

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DBP-11

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Another Rocker of the Revolution
(the fourth of five parts on Bulgaria)

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Dear Peter,

One night in early August, in downtown Sofia, we were lucky enough to come upon a demonstration on Bulgaria Square. We had been there during the day when the only thing happening was a crowd of people around an old car that had been dumped in front of the Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum and was surrounded by piles of old Marxist-Leninist literature. This evening's event turned out to be one of the many Town of Truth meetings held by a group that goes by that name and supports the SDS. For the past few months, they've set up a virtual camp on a small rise on a corner of the park opposite the mausoleum and the Bulgarian Socialist (the renamed Communist) Party headquarters. Opposite an adjacent side of the headquarters were hundreds of tents, whose guylines were attached to pegs driven into the narrow spaces between the paving stones. Many tents had hand-drawn political cartoons on their roofs or in front of the tent doors. American and British rock and roll was straining the volume of little cassette recorders all over the Town of Truth. It was clear why some Bulgarians were calling this activity karnevalizace (carnivalization).

Three men wearing wonderfully expressive, slightly oversized, papier-mache masks of three former leaders (I couldn't find out who they were, although it's likely one was meant to be Zhivkov and another the head of the army) were ambling through the crowd. The thumbs-up gesture they gave to everyone around them seemed to bring the features of their masks to life. On the steps up to the camp, a bearded man was seated at a small table and reading new demands to the government. He was flanked by

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

two standard bearers; one held the pale-blue and white SDS flag, the other held the red, green, and white Bulgarian flag. The whole area was brightly illuminated by tungsten spotlights, and about 30 participants were seated behind them, each person awaiting his turn at the microphone. After a second serious political speaker, there came a chubby man with shoulder-length hair and large glasses. He launched into a rock'n'roll song with a taped musical accompaniment. I could only understand the words "freedom" and "rock'n'roll", but the audience, which had already been in a good mood, started to sing along and their faces were positively beaming. They waved small SDS and Bulgarian flags (or, in at least one case, an SDS plastic bag) and gave the victory sign up and down to the rhythm of the music.

Once again, it's music that gets the crowd motivated. So many political forces have used the music of their time to gain attention and whip up enthusiasm. (A convinced -- albeit probably mentally unstable -- Czech Communist told me last October how in her day, i.e., the late 1940s ^{and} early 1950s, the music was wonderful, but today one only hears vulgar noises. "We knew all the words, and you could sing along; the melodies were so beautiful. The young men looked so handsome in their white trousers and blue shirts." etc.)

The music in Prague during the demonstrations was mostly folk. Here, in Bulgaria, at least at this demonstration, it was rock 'n'roll. Silvia and I went up to the knoll where students and other civilians were blocking access to the performers and speakers, who were sitting behind the improvised stage. We stood on the sidelines and watched a young man at the mike (Sofia's most popular radio announcer) do comic impressions of Todor Zhivkov and other politicians. He was followed by more singers and a dance troupe -- far from folk dancing -- of two women and two men, all in tight black trousers and black silk jackets with golden tassels along the fringe. We managed to reach the first singer, Georgi Minchev, and got his phone number so we could soon arrange a chat, which we sorted out for the following day.

When we reached Minchev's apartment, which is in a relatively new housing complex of prefab low-rises, we found a large red dahlia on his doormat. As he opened the door, we handed him the flower and he rolled his eyes. The dahlia was from an admirer, a teenage student who leaves a flower for him whenever she comes to her classes in Sofia. Georgi invited us in and rushed off with the flower to a back room. With all the drapes drawn to keep out the broiling August sun, his apartment was dark and cool but for some light that made it through the floral print. We sat on a large leather sofa, and Georgi hurried to the kitchen for coffee. There was only a television, a stereo, and some videos and cassettes on an entire wall of shelves. On one speaker, there was a pink, stuffed, toy octopus. A little gray poodle came into the living room and hopped up onto the leather armchair. The dog was 15-years old and very ill, explained Georgi. It had had three operations, but the last time they opened it up, the veterinarians saw its cancer was too far advanced and immediately sewed it up without operating. It was blind and had runny eyes. Georgi was sitting on the edge of a big

leather easy chair in such away as to block our view of his poodle so that, he said, we wouldn't have to look at it.

At one point, Georgi suddenly switched from Bulgarian to really good English. I asked him how he got into the SDS. "I always hated the Communists and was very glad when the SDS appeared." According to Georgi, artists were the first to join SDS and then the musicians followed. He got up and left the room, but then quickly returned and handed us the three songs that we had originally come for. Then the phone rang -- one of an unending chain of phone calls -- and he excused himself. I could ~~hear~~^{hear} him answering questions and explaining aspects of current Bulgarian politics in very fluent French. "The magazine La Pointe," he said when he returned. French journalists call him all the time.

All the songs Minchev handed us, which Silvia and I translated here, are both musically and textually straight-forward. They address basic Bulgarian issues and appeal to people's emotions in a rather old-fashioned, albeit effective, way, as I saw from the crowd's enthusiastic response. This first song makes a reference to police bullying and prudery, Communist distortion of the past, enforced isolation from the rest of the world, labor camps, and neglect of the natural environment.

Communism Go Away [Komunizmat Si Otiva]
by Vasil Georgiev

The soil is state property, the fields are poisoned,
the water is polluted, the soul is depressed ...
Hair is cut short, beards are shaved,
Stamps on the legs, but the times are changing

Go away Communism ...
Children sleep well!

They separated from the world, accused of subversion,
beat us at the police stations and pinned medals on themselves ...
They hid themselves in palaces, built camps,
and twisted history, but the times are changing

Communism, go away ...

They changed dictators and rule again,
the lie remains, misleads this state ...
They destroy archives, alienate people,
they leave for abroad, but the fight goes on

Communism, go away

Congratulations Freedom [Chestita Svoboda]
by Georgi Minchev

Men, women, children with glowing faces
I see all around me today
Kissing each other, saying without fear:
"May it flow like water, congratulations Freedom!"

From now on, man can be a brother to man,
life is so short, let's not go back ...

People rejoice, proudly wave the tricolor,
may it flow like water, Congratulations Freedom!

The following song, with a call to wave the flag, was the election song of the SDS.

Rock 'n' Roll SDS [Rokenrol SDS]
Music by Petar Gjuzelev, lyrics Georgi Minchev

Hey girls, hey boys,
at least you've got the good luck
to live the right way
like free people in a free state

At least you have a real youth,
at least there won't be anymore programmed joy,
at least I hear you shouting, "Enough!"
"Bring on the SDS!"

It won't be easy but there's only one way
there've got to be clouds, there's got to be a blue horizon
As blue as the hope for a better life
for our nation
May all the flags in June
throughout the country be blue
May the sky be blue, may the sea be blue,
may all the ballots be blue ...

Hey girls, hey boys,
Bulgaria is barely on its feet
It's time for us all to shout, "Enough!"
"Bring on the SDS!"

And in May, all honorable people
join hands, wave the tricolor
Let's fulfill the hopes for a better life
for our nation.

May the hatred cease,
may there never be anymore lies,
may the sky be blue, may the sea blue,
May all the bulletins in June be blue ...

This fourth song refers to Lovech, which is the main city in the Loveshka oblast, a region with prison camps. It also mentions imminent justice with the punishment of Gazdov and Spasov, who were the leaders of these camps and who had passed sentences on people. Now these two men are saying in TV interviews that they are innocent and, therefore, refuse to accept any guilt. But the author of an article in one of the main Sofia newspapers wrote that just as Todor Zhivkov will end up in jail, their time will also come. Karadimov was the leader of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth Organization, Komsomol. The song also comments negatively on Bulgaria's status vis-a-vis Europe, to which many Bulgarians (like Czechs and Slovaks in their country) claim they would like to return. It also places the blame on "ourselves" for having never resisted and thinking a wisecrack was opposition enough.

What Times [Kakvi Vremena]

by Kiril Marichkov and Georgi Minchev

Forty-five years are hard to forget
but as you see, even now in our country
the guilty try to present themselves as innocent ...
What times!

Why can't they see, my God, that in Bulgaria today
people don't even have food anymore
Or maybe this was their scenario ...
What times!

What times, but the guilt is also ours
Tell me, does one joke, one curse, remove from power?
What times we lived to see, oh people
To sing the ode to terror ...

Everybody has heard about the memorial plaque near Lovech,
the truth anyway remains the only one
History is neither blind nor deaf ...
What times!

What times, but it's clearly awful
Gazdov swells his chest, Mircho Spasov is silent ...
What times we've lived to see, oh people,
To sing the ode to terror ...

But what ought to happen, we should let happen in this state,
whoever breathes should hope, oh, let it be,
there is no Rosen Karadimov, no Komsomol,
there's no one who would stop us from singing rock and roll ...

What times we've lived to see, oh people,
and if this isn't a terror ...
Todor Zhivkov isn't in prison yet,
and we are the backyard of Europe ...
What times ... We are the backyard of Europe ...
What times ... And if it isn't a terror ...

From my very first questions to Georgi, I couldn't help making comparisons to events in Czechoslovakia. Georgi was quite defensive about any such comparisons, but he was also quick to recall his days in Czechoslovakia in 1969. His friend, Michal Angelov, a Bulgarian composer of contemporary music, was living there at the time, and invited Georgi to tape a television show. When he arrived at the airport in Prague, no one, not even the airport staff, would tell him where to get transportation, let alone where to find a hotel. At one point, said Georgi, he saw an old friend, the Czech singer Jiří Laufer. Laufer's response to Georgi's greeting was a cool, "Oh yes. Yes, I think I remember you." Despite such displays of Czech hostility for citizens from "fraternal states," Georgi's friend Angelov was determined to show him that there was now real democracy in Czechoslovakia. "Do you want proof?" he asked Georgi. "Watch me," and at the top of his lungs in the airport lounge he bellowed out, "Dubček [the President at the time] is bullshit!" "No attention, no effect, real democracy," said Georgi smiling.

The television program he took part in was actually a game show of OIRT (Organization of International Radio and Television), where stars from the Socialist countries and special guests, e.g., Finish, would perform together. While Minchev and the other stars who were playing silly fairground-type games were being taped, Georgi could see the TV crew backstage snickering and laughing. It was only later that Georgi learned that the Czech crew had played the song "Jdi domů Ivane!" [Ivan, Go Home!] as background music without telling any of the foreign performers, and that the show was being broadcast live to Bulgaria and elsewhere in the East Bloc.

During our conversation, Georgi got up again and came back with a couple of medium-sized posters of the SDS. One was of him, apparently in earlier days, and it displayed the words, "I've made my choice." The other was aesthetically a little better: a crowd of about 50 artists and performers standing in the rain and holding umbrellas. No poster we saw in Bulgaria, however, had any of the flair of the Civic Forum posters from the November days in Prague. "Actually, I did nothing for this movement compared to this guy," said Georgi with genuine modesty, while pointing to a man in the photo, who is a bass player and -- in August, anyway -- a member of parliament.

Were there any other opposition groups before the November demonstrations and the June elections? I asked. Georgi mentioned the Club for Glasnost and Democracy but said it was very hard for anybody except intellectuals to be part of the group. "We have no Marta Kubišová or Václav Havel," he said, making reference to the fact that a pop singer and a bon vivant playwright can find common ground and work together with professors, philosophers and a wide range of other people in a movement against totalitarianism.

Georgi, like most East Europeans -- or Europeans for that matter -- was smoking with a vengeance, and we had already progressed from coffee to our second bottle of Bulgarian white wine. A friend of Georgi's, an engineer, arrived and joined in the conversation. I asked what were the Bulgarian attitudes to Russians and if there remained any of the supposed Russophilia, which one reads so much about in political

science books on Eastern Europe. Georgi said that most of the nation doesn't like the Russians, but that they had all been misled throughout most of the past into being told they had to like the Russians for having liberated Bulgarians in 1878. The engineer added that this was but one of Imperial Russia's tactics to expand into the Balkans. The engineer then illustrated Bulgarians' views on the Russians with the following story: "A group of Russian tourists is sitting with their Bulgarian guide in the restaurant of one of Sofia's hotels. After dinner, tea cups and tea bags are brought to the table. The Russians have never seen a tea bag before and sit there dumbfounded. Their Bulgarian guide instructs them on how to drink the tea: 'Put the bag in your mouth, the sugar cube between your teeth as usual, tilt back your head, and pour in the hot water.' I love the picture of a typical group of 50 Russian tourists sitting in the hotel restaurant, each with the little string and tag from the tea bag hanging out of the corner of his mouth."

The engineer has had his own firm since January, installing electric outlets, switches, and wiring in buildings. With taxes so high and no reductions of taxes or tax deductions in sight, he can't invest as freely as normal investors do. He complained that the new Bulgarian free market was full of dirty money (a very common expression today in Czechoslovakia; Finance Minister Václav Klaus and Labor and Social Welfare Minister Petr Miller have each said the economy doesn't differentiate between clean and dirty money). The Communists try to use the foreign-trade organizations, which they control, to sign joint-ventures and get the profits or dividends and then sell Bulgarian manufactures and goods at artificially low prices.

My question about whether Bulgarians honor their contracts lead to a couple of examples from Georgi, which also illustrated his nonconformism. "I played and sang with a band in Belgium for more than a year," he explained. "Even in those days, I refused to let the Communists get their way. They wanted to tax me for everything I earned in Belgium. I had a friend here who was a lawyer and he found a clause in the contract, which said that if you were a student you were released from having to pay higher taxes. They were furious but there was nothing they could do." In the 1960s, says Georgi, he was a kind of rebel in Bulgaria. That he had long hair was enough to put him in the rebel category. The police in the streets had scissors and they would grab boys with long hair or beards and play the role of barber on the spot, and none too gently either. As for girls, the police carried rubber stamps and if they saw a girl whose skirt they considered too short, they'd stamp her on the legs to show how high her hemline was. (See the song above, Communism Go Away). Once, in East Berlin, the Germans wanted Georgi to perform with shorter hair. They tried to pin his hair up and stick it behind his ears. He told the Germans that the Bulgarians had allowed him, as an artist, to wear his hair long. The head of the East German TV studio telephoned Sofia for confirmation. The answer was predictably negative, so rather than let the Germans cut his hair, Georgi left. A friend warned him he would lose his fee, which was a comparatively large sum at the time. "No, I won't," replied Georgi, "they have to pay me, it's in the contract that the employer has to assure good and commensurate conditions for performers."

Georgi told us that in the near future he'd like to establish a private radio station. He has a degree in radio and television arts (thus, another singer-songwriter who, like Vladimir Merta in Czechoslovakia, has vocational credentials besides his singing and songwriting). He needs investors but, according to him, a lot of Bulgarians who have the necessary money have no idea what to do with it. As for his political life, Georgi said he was no longer as great a supporter of SDS as he had been before; he feels that some of their attitudes are very similar to the Communists' attitudes. (This also has a Czech parallel in the cries from some people that Civic Forum has become the new totalitarian regime and a new 'mafia' etc. This is all either a typical cynical and/or fearful reaction to authority from a people who have never had any prolonged period to participate in politics, or it may also partially stem from observing some genuine power-hunger, corruption, and lies of the new guard, or from general impatience, boredom, and lack of the initial fervor that had once been focused in a united force against a common enemy). Nevertheless, says Georgi, he believes in the SDS's aims and says he'll perform for them again in the autumn campaign. He describes his dismay with the Robert Maxwell-sponsored concert of Chaka Khan and Paul Young (from the US and Britain). Georgi met with the two performers to warn them that they were singing in support of the Bulgarian Communist Party, which had simply been renamed 'Socialist'. Khan and Young said that they would not refuse to sing, but they at least opened their concert saying that they came to sing for freedom and Bulgaria, not for any political party.

In Bulgaria, as in the rest of Eastern Europe, Robert Maxwell has a mixed record. His series of books on world leaders (Pergamon Press) contain praise not only for Todor Zhivkov, but also for the DDR's Erich Honecker and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic's Gustav Husak (This news was written several months ago in an issue of the British magazine, Private Eye). Apparently, the Communists signed so many contracts with Maxwell that Bulgarians won't say no to him for fear that he'll withdraw it all.

All the best,

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