority.\(^{222}\) The hindrance of social benefits ordinary citizens received during the Communist era and the neglect felt from a mishandled and self-centric democratic transition led regular people to see themselves as Bulgaria’s losers. The lack of a unified vision for a Bulgarian future and treacherous economic conditions did not offer Bulgarians hope or opportunities to prosper. Unlike the Brigadier movement, the transition period left ordinary citizens watch the further economic collapse of the nation from the sidelines. The rich and corrupt elites who received and distributed favors to their social circles and grasped control of the small percentage of privatized municipal properties for their own profit constituted the “Them.”\(^{223}\)

Due to the small number of corrupt elites that made up the “Them” minority, regular Bulgarians envisioned themselves as the poor losers, the “imagined poor majority.”\(^{224}\) Frequent Bulgarian critiques of corruption, however, masked a more expansive critique of Bulgaria’s transition towards a more hierarchical society through capitalism. Instead of promoting merit, hard work, and equality, the corruption critiques further deterred the creation of a political agenda to combat the issue—mainly because discussing corruption was a form of oplakovane that further cemented the belief that the nation was “a hopeless morass with no way out.”\(^{225}\) If the transition to democracy was seen as a beneficial move for many nations that solved the lack of

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 30.
\(^{223}\) Ibid.
\(^{224}\) Ibid., 34.
\(^{225}\) Ibid., 145.
freedoms individuals experienced under a Communist regime but Bulgaria could not seem to implement it successfully, what hope was left? For many, there was none.
Chapter 4: Where Do We Go From Here...if Anywhere?

After 15 years of national betrayals, frauds and criminal plundering, after the arrogant demonstrative policy of genocide towards the Bulgarian people carried out by several parliaments and governments under the dictation of foreign powers, at last the hour of the Bulgarian Renaissance has come. . . .

—Volen Siderov, 2005 Addressing the Opening of the Parliament

The young and few zealots of the nation, however, made a final push to combat the hopelessness many Bulgarians felt in the winter of 1996-97, as a result of the economic crisis. Following the bank’s collapse, hyperinflation, and a decrease in the overall standard of living, Bulgarian youth spearheaded daily protests in downtown Sofia for six weeks. Their incentive? The corruption and imitation behind the government’s ‘progressive’ actions. The protestors were fed up with Bulgaria’s “imitation democracy, an imitation market economy—the companies which emerged came from the party and the secret services—and an imitation Western-oriented foreign policy, saying the government was for Euroatlanticism while playing games with Moscow.” These protests led Bulgaria to pivot and reorient its foreign policy around two objectives, no matter the consequences: membership in the European Union and NATO.

Though the nation’s first attempt to reorient with the West following the fall of the Communist regime hurt the everyday Bulgarian, the protest catalyzed what would be considered Bulgaria’s first real transition to competitive markets. The election of the UDF on May 21st, 1997—who would be in power until July 24th, 2001—would be the first post-Communist Bulgarian government to serve a full four-year term. Throughout its term, the UDF put Bulgaria on an irrevocable path to EU membership and Western identity by: placing the armed forces under

227 Ibid.
228 Ibid., 58.
229 Ibid., 55.
230 Ibid.
civilian control, securing more than half of its trade with the EU, welcoming Western investors, publicly apologizing to Ankara for the past decade, and promising to pay the tensions of Turks forced to leave the nation.\(^{231}\) Though the UDF seemed to have learned that solely retaliatory policy was not effective, Bulgarian protests inspired by the Turkish yoke had to be quelled with the creation of the Committee on National Reconciliation.\(^{232}\) Despite several nationalist protests, the period following the UDFs election would be regarded as Bulgaria’s longest growth period since the 1930s and the nation sported the fastest catch-up rate of any nation in Europe.\(^{233}\) Why then, when a U.S. Pew Research Center study asked 38,000 interviewees from 44 countries, did only 8% of Bulgarians say they were “content with their lot,”\(^{234}\) the lowest of any country in continental Europe and the equivalent to the rate in Tanzania, Africa’s most discontented nation?

**The Bulgarian People**

The answer is, plainly, that the national narrative’s distraught nature had become so entrenched within the Bulgarian people, and thus nostalgia inevitably clouded prosperity. While nationalists were nostalgic of a homogenous Bulgaria pursued through ethnic cleansing policies, agrarians were nostalgic of the sense of their self-importance and belonging in the economy that had been taken away from them through the entrance of Western market players, and ordinary citizens were nostalgic of hindered societal benefits as a result of the drastic nature of the policies instituted to westernize Bulgaria rapidly. In accordance with the objective criteria of social status, income and consumption, around 20% of Bulgarians have benefit from the transition to a market economy, yet less than 6% of the Bulgarian population are capable of

\(^{231}\) Ibid.
\(^{232}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{234}\) Ibid.
acknowledging this improvement.\textsuperscript{235} Ivan Krastev, Director of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, claims that this negative perception stems from the belief that it is not impossible to succeed in the nation through honest means\textsuperscript{236}—the realization that led to the proliferation of the Bulgarian curse. In their novel \textit{Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe: A World of Difference}, Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser, renowned Harvard economists, conclude that such unabating beliefs of poverty, [bad] luck, and a [lack of] mobility, despite their accuracy, are correlated with each nation’s political behavior.\textsuperscript{237} Alesina and Glaeser’s analysis explains how the perpetual corruption that followed Bulgaria’s transition can be credited not only with aggravating the tones of negativity within the Bulgarian narrative, but also with the decrease in voter turnout and trust in political institutions that this chapter will elicit. Most importantly, therefore, all Bulgarians were nostalgic of the ability to entrust in their own people. For Bulgarians, “the illusion that we will one day get better died.”\textsuperscript{238} Even though the nation had seen its longest growth period following 1997, the pervasive narrative that this growth was not facilitated through merit and at the expense of the imagined poor majority had become so salient that the nation’s growth was dismissed and rarely even discussed in national media. “To put this in a larger perspective, while the standard of living in Bulgaria is close to that of Romania, Latvia, and Lithuania, the public levels of dissatisfaction place it next to Congo, Haiti, and Sierra Leone.”\textsuperscript{239} To quantity the effect of this permeating narrative, Boriana Nikolova, at the time a Graduate Student at the University of Chicago, studied how many times the word ‘poorest’ was used to compare Bulgaria to its European counterparts from 1990-2002 in her dissertation \textit{Poor, Poorer, Bulgarian: Making Sense of Poverty and Inequality after the End of Communism.” ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 2015. http://search.proquest.com/wpsa/docview/1722272281/abstract/DD95181CE5BF465CPQ/1.}

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{237} Nikolova, Boriana N. “Poor, Poorer, Bulgarian: Making Sense of Poverty and Inequality after the End of Communism.” ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 2015.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 57.
Nikolova found that, at a time during which Bulgaria was the fastest growing country in Eastern Europe, the word was used to compare Bulgaria to the EU or other European nations in 91% of articles in *Chasa, Demokratzia, Trud*, and *Duma*—the most commonly consumed newspapers in the nation. Despite the progress made, the dominant narrative of backwardness persisted as a result of the Bulgarians’ perceived unjust roots of their own growth.

While natural political nostalgia is evident through the disheartenment of the imagined poor majority in the aforementioned public opinion polls and newspaper data, political parties would exacerbate this dissatisfaction through the use of artificial nostalgia. As the imagined poor majority, nationalists, and agrarians witnessed development while feeling so far removed from them, the romanticization of Bulgarian’s past greatness and indulgence in the prior prosperity of the homogenous Christian Bulgarian population proliferated; “by continually returning to historical elements that had sacred resonance…political actors found the examples….upon which to model their societies.” Essentially, political actors strategically utilized popular discourse and campaigns which drew on natural nostalgia to further aggravate societal discontent, and, therefore, amass fervor for political parties of a populist nature. Populism represents, therefore, the manifestation of artificial political nostalgia.

### The Parallels of Artificial Nostalgia and Populism

Political parties capitalizing on the public’s natural nostalgia and the bleak national narrative encompass artificial nostalgia, as they aim to use nostalgia to accrue political capital or

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240 Ibid., 58.
gain popular support. However, such parties need a greater catalyst to breed public discontent with the present day to uphold the widespread adoption of their platform. The majority of the Bulgarian population further perpetuated the negative narrative through natural nostalgia, as shown through opinion polls and perceptions of their condition. Bulgaria’s foreign policy, however, did not drastically alter from 2001-2005 following the UDF’s commitment to pursue NATO and EU membership. At this time, no political parties had adopted campaigns solely based on the faults of the present day, the people felt this way on their own. Even though politicians knew the domestic impact such severe commitments to Westernization would result in an increase in inequality,\textsuperscript{242} they deemed them necessary to hinder stagnation on the international stage. Despite advancement, the Bulgarian people’s abhorrence of the UDF and BSP, the nation’s two largest and most powerful parties, only deepened. As predicted through the ubiquity of Nashism during both the Communist period and the early transition, only the Bulgarian elite reaped the rewards of the realizations of Westernization. In 2004, the efforts of the UDF and BSP had successfully led Bulgaria to achieve the thirty-one goals it had agreed upon with Brussels in order to become a formal candidate for EU membership.\textsuperscript{243} The subjective nature of political nostalgia, however, left many unsettled with this development. Varying sentiments among nationalists that desired a Bulgarian-centric domestic and foreign policy, agrarians who yearned for an egalitarian society that did not place them at the wayside for entry of foreign corporations, and everyday citizens infuriated with prosperity centered on demerit political favor, allowed the dangers of political nostalgia to manifest themselves through the rise of populist parties. As I will demonstrate, populist campaigns are intrinsically reliant on artificial


\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 57.
political nostalgia to flourish. Notably, I will explore The National Movement of Simeon the Second (NMSS) in 2001, ATAKA in 2005, and There is Such a People (ITN) in 2020-21. Prior to providing case studies of the success of these parties’ reliance on the amalgamation of political nostalgia and the negative national narrative, let us interweave Paul Taggart’s account populism from *Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe* into the discussion, as the inception, popularity, and ultimate fate of NMSS, ATAKA, and ITN fall in line with his analysis and display the artificial nostalgic nature of their platforms.

*Taggart’s Populism and it’s Nostalgic Roots*

In his widely acknowledged work, Taggart argues that developments in Europe have made the region a ripe breeding ground for populist parties. I will extend this claim by asserting that, in Bulgaria, political nostalgia created the breeding ground for populist parties, who exclusively campaign in an artificial nostalgic manner, deepening discontent with the present. Taggart credits sentiments of Euroscepticism—or, the criticism of the European Union and European integration—centered on anti-elitist views seeking greater representation and less cultural integration as proponents crucial to the flourishing of populist parties. Interestingly enough, the varying forms of natural political nostalgia among the Bulgarian people exhibit all these sentiments, as seen through the imagined poor majority attestation of the elite, Bulgarian nationalists sentiments towards Turks and Pomaks, and agrarian perceptions of Eurocentric capitalists. Taggart attributes four themes that populist parties share that grant them the power to attract these individuals and manifest a subjective model homeland—or ‘heartland’ as Taggart

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244 Taggart is a professor of comparative politics at the University of Sussex and scholar of populism and Euroscepticism

245 Taggart, Paul. “Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe.” Journal of Political Ideologies 9, no. 3 (October 1, 2004): 270. [https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263528](https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263528).
names it—through the use of artificial political nostalgia to attract already nostalgic and fervent citizens. The four themes are as follows: hostility towards representative politics, identification with an idealized heartland, deficiency of core values, and emergence as a reaction to an extreme crisis. These themes, in the Bulgarian context, all accentuate dissatisfactions with the present. The rise of populist parties, therefore, evinces the threat to freedom and of irreversible stagnation the pursuit of a utopian, prescriptive, and subjective society through political nostalgia Chapter One warned of. Furthermore, the adoption of artificial nostalgia makes political nostalgia regenerative, as populist parties draw on already present nostalgia, deepen discontent, and ultimately, promote more widespread nostalgia as societal discontent becomes a more present theme in public discourse.

I will articulate a brief overview of Taggert’s themes for the purpose of connecting each respective parties’ platform to its populist nature, and, further, demonstrating how the presence of political nostalgia underlies each of these themes. Populist parties are averse to representative party platforms centered on securing rights for individuals of minority groups and seeking redress for injustices. Instead, populist parties gain traction through extreme charismatic leadership which appeals to certain groups or beliefs present in the nation. In short, populist parties do not seek an equitable government, but one that is simply ‘better’ for their members. The subjective nature of nostalgia, therefore, is critical for this criteria. If Bulgaria’s political nostalgia reminisced on the same historical moments, a platform supporting a better society for a segment of the population would not stand.

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246 Ibid., 273-75.
247 Ibid., 273.
248 Ibid.
Taggart’s second premise relies on the various subjective ideal realities that nostalgia breeds: populists represent a ‘heartland’ that is a ‘past-derived vision projected onto the present’ that relies on feeling, not reason.\footnote{Ibid., 274.} This premise highlights the danger of utilizing political nostalgia as a means to achieve an ideal society, because distinct political nostalgias develop equally distinct, and often competing, utopias, rendering their execution unfeasible. This premise even mirrors Berdahl’s claim that ostalgie posits a ‘once was’ relation to a ‘now.’ Appealing to the retrospective and perspective nature of political nostalgia, this condition only advances the creation of competing ideal societies through populist politics—as individuals with differing experiences are prospective and retrospective in divergent manners.

Compounding with this principle is the idea that populism lacks core values.\footnote{Ibid.} Populists can be revolutionary, reactionary, left-wing, right-wing, authoritarian, or libertarian; they do, however, have one commonality: populists react against current standards, they do not act for espoused values. Populists, therefore, show a dissatisfaction with the present as a driving force within their platform—the precondition for any form of political nostalgia.

Ultimately, populists not only react, but they react in a crisis, utilizing artificial political nostalgia as a tool to inject urgency and importance into their platform.\footnote{Ibid., 275.} This concluding theme exhibits the danger of political nostalgia in stagnating society and anchors Bulgarian populism on artificial nostalgia: the urgency of populist platforms further incepts dissatisfaction and provides individuals hope that the subjective utopian society they have conjured has the potential to awaken, rendering populists more fanatic than the typical political party member. Taggart
concludes, however, by arguing that while these populist parties gain traction quickly, the foundation of their origin makes it difficult for populists to sustain momentum, ensuring their inevitable dwindling. As I will explore, such is the case with the NMSS and ATAKA. Whether this will occur with the ITN is currently unknown, though clearly prescriptible. The rise and fall of populist parties, however, makes nostalgia perpetual, as its successes makes individuals believe their utopia is desirable but their fall makes individuals more dissatisfied with the present.

National Movement of Simeon the Second (NMSS)

Despite the effects of the UDF’s Eurocentric policies which sparked Bulgaria’s longest growth period in 70 years, the Bulgarian population’s dissatisfaction with the elite’s exclusive procurement of the benefits from Western investors propelled the NMSS—and notably, it’s leader Simeon Saxecoburgotski—to power. Saxecoburgotski was the grandson of Tsar Ferdinand and son of Boris III—he served as the last Tsar of Bulgaria from 1943-1946, though he was never crowned as he was only six years old in 1943, prior to the entire family’s exile by the Soviet army in 1946. Saxecoburgotski was aware of the frustration with the corrupt practices rooted in Nashism that fueled public anger towards the UDF and the BSP, and upon his return to Bulgaria in 2001, he declared his intention to follow in his family’s footsteps and run for office. As a result, Saxecoburgotski organized the NMSS in April of 2001, two months prior to the upcoming elections. Saxecoburgotski appealed to the Bulgarians nostalgic of the greatness the nation reached under royal leadership during the Bulgarian empires and the politicians marred by

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253 Ibid., 270.
255 Ibid.
256 Ibid.
the corruption present in post-communist politics as he was so far removed from the transition. Saxecoburgotski quite literally personified political nostalgia, his entire campaign grounded on a glorified past his last name represented. The root of Saxecoburgotski’s name and the importance it holds speaks volumes to the presence of political nostalgia in Bulgaria. Primarily, the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha holds significance to Bulgaria’s history with royal rule under Tsar Ferdinand and Boris III. Despite contentious opinions of Ferdinand, the nationalist policies he pursued and his commitment to restoring lost Bulgarian lands in the Balkan Wars made nationalist Bulgarians nostalgic of such Bulgarian-centric domestic and foreign policy. Boris III’s commitment to neutrality and protecting the Bulgarian people during WWI and WWII, on the other hand, made Bulgarian’s reminiscent of a leader who they felt had their best interest at heart. The most important aspect of political nostalgia Saxecoburgotski drew on, however, was that Bulgarians felt a presently unattainable pride, trust, and prosperity when reflecting on Bulgarian Tsardom as a result of the First and Second Bulgarian Empire. Saxecoburgotski was not merely a politician with a royal lineage, his lineage was his politics. Saxecoburgotski was not a skilled politician, but simply the real-life incarnation of a hope in a glorified past.

Saxecoburgotski, aware of the power his name holds, artificially disseminated public discontent to accrue political capital. The NMSS’s name itself reflected the use of artificial nostalgia. Including Saxecoburgotski’s name in the party title capitalized on Bulgarian romanticization of prosperity during the First and Second Bulgarian Empires, dissatisfaction of the present, and hope that, because Saxecoburgotski was a tsar, he could be their savior. Prior to the election, Saxecoburgotski notably attended Easter celebrations at which he “publicly recited the Orthodox Creed and subsequently attended religious ceremonies at the time of the electoral
campaign advocating his political ambitions.”257 Such actions strategically glorified the Christian-Bulgarians who retreated to the hills during the Ottoman Empire to preserve the nation, artificially growing discontent that such a strong and homogenous population was no longer present. The NMSS appealed to Bulgarians subjectively nostalgic of the ethno-homogenous and ethno-cultural Bulgarian Empire, dissatisfied both with the present corruption and the lack of freedom during Communist times, notably the outlawing of religious worship. Their subjective nostalgia would differ from Bulgarians nostalgic of leftist policies, and the NMSS embraced their selective utopian ideals. Furthermore, the NMSS had a short, yet powerful campaign slogan: “Trust me.”258 Even their campaign slogan artificially bred nostalgia through discontent. The NMSS imposed the belief that the current government should not be trusted, validating already-present skepticism of corruption in public opinion polls. As the NMSS contrived heightened dissatisfaction towards the present political environment, the NMSS also gave life to the nostalgic belief that there must have been a society better than the current. In her article “Left Wing, Right Wing, Everything: Xenophobia, Neo-totalitarianism, and Populist Politics in Bulgaria,” Kristen Ghodsee articulates Saxecoburgotski’s emulation of Taggart’s populism which I will fill in with my concept of political nostalgia. Ghodsee claims that “According to Paul Taggart’s definition, populist movements capitalize on popular frustration at the corruption and self-interestedness of those who dominate representative politics. Simeon Saxecoburgotski (Simeon II) Populists also appeal to the idea of a fixed national identity that unites the populace that the political elite should serve.”259 However, had political nostalgia of Tsardom and ethnic

homogeneity not been readily available for further manipulation, the NMSS would have gained no traction. The NMSS’s populist nature would be nothing without political nostalgia and the artificial nostalgia it espoused.

The NMSS relied on a charismatic leader, constructed a heartland for the Bulgarians already nostalgic of a homogenous Christian utopia, lacked core values, and reacted to the crisis of distrust within the nation. As a result, the NMSS appealed to nostalgic nationalists reminiscent of a glorified past and nostalgic citizens frustrated with the present, thus granting the party an outlet under which to further propagate discontent through artificial political nostalgia in their campaign. Unsurprisingly The NMSS was incredibly successful. Despite mobilizing only two months prior to the 2001 elections, the party took 120 seats, 42.74% of the national vote, in the parliamentary elections, placing both main political parties, the UDF and BSP, on the opposition through creating a coalition government with the MRF.\textsuperscript{260} Despite initial hope in the NMSS’s capabilities, the Bulgarian curse could not be escaped.

Although preaching honesty, the NMSS succumbed to the permeating culture of Nashism. As aforementioned, towards the end of the NMSS’s reign, Saxecoburgotski successfully led Bulgaria to close all thirty-one conditions it had agreed upon with Brussels to qualify the nation for EU membership.\textsuperscript{261} Yet, this perceived success did not please the Bulgarian people. Even though the NMSS continued Bulgaria’s growth period initiated by the UDF, Saxecoburgotski restituted former lands to himself, allowed cabinet members to bleed the state

\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 26–39.
coffer through privatization schemes, and manipulated foreign debt. The Bulgarian public’s frustration with the corrupt nature of NMSS’s was justified, though historical accounts of party negligence towards commitments of sincerity prove this foreseeable. The 2005 parliamentary elections, therefore, would see the rise of ATAKA as a response to the snowballing corruption crisis while recording decreased voter turnout as hopelessness further eroded the Bulgarian national narrative.

**ATAKA**

Bulgarian populist parties may follow a similar theme, as ATAKA also materialized just two months prior to the 2005 elections. The name of the party itself enshrines the use of artificial nostalgia to heighten discontent and substantiate a populist platform, as it is the Bulgarian word for ‘Attack’ and stands for “ATAKA for” and “ATAKA against.” ATAKA’s title capitalizes on the frustrations and nostalgic desires of varying social groups within Bulgaria; similar to the NMSS, it bridges nationalists, with displeased members of the imagined poor majority, but also attracts workers resentful of Western corporate influence. The party ‘is for’ “pulling Bulgarian forces out of Iraq, revising corrupt privatization deals, and making sure that the Bulgarian economy served the interests of the Bulgarian people; [While the party is] ‘against’ anti-Bulgarianness in the government, foreign military bases in Bulgaria, the selling of land to foreigners, and ethnic parties and separatist organizations. Despite the presence of the Turkish yoke in the Bulgarian narrative, the party’s name furthers and validates anger based on said

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263 Ibid., 26.
264 Ibid., 30.
265 Ibid.
yoke. To act on its promises, on Independence Day prior to the 2005 elections, the party held political rallies that petitioned to silence calls for prayer from mosques across Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{266} The strength of these rallies intensified anti-Turk sentiment, artificially breeding more discontent with growing acceptance of Turkish relevance through the NMSS’s prior coalition government with the MRF. From the outset, ATAKA emerges as an alt-right nationalist party harnessing ethnic and religious intolerance alongside anti-corruption to build its following. Had nationalists not been nostalgic of past renaming campaigns, had agrarians not felt nostalgia of their sense of belonging during Communist times and the past respect of the Bulgarian peasantry, and had ordinary Bulgarians not been nostalgic of the prosperity Bulgaria during the Second Empire, the populist principles of hostility towards representative politics, a heartland for a specific identity, and inception as a response to crisis would not have garnered attention in Bulgaria. Ghodsee notes that a ATAKA is a \textit{true} populist party because it is capable of promoting ideas that “originate on opposite ends of the political spectrum,”\textsuperscript{267} through intertwining far-right nationalism with a far-left political agenda. ATAKA can do this, however, because it’s far-left and far-right platform appeals to the plethora of subjective utopias developed through political nostalgia. Once again, while ATAKA manifests artificial nostalgia, it would not have experienced as steep a rise in popularity without reliance on already-present political nostalgia.

ATAKA’s leader—Volen Siderov—widespread critiques of the Eurocentric nature of the UDF, among other parties, exhibit artificial nostalgia as he furthers discontent of Westernization policies that isolate workers, notably farmers, who tied their sense of identity to the importance of their work during the communist period. Siderov’s critiques furthered this discontent and

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 27-28.
nostalgia through his validation of Westernization’s injustices. Through authoring five novels that intertwine Bulgarian nationalism with left-leaning policies, namely Bulgarophobia and Boomerang of Evil, Siderov also gained credibility as a leader with committed and distinct views. ATAKA’s notable leftist tendencies include promoting legislation for the re-examination of privatization and re-nationalization of state-owned companies owned by foreign investors, critiquing alignment with the World Bank and the IMF, disagreeing with policies that cut state funding for healthcare, education, and promulgating pension plans to service foreign debt.  

As aforementioned, a common agrarian critique post-1989 was that the transition to privatization and capitalization left the Bulgarian farmers to the wayside, with no resources to acclimate, while welcoming foreign companies to displace them. While agrarians formed a socialist political nostalgia that drew them into ATAKA’s platform, far-right nationalists reminiscent of Bulgarian greatness imagined an alternate utopian reality. ATAKA’s platform artificially escalated both of these dissatisfactions. ATAKA is uniquely powerful, therefore, because it represents a right-wing nationalist party while “promoting a Russian version of left leaning, nationalist neo-authoritarianism justified by the people’s inability to defend themselves against corrupt political elites and oligarchs.”

ATAKA artificially generated a new constituency previously ignored by incumbent parties. This dichotomy, however, fulfills the remaining untouched theme of populism—a lack of core values—as the party only based itself on characteristics of nostalgia. ATAKA’s far-right and far-left constituents are politically nostalgic regarding incompatible aspects of Bulgaria’s history, calling varying subjective utopias. The

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268 Ibid., 36.
269 Ibid., 37.
subjective nature of these conflicting utopian nostalgias, therefore, substantiate that ATAKA’s populism lacks a core value.

While the 2005 Parliamentary Elections were notable in their own right as they exhibited the lowest voter turnout in Bulgaria’s post-communist history likely due to the rise in hopelessness felt by citizens from the betrayal by the NMSS, national and international attention was on ATAKA’s success. In 2005, ATAKA won 8% of the vote and 21 seats in the National Assembly, beating all moderate center-right parties. ATAKA was the first party with an *openly* nationalist platform to gain representation in Bulgaria following 1989. Becoming the fourth-largest party in parliament was surely a feat, considering the party’s controversial policies and inception only two months prior to elections. A feat driven by political nostalgia and a negative national narrative, that is.

In accordance with Taggart’s prediction, however, ATAKA would not maintain enough momentum to sustain itself for long in Bulgaria’s political landscape. Yet, Taggart’s claim would not be valid if political nostalgia had not led to the creation of the diverse utopias the party aimed to address. In addition to the difficulty in sustaining ATAKA’s constituency due to the multitude of conflicting utopias the party aimed to coalesce, the party’s radical actions steadily affected its legitimacy. Following 2005, the outlook and performance of the party grew bleak. In 2006, Siderov was stripped of his parliamentary voting immunity due to his discriminatory remarks gaining international recognition, and, in 2007, the party lost regard after its deputies were labeled as showing an intentional lack of respect for political correctness. The party’s popularity fluctuated but still declined over time, gaining 8.14%, 9.44%, 7.30%, 4.52%, 9.07%, and 0.49% of the vote in 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2021, respectively. The party, incapable of securing a single seat in the 2021 elections, has faded away from the spotlight of Bulgarian
political discourse. Despite the inability to gain significant influence in politics, ATAKA still
demonstrated how a party can notice the presence of various political nostalgias, capitalize on
the discontents which breed the separate nostalgias, and create a populist agenda that artificially
exacerbates the discontents initially present in society.

Ever since Bulgaria’s Parliamentary elections in 2007, the center-right Citizens for
European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) have been in power. GERB’s Boiko Borisov has
served as prime minister since. This stability in party leadership, however, does not mean the
nation has developed a healthy political system that has ameliorated the dissatisfaction that
further propagates political nostalgia. In fact, nostalgic tendencies and the worsening of the
Bulgarian narrative have only intensified. As I will discuss briefly, Bulgaria’s 2021
Parliamentary Elections point to this, as the newly formed anti-establishment There Is Such a
People (ITN) political party shows the imminent rise of yet another populist party which
garnered enough support to become the second largest in Parliament through an artificially
nostalgic platform. How could this occur? As seen with NMSS and ATAKA, political nostalgia
arising from differing societal discontents culminated into a growing crisis of distrust and
faithlessness of fellow Bulgarians. This granted ITN the catalyst it needed to intensify an
already-present hope for a utopian society through artificial nostalgia.

Bulgaria, Today

Bulgaria is tied with Romania and Hungary on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, marking the three nations the worst-ranking EU members. The World Press Freedom Index ranks Bulgaria 112th out of 180 countries, describing Bulgaria as “the Black Sheep of the European Union” due to its corruption and collusion between media, politicians, and oligarchs. The actions of Borisov, and GERB in general, have driven the upshot in corruption. In addition to being under investigation by Spanish prosecutors over money laundering, Borisov’s frequent boasting of photos in which he visits the nation’s schools and churches in his Jeep coupled with public knowledge that such infrastructure was negotiated through tenders which benefit the associates and friends of GERB have made many Bulgarian’s seek change. The Parliamentary Election held on April 4th, 2021, and, most importantly, the success of the ITN party, exhibits how public dissatisfaction and the presence of political nostalgia was necessary for a populist party to gain traction.

There is Such a People (ITN)

Sentiments of Bulgarian youth describe the political climate GERB has further inoculated as one that is "worn-out, illegitimate and harmful for political and public life in Bulgaria” in

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272 Ibid.
which "nepotism and corruption are also omnipresent." The sentiments of imagined poor majority have only entrenched dissatisfaction into the national narrative more, fueling more political nostalgia. The 2020 elections saw three anti-establishment parties gain electoral seats, the ITN, Democratic Bulgaria (DB), and Stand Up! Thugs Out!, but the leadership and origin of ITN specifically and aptly depicts political nostalgia, both natural and artificial, and it’s required presence for populism to thrive.

Slavi Trifonov, who would found and serve as the leader of the ITN, is a Bulgarian producer, singer, actor, and host of one of Bulgaria’s most famous evening talk show hosts, *Slavi’s Show*. As a producer and talk show host, Trifonov used political satire to criticize Eurocentric politicians and irritate the status quo through mimicking Bulgarian politicians while also inviting Borisov and Rumen Radev, Bulgaria’s current president, among others, onto his show. He’s controversially referred to ministers as gay, jail mates, and, most notably, executed a satirical skit which depicted Nadezhda Mihaylova, Bulgarian prime minister of Foreign Relations during the UDFs reign from 1997-2001, as a woman who “танцува с кол” (dances on a pole), insinuating she utilizes her looks to achieve political goals. Trifonov often criticized Mihaylova her Eurocentric policies, as she is often credited for her contributions to Bulgaria’s integration into NATO and the EU. The discourse of Trifonov’s show has artificially

276 Ibid.
intensified the discontent of Bulgarian’s seeking a more nationalist domestic and foreign policy, reminiscent of the Bulgarian Empires and dissatisfied with the West’s negligence of the Bulgarian people. His music released through the band Slavi Trifonov and the Ku-Ku Band—whose name colloquially means ‘cuckoo’ in Bulgarian and alludes to the “craziness [and] silliness…arguably characteristic of the life and experiences of the early years of postsocialist transition”—falls under chalg (Turkish for ‘musical instrument’). Chalg music distinctly “embodies both the negative attitudes of Bulgarian society towards its Ottoman heritage as well as its fractured and traumatic social experiences with the post socialist transition.” While drawing on those individuals nostalgic of an ethnically and culturally homogenous Bulgaria and the renaming campaigns throughout the Balkan Wars and the Communist regime, Trifonov also appeals to those unhappy with the corruption within the Bulgarian government in the present day. Lyrics in the group’s song “‘Nqma Takava Đurzhava” (“There Ain’t a Country Like This”) reflect nostalgic tones yearn for a better status quo and question why a better society is not being pursued, through asking rhetorical questions like: “Are you sleeping?”; “How many times are you going to relive the same old story?”, “How long are you going to live in this lie?” Clearly, Trifonov’s personality appeals to various facets of political nostalgia and discontent present in the Bulgarian society: that of the working class displaced by the West, that of Bulgarian nationalists, and that of the imagined poor majority who feel abused by the elite. Despite controversial opinions regarding Trifonov, his career and social commentary is intimately tied to Bulgaria’s experience post-1989, as his participation in satirical television programs dates back

282 Ibid., 8.
283 Ibid., 8.
284 Ibid., 1.
to 1990. Trifonov has been considered either a socially conscious voice of the people or boorish TV personality for decades due to his political critiques.

When social unrest over corruption, similar to those of 1996 which instigated to the 1996-1997 Sofia protests, resulted in demonstrations to prevent Borisov and GERB from winning a fourth term in the summer of 2020, Trifonov capitalized on his political stance. Trifonov’s charismatic nature coupled with increased anti-elite sentiments led him to find There Is Such a People (ITN), whose name was inspired by his album “‘Ima Takav Narod” (‘There is such a Nation”). The party’s anti-elitist and anti-corruption focus are the precipice of its platform, while also purporting light forms of direct democracy. ITN’s aggressive goal to curb Bulgaria’s omnipresent corruption resonates with what initially drew intrigue to both the NMSS and ATAKA.

Results of the April 4th Election

The April 4th election resulted in a fragmented parliament with no clear winner. GERB’s loss of grip on power can be credited to the rise of the populist ITN and anti-corruption campaigns. This is the first time since 2005 that ATAKA will not be in parliament, as aforementioned. Furthermore, the ITN succeeded in pushing the BSP out of second place.

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285 Ibid., 38.
becoming the main opposition to GERB. The BSP has not suffered such a loss in support in Bulgaria’s post-communist history.\(^{289}\)

Figure 3: Results of the 2021 Parliamentary Election. Source: Central Electoral Commission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Vote share (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Seat change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)</td>
<td>Centre-right</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is Such a People (ITN)</td>
<td>Populism / Direct democracy</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)</td>
<td>Centre-left</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)</td>
<td>Liberalism / Turkish minority</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Bulgaria (DB)</td>
<td>Liberalism / Green politics</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand Up! Thugs Out!</td>
<td>Social populism</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a result of this fragmentation, President Rumen Radev handed GERB a mandate to form a coalition government.\(^{290}\) After GERB was incapable of gaining consensus to form a government and returned to mandate to Radev on the 23\(^{rd}\), the mandate was passed to Trifonov and ITN. However, Trifonov decided to stay firm to the party’s platform and refused to “accept support from the traditional parties it blames for keeping Bulgaria as the European Union’s poorest and most corrupt member state”\(^{291}\)—returning the mandate to Radev on the 27\(^{th}\).

Through this action, Trifonov shows awareness of rising discontent with the corrupt and elite nature of established party the artificially nostalgic nature of the ITN’s platform intensified—while granting his followers hope their various utopias will be pursued through showing that

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\(^{289}\) Ibid.


\(^{291}\) Ibid.
there is hope for a better future and he will not succumb to corruption. At this very moment, Radev can grant the BSP the mandate in hopes of forming a coalition government, but GERB and ITN’s failure in structuring a coalition government insinuates this is likely not plausible. A third failure necessitates the creation of an interim government and the call for new elections within two months.\textsuperscript{292}

\textit{What Now?}

In Bulgaria, the mixture of both natural and artificial nostalgia has reached the threat level discussed in Chapter One; Bulgarian political nostalgia serves as both a massive barrier to future development and a sign of perpetual stagnation for years to come. The stalemate of this most election and its effects on Bulgarian society helped to fully elucidate this threat. Bulgaria has yet to create a COVID-19 recovery plan using the €12.3 billion the country has been allocated from the European Recovery Fund\textsuperscript{293} or to develop a strategy for its allocation of €16.7 billion from the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.\textsuperscript{294} If the stalemate continues, a coalition government is not established, and a new parliament does not revise and pass plans for these funds, Bulgaria will lose access to the much-needed stimulus.\textsuperscript{295} The loss of these funds would negatively affect almost every Bulgarian citizen. Not only would populist parties fail in their nostalgia-based promises made to individuals who fit their homeland, but also widespread discontent would, justifiably, run rampant across all aspects of society. The belief in the Bulgarian curse would seem justified, and thus negativity present in the national narrative will continue to snowball out of control. And, ultimately, a further worsening of the national narrative

\textsuperscript{292} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{295} Ibid.

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will only spur more dissatisfaction with the status quo, consistently placing the various political nostalgias and their conflicting utopias at the front of political agendas. The overall wellbeing and development of Bulgaria’s general population, therefore, will remain inferior. Considering that the recent reports have shown six out of ten Bulgarian households are unable to meet levels of subsistence, this threat is incredibly frightening.

Bulgaria now suffers from a severe fragmentation of the political system. This fragmentation poses a threat of even more dissatisfaction among the public. Increased dissatisfaction, as this thesis has hoped to prove, creates a negative feedback loop against development that will be nearly impossible to escape. Varying social groups will spurn political nostalgia reminiscent of even more aspects of Bulgaria’s history. Such political nostalgia will generate more subjective utopias, granting politicians more narratives to exploit through populist politics. The nation’s narrative has entrenched itself in the culture and cyclical nature of political nostalgia, putting Bulgarians in a political cage of their own making. A falsified perception of past greatness will keep modern day Bulgaria from ever achieving any real progress.

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Bibliography


