



Bust of Lyudmila Zhivkova, Sofia

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The Debate on the Communist Past and the Memory of Lyudmila Zhivkova in Bulgaria

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In October 2012 a conference took place at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski that was dedicated to Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Todor Zhivkov and chairperson of the Bulgarian Committee of Culture (1975-1981). This was an attempt to remember Lyudmila Zhivkova and promote a positive image in the public sphere, yet it provoked a fierce response in the media from political parties and citizens indicating that the memory of socialism is a 'hot' issue in Bulgaria.

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The Debate on the Communist Past and the Memory of Lyudmila Zhivkova in Bulgaria

This paper addresses the media response to a conference that took place in October 2012 at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the birth of Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Todor Zhivkov and chairperson of the Bulgarian Committee of Culture (1975-1981). This attempt to remember Lyudmila Zhivkova and promote a positive image in the public sphere provoked a fierce response from political parties and citizens and indicated that the memory of socialism in Bulgaria is a 'hot' arena of public debate.

A Positive Memory of Lyudmila Zhivkova?

At the end of October 2012 Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski made the headlines when former and current students booed the opening of a conference dedicated to Lyudmila Zhivkova.^[1] Their protest prompted media reports^[2] and comments by the organizers and opponents of the conference. The two main political forces in the Bulgarian parliament, the left-wing BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party/ Balgarska sotsialisticheska partiya) and the right-wing Blue Coalition (Sinyata koalitsia), issued diametrically opposed statements on the event. The emotional response to the event showed that the public memory of the communist past, in particular of late socialism, is a "hot arena" (to use Charles Meyer's term) of dispute in Bulgaria.^[3] The attempt to impose a positive memory of the daughter of Todor Zhivkov raised the hackles of part of the country's civil society and its cultural and political elite.

In this text, I will present the debate provoked by the media coverage of the conference. In this debate there were two major conflicting arguments regarding the evaluation and remembrance of late socialism in Bulgaria. The conference "The cultural opening of Bulgaria to the world; dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the birth on Lyudmila Zhivkova was organized by the Faculty of History at Sofia University and the St. Cyril and St. Methodius International Foundation as one of the events dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the birth of Todor Zhivkov's daughter. The programme of the day-long conference, which was published on the university website and in the media, featured 25 papers. I reproduce this programme below, because it prompted the aforementioned political declarations and the demonstrations during the conference.

"The Cultural Opening of Bulgaria to the World"

The organization of the conference by Lyudmila Zhivkova's daughter, Evgenia, and the titles of some papers such as "On Lyudmila Zhivkova", "The Lyudmila Zhivkova I worked with", "A few words about Lyudmila Zhivkova", presented by public figures who had been close associates of Lyudmila Zhivkova, including the artist Svetlin Roussev and the poet Lyubomir Levchev, was perceived by the public as a sign that the gathering was not a scientific conference as advertised, but a commemorative event, which was more likely to glorify Lyudmila Zhivkova than to critically appraise her activities.

A day before the opening of the conference, the Blue Coalition made a statement in parliament expressing its opposition to holding such an event at Sofia University. The right-wing politicians of the Blue Coalition argued that the conference should be cancelled because it was "an insolent attempt to present the repressive Bulgarian regime as humane, tolerant and open to the world"^[4]. They claimed to

be against "the falsification of the past and the rehabilitation of BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party/ Balgarska Komunisticheska Partiya) leaders". In their view, the conference in honour of Lyudmila Zhivkova sought to rehabilitate communism - an act they defined as illegal and anti-European: "The commemoration at SU [Sofia University] is illegal and anti-European because in 2000, the National Assembly passed a law declaring the communist regime in Bulgaria to be criminal, while in 2009 the European parliament declared all totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century to be criminal."^[5]

Blue Coalition deputies also condemned attempts to rehabilitate communism and revive the cult of Zhivkov, which in their opinion were supported by the ruling party of the Prime Minister Boiko Borissov (GERB/ Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria/ Grazhdani za Evropeysko Razvitie na Balgariya)^[6], the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party/ Balgarska sotsialisticheska partiya) and the MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms/ Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi (DPS)). They insisted on introducing a law to punish all judicial or natural persons who "attempt to rehabilitate the repressive Bulgarian communist regime".^[7] The Rector of Sofia University, Professor Ivan Ilchev, himself a historian, responded to the Blue Coalition statement by denying that the University was engaged in "political propaganda in favour of the BCP/BSP". For Ilchev, the statement was a "primitive reaction" and "an attempt to prohibit historians from dealing with the subject of their profession."^[8]

On the next day - 19 October 2012 - the conference was opened by the Dean of the Faculty of History, Professor Plamen Mitev. His opening speech was summarized in a short text on the university website:

The noise that occurred in the public space is proof of how painful and sensitive the present topic is. Obviously 23 years of transition were not long enough for us to learn how to protect the plurality of opinions. [...]. In the Faculty of History there are no taboos because the road to the temple of knowledge does not pass through prohibitions and oblivions. [...] history is a science in which there is no place for political servitude.^[9]

According to media reports, the dean's speech was met with cheers of "hurrah, comrades!" and "BCP and CPSS - out of Alma Mater"^[10], as well as clapping and hoots from a group of onlookers - former and current students who aimed to sabotage the conference through their noisy presence. Videos of the event posted on the Internet showed some of the protestors wearing red pioneer ties and carrying posters with anti-communist slogans. They interrupted Peter Fisher-Appelt, an honorary chairman of the St. Cyril and St. Methodius Foundation (known as the Lyudmila Zhivkova Foundation before 1990) by clapping and chanting "Stasi" and "Shame on you".

The protestors rejected the invitation by conference chairman Iskra Baeva to participate by making their own presentations because they did not want "to legitimize the event with their presence", according to a statement cited by reporters. The words on their posters clearly expressed their political position: "Communism is criminal, ergo communists are criminal", "Lyudmila Zhivkova is a communist, not a national hero", and "Zhivkova belongs to the Zhivkovi, not to the students". A female protestor made the following statement to reporters:

It is not right to restore communism in the Alma Mater - a place that should be characterized by a young, freedom-loving spirit. Here, our children are being instructed by the very people who want to this restoration. [...]. If it had been somewhere else, we probably would not have expressed our protest with the same force. Of course, [hosting the conference] elsewhere would not be appropriate either. This is their pretence; we lived with this pretence for decades. Now we're

supposed to pretend that this is science.^[11]

The Media Coverage

Several articles in the weekly newspaper Culture were dedicated to the conference and to a commemorative exhibition that had opened a month earlier in the Gallery of Foreign Art. The exhibition is titled "The cultural opening of Bulgaria to the world" and is dedicated to the 70th anniversary of Lyudmila Zhivkova's birth and the 30th anniversary of the "St. Cyril and Methodius" Foundation, created as a sign of continuation of her cultural mission. Its curator is Svetlin Roussev and it is subsidized by the foundations "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" and "Lyudmila Zhivkova - Banner of Peace". Documents from private archives for the life of Lyudmila Zhivkova and children's drawings from the Assembly "Banner of Peace" are presented. In the introductory text to the exhibition there is a summary of her activities:

In her short life time Lyudmila Zhivkova becomes an expression of ideas, synthesizing ancient experience of mankind with the prospect of a new path of social development based on the cultural and moral values of the versatile person. In this light she managed to realize her ideas in substantial proportions. The concrete results of this large, often - contested work are still present in the public landscape as symbols of national dignity. The National Palace of Culture, without which we could not imagine cultural forums today, the construction of a large-scale exposition of the National Historical Museum, the Assembly "Banner of Peace" united children on the planet under the sign of creativity and under the ringing bells; cultural programs introducing the Bulgarian audience to the universal spirit of the masters of art such as the genius Leonardo da Vinci and Nicholas Roerich; exhibitions, revealing to the world the treasury of the Bulgarian artistic heritage - these are some of the signs by which the current generations will judge her achievements.^[12]

The article "What does Lyudmila Zhivkova mean to us?" by the journalist Tony Nikolov, which was re-printed on other websites, stirred up a heated debate. Nikolov argued that the exhibition exuded nostalgia, glorified Lyudmila Zhivkova's epoch, and attempted to rehabilitate it. For him, this event was part of the current process of "restoring the 'golden age of socialist culture'". The nostalgic version of the recent past imposed on public memory by institutions such as the [Museum of Socialist Art](#) and the re-established Banner of Peace Assembly^[13] was contrasted with the memory of people who had lived through this period:

However, we, the survivors of this epoch, still remember. We are alive, aren't we? We remember the cultural opening to the world, endorsed by comrade Zhivkova, and the total exclusion from the same world undertaken by comrade Zhivkov. We remember the grandiose peace projects and the vast sums of money squandered on the assemblies, which, according to cunning flatterers, should have brought a Nobel Peace Prize to Lyudmila Zhivkova. We also remember the division between the privileged and the unprivileged: in terms of [...] access to books and films, which were available only to the chosen ones, those privileged enough to receive the professional bulletin of the Union of Bulgarian Writers or to go to exclusive screenings at the Cinema House. I personally remember how while the International Children's Assembly was being opened at Universiada Hall, a neighbour of mine had the imprudence to order 'three times Lyudmila' instead of 'three princesses', and he disappeared for a long time from Sofia. This is what we

remember.^[14]

In another article in the same newspaper, the journalist Diana Ivanova posed the question, "Who has the right to remember Lyudmila Zhivkova?" and then replied that the two opposing arguments on Lyudmila Zhivkova were both valid. As she put it:

the problem of seeing the multidimensional Zhivkova most probably reflects our incapability to see and accept ourselves in our initial post-communist contradictions. And to accept that namely as such we have the right to our opinions, passions and formation of civil space.^[15]

The author disputed the "either or" approach of N. Tsekov in his article "The long good bye to the People's Republic of Bulgaria", which was published on the Deutsche Welle website. The subtitle of this article read: "Who wants to restore the cult of Lyudmila Zhivkova and thus obliterate the memory of the victims of the numerous crimes of the communist regime in Bulgaria? Who needs a commemoration of the dictator's daughter?"^[16]

The academic community did not play a particularly active role in commenting on the conference. However, during the conference, the professors of the Faculty of Philosophy approved a declaration in which they expressed their disagreement at the hosting of such an event at the university. According to one of the initiators of the declaration, Professor Vladimir Gradev, the fact that the conference was being held at Sofia University was "a disgrace for Bulgarian scholarship".

Judging by the titles of the papers, it is clear that this conference is only an apology for Lyudmila Zhivkova. Not a word is lost on the ugly and sinister monuments that cluttered Bulgaria during her 'leadership' of Bulgarian culture, not a word on the wasted resources supposedly assigned to creating the Gallery of Foreign Art, which was rapidly filled with cheap surrogates at the cost of expanding private collections and bank accounts. [...] There is no mention of the 'chosen' children who played under police guard at the 'Assembly', and the other children who were taken in formation to watch and applaud them behind the lines. In other words, this was an event geared towards whitewashing the history of the totalitarian regime of Zhivkov and his circle so that the communist regime will shine under the 'academic sun' with the white clothes worn by Lyudmila Zhivkova.

Professor Gradev concluded: "The truth is sad, but beyond any doubt: the so-called Bulgarian intellectual elite is still a hostage to its servile career-oriented opportunism."^[17]

In an interview for the daily newspaper "Dnevnik" Michael Gruev, a professor at the Faculty of History at the Sofia University and one of the authors who studied the period of the late socialism, although he was not among the conference participants stated:

indeed this is the time to historically discuss Lyudmila Zhivkova. However, we saw how an event was tagged as "scientific" without being so, because there was not distance from the object. It is absurd to expect reflexivity demonstrated by the daughter to her mother. It is absurd to study Lyudmila without taking into account her close circle, and then the circle is not able to do a research on itself. The people who are seriously concerned with these topics did not attend,

while in the hall there were the people from her circle... if they had met at a foundation, there would not have been a problem. The problem was that the name of the University was involved.^[18]

The conflicting arguments - for and against holding the conference in honour of Lyudmila Zhivkova at Sofia University - were expressed in even more radical terms in Internet forums. Opinions were divided on the recent past and evaluations of the present, on historical analogies and the question of how fair the transition to democracy had been in Bulgaria. Those commentators in support of the organizers pleaded that Lyudmila Zhivkova deserved to be the subject of academic discussion in a country where there was freedom of speech and a plurality of views on the past. In some of comments, people suggested that Zhivkova had been the victim of an attack because of her cultural projects and "anti-Soviet policy" that went against the position of her father's regime.

By contrast, anti-communists defined the conference as "a disgrace" for the university and shameful for the participants in what they saw as a pseudo-scientific event. Like the Blue Coalition politicians, they referred to the law that criminalizes the communist regime^[19] and appealed to the Attorney General to intervene and punish the conference organizers. For them, this was an unscientific conference and an expression of nostalgia and a desire to rehabilitate and normalize the communist regime on the part of its supporters.

Current Debates

A year later, the conference in memory of Lyudmila Zhivkova is referred to as the "failed" conference. A genuine scholarly discussion of "the cultural opening of Bulgaria to the world" in the period of late socialism never took place. In fact, it seems likely that such a discussion was never the goal of the organizers, who only invited their followers to participate. In their interpretation of the socialist period, Bulgarian scholars of the recent past are still divided into two mutually exclusive camps. In their research and forums, they seem to move along two parallel corridors, with no dialogue between them. The two diametrically opposite discourses on the communist past in Bulgaria can be defined as leftist, on the one hand, and right-wing, liberal, anticommunist, on the other. The authors from the anticommunist circle define the left-wing discourse as normalizing the communist regime and revisionist. Behind the pursuit of objectivist position expressed by their colleagues, they find the claim to neutrality of scientific knowledge, which, however, leads to a dangerous moral relativism and rehabilitation of the communist regime. They share the views that the scientist must have a clear civil position and communism should be defined as "absolute evil".^[20] In an attempt to analyze the leftist normalizing discourse on the communist past and related nostalgia which are getting more popular, the supporters of the anticommunist discourse held a Roundtable in November 2011 and later released a compilation book entitled "Bulgarian communism. Debates and interpretations". During the Roundtable discussions and preparation of the book, a third perspective towards examining the communist past was articulated. Namely - it was expressed by authors who distance themselves from both the pro-communist position rehabilitating communism and the anticommunist version condemning it. They advocate a more nuanced examination of both the communist and pre - communist past.^[21]

At universities, the topic of communism and its legacy became the focus of attention once again in October and November 2013, when Sofia University was the scene of a new wave of political protests and a moral battle led by students demanding "a change of the system". The students who occupied the

main building of the Sofia University, as well as the citizens who filled the central parts of the capital and the major cities with protest marches throughout the summer and autumn of 2013^[22], had demanded a break with the communist legacy, a change of the corrupt political elite, still dependent on the Communist State Security, a new political culture and a new social contract that will lay the foundations of a real democratic system and the rule of law in the country.

Footnotes

1. Lyudmila Todorova Zhivkova (1942-1981) was the daughter of Todor Zhivkov - the Secretary General of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) (1958-1989) and the chairman of the Council of State of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) (1971-1989). Zhivkova was a member of the Central Committee and the Politburo of the Central Committee of the BCP (1979-1981) and chairperson of the Committee of the Arts and Culture from 1975 to 1981. Under her leadership large-scale projects were undertaken in the sphere of culture, such as the celebrations to mark 1300 years of Bulgaria, the "Banner of Peace" International Children's Assembly under the aegis of UNESCO in 1979, and the construction of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia (named after Lyudmila Zhivkova from 1981 to 1990).
2. See Stoil Roshkev, Protest sreshtu konferentsiya za Lyudmila Zhivkova v SU, Balgarska natsionalna televizija (19 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://bnt.bg/bg/news/view/87132/protest_sreshtu_konferencija_za_ludmila_zivkova_v_su; Vili Yankova, Protest v SU zaradi konferentsiya za Lyudmila Zhivkova, DarikNews.bg (19 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=981000; Skandal zaradi konferentsiya, posvetena na Lyudmila Zhivkova, TV7 (19 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://tv7.bg/Новини/България/Конфликти/Скандал-заради-конференция-посветена-на-Людмила-Живкова_1.1_i.9491732_c.40.html#.VMKSWMYbbnd and Mila Geshakova, Dva shturma na protivnitsi na konferentsiya za Lyudmila Zhivkova v SU, 24chasa (19 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1596136>.
3. See Charles S. Maier, Heißes und Kaltes Gedächtnis: Über die politische Halbwertszeit von Nazismus und Kommunismus, *Transit* 22 (2001/2002): 153-165. For the French translation, see Charles S. Maier, *Mémoire chaude, mémoire froide: Mémoire du fascisme, mémoire du communisme*, *Le Débat* 122 (2002): 109-17.
4. Desislava Dmitrova, Sinite iskat otmyana na konferentsiya za Lyudmila Zhivkova, *Dnes* (18 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/konferentzia-ludmila-zhivkova-sinjata-koalitzia-12223882>.
5. Ibid.
6. They cited a statement made two years earlier by Prime Minister Borissov, who is also the leader of GERB: "If we can achieve just one hundredth of what Todor Zhivkov built for Bulgaria and what was done in these years, and reach the economic growth of the past state - it would be a great success for every single government." (Dmitrova, 2012.)
7. Such a proposal was only made at the end of the term of the 41st National Assembly (March 2013). None of the parties that make up the Blue Coalition is represented in the current 42nd National Assembly.
8. Osvirkakha konferentsiyata za Lyudmila Zhivkova, newscafé (19 October 2012), retrieved 28 January 2015, URL: www.webcafe.bg/id_400910579/fpage_2/.
9. https://www.unisofia.bg/index.php/bul/novini/novini_i_s_bitiya/p_tyat_k_m_hrama_na_znaniето_ne_minava_prez_zabrani_i_zabravi - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!!
10. "Bulgarian Communist Party and Communist Party of the Soviet Union - out of the Sofia University".
11. Sofiya Velkova, Protesti i skandali saprovodikha konferentsiyata za Lyudmila Zhivkova, Протести и скандали съпроводиха конференцията за Людмила Живкова, mediapool.bg (19 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/protesti-i-skandali-saprovodiha-konferentsiyata-za-lyudmila-zhivkova-news198546.html>.
12. http://www.foreignartmuseum.bg/en/archive/Ludmila_Zivkova.htm - link nicht mehr abrufbar!!! and Toni Nikolov, Kakva ni ye Lyudmila Zhivkova? *Kultura* (20 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: kultura.bg/web/kakva-ni-e-lyudmila-zhivkova/.
13. The International Children's Banner of Peace Assembly is a festival of children's art under the aegis of UNESCO, which was organized for the first time in 1979 when Lyudmila Zhivkova was the chairperson of the Committee of the Arts and Culture. With the motto "Unity, Creativity, Beauty" the festival took place four times until 1989. A total of 39 000 children from 138 states took part. After 1990 Bulgaria stopped organizing the children's festival. In 1999 Lyudmila Zhivkova's daughter Evgenia established the Lyudmila Zhivkova Foundation, whose purpose it was to re-establish the Assembly.
14. Toni Nikolov, Kakva ni ye Lyudmila Zhivkova, mediapool.bg (5 October 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/kakva-ni-e-lyudmila-zhivkova-news198031.html>.
15. See Diana Ivanova, Koy ima pravo da si spomnya Lyudmila Zhivkova? *Kultura* (9 November 2012), retrieved 28 January 2015, URL: <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/20276>.
16. See N. Tsekov, Dalgoto sboguvane s NRB, *Deutsche Welle* (19 October 2012), retrieved 28 January 2015, URL: www.dw.de/дългото-сбогуване-с-нрб/a-18184071.
17. Daniela Gorcheva, Balgarskiyat intelektualen elit ye vse tay v plen na svoya oportunityunizam, mediapool.bg (23 October 2012), retrieved 28 January 2015, URL: www.mediapool.bg/balgarskiyat-intelektualen-elit-e-vse-tay-v-plen-na-svoya-oportunityunizam-news198657.html.
18. Mariya Velkovska, Dots. Mikhail Gruev: Zad skandalite s istoricheski privkus - politika i vrashtane kam uchebnikarskiya razkaz, *Dnevnik* (27 December 2012), retrieved 23 January 2015, URL: http://www.dnevnik.bg/intervju/2012/12/27/1957180_doc_mihail_gruev_zad_skandalite_s_istoricheski_privkus/.

19. The law declaring the communist regime in Bulgaria as criminal, see State paper 37 (5 May 2000).
20. See Mihail Gruev and Diana Mishkova, eds., *Bulgarian communism: Debates and interpretations*, Sofia: 2013.
21. See Aleksandar Vezenkov, *Kam posledniya debat za "balgarskiya komunizam"*, *Liberalen Pregled* (17 February 2014), retrieved 23 January 2015,
URL: <http://librev.com/2013-03-30-08-56-39/discussion/culture/2314-2014-02-17-10-40-21>; Mayya Grekova, *Otnovo za tsennostite: grazhdanska pozitsiya i nauchno isledvane*, *Balgarski Khelzinski Komitet* (31 October 2013), retrieved 23 January 2015,
URL: <http://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/publikacii/obektiv/mayya-grekova/2013-10/otnovo-za-cennostite-grazhdanska-poziciya-i-nauchno-izsledvane/> and *Balgarskiyat komunizam*, *Kultura* (10 December 2013), retrieved 23 January 2015,
URL: kultura.bg/web/българският-комунизъм/.
22. See Lyuba Yordanova, *Protestite pokazakha, che grazhdanskoto obshtectvo v Balgariya se sabuzhda*, *Kapital* (26 December 2013), retrieved 28 January 2015, URL:
www.capital.bg/vestnikut/capital/k2014/istorii/2013/12/26/2208529_protestite_pokazaha_che_grajdanskoto_obshtestvo_v/.

