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# The “Bulgarian situation”: Constructing the myth of a “national mentality” in Bulgarian discourse and its effect on agency

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the mythic form<sup>1</sup> of the “Bulgarian situation”, which is evoked and managed in moments of social interaction, and particularly during enactments of *oplakvane* (complaining) in Bulgarian discourse. Based on ethnographic examination of naturally occurring talk, interviews, and various media data, I have constructed the larger cultural narrative available in Bulgarian discourse, which explains the origins of a particular national identity, linked to a “national mentality” developed over a historical period. This national identity is constituted communication, and highlights a deeply cultural notion of nationality and biology as being intricately connected, and developed over the context of the Ottoman occupation, and the following period of socialism. Such a discursive conceptualization of nationality has implications for the local understandings of self and agency, as constrained and immobilized, and is also visible in the availability of a larger field of study across disciplines in Bulgaria under the name *narodopsihologij* (national psychology). The study bridges areas of study within postsocialism and communication and addresses the importance of the macro processes in moments of transformation by examining how people are responding to the uncertainty they face in the long transitional period post communism, thus highlighting the complex consequences of the way the past enters the present as novel adaptation.

## Introduction

You know how things are in Bulgaria. It’s bad, you know. Actually, how would you know, you have been away long now. You don’t know, the situation is getting worse, people have become beasts [oskotjli]... 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.<sup>1</sup>

I hear the above sentiment every time I visit Bulgaria, whether spoken by my own parents, high school friends, people meeting me for the first time, long-forgotten relatives, and even at the doctor’s office (“Oh, yeah, well, you are ok in the US, unlike here...”). These snippets contain very rich points of the larger narrative about being a “Bulgarian” in Bulgaria, and “seeing” as well as “understanding” the reality there. This study examines the local discursive conceptualization of “the Bulgarian situation” as a mythical form in popular discourse within Bulgaria, and explores how the particular symbolic narrative is constituted through a communicative practice, *oplakvane* (complaining), which links the past and the present, the individual and the community. Utilizing Philipsen’s definition of a mythic form<sup>2</sup> as well as Labov’s concept of narrative<sup>3</sup>,

I extrapolate the grand narrative of “the Bulgarian situation” as it is constructed and evoked by participants in enactments of *oplakvane*. This grand narrative is the backdrop for the communicative practice of *oplakvane* and provides the story of how the Bulgarian national “mentality” (endemic term) was developed over the years of Ottoman occupation and communism—a fusion between learnt behaviours and biology—making way for a whole field of study by the name of *narodopsihologia*. The myth is constructed based on extensive reading of Bulgarian history and recordings of Bulgarian talk about the past and present of the country.

In previous work, I have examined how the communication term *oplakvane* can be understood as a ritualized communicative practice, which evokes and manages a larger cultural knowledge of “the Bulgarian situation”. One cannot comprehend and participate as a proper “Bulgarian” in social interactions in the country without understanding the narrative of “how things in Bulgaria are”. According to Philipsen’s definition of myth, such cultural codes are used to make sense of the communal conversation, where the larger symbolic narrative provides bases for “harmonious thought and action” (p. 251)<sup>2</sup>, a cultural backdrop for the members’ fit between their past and present. I utilize this understanding of myth to examine the larger public narrative of “the Bulgarian situation” as it becomes visible within the data in a manner that provides cohesion for the participants’ actions and meaning within the grand cultural context and history.

In many ways, the communicative practice of *oplakvane* (term, structure of its communicative enactment, and its function) is not different from other similar “complaining” practices across the world. I have personally explored the comparison between *oplakvane* and Israeli griping as described by Katriel<sup>4</sup> in 1985. Despite the many similarities the two modes have, their main difference is in the fact that *oplakvane*, unlike griping, is not recognized as a separate ritualized form of communication, and this illustrates the different “realities” the practices evoke and manage. Similarly, the “Bulgarian situation” is also not too different from other narratives of countries in a similar geopolitical location and with background of socialism/communism as it relates to Russia. Numerous authors<sup>5678</sup> within post-socialist studies call for and highlight the importance of ethnographic studies of post-socialist countries, which would examine nuances within the daily lives of people and add an understanding of the sociocultural aspects and implications of the specific post-socialist context and the pasts that shaped them.

Bulgaria offers quite an intriguing beginning in this line of research as it had quite a strong socialist influence in the period 1944-1989, and despite the claims of “democratic” orientation since 1989, its people have struggled with experiencing the promise of democracy in their everyday lives in the decades that followed: the country has not fared too well through its economic transitions despite its joining the European Union in 2007. Ethnographic explorations of the communication practices that shape and maintain cultural understandings and how they are navigated within everyday interactions allows for understanding the political and socio-economic turbulence within the country, its continuous struggle with the constant political shifts, as well as the massive population exodus to the west. Examining the underlying narratives that explain and reinforce larger cultural values offers insights that are often missed in more quantitative polls, and show how people themselves make sense of their experience as being raised under one system of rules and then having it removed. There are certain characteristics common to all post-communist countries, such as losing the promise of lifetime employment, privatization of public property, creation of free markets, rise of new nationalism, and growing nostalgia for the past. Focusing on these changes within Bulgaria provides a useful lens for the

examination of processes of economic and political transition especially as the country is one most Westerners have few preconceived ideas about<sup>7</sup>.

One cannot start examining these processes without first understanding the cultural narratives that play in the background and inform people's understandings of themselves, their surroundings, and interactions such as the myth of the "Bulgarian situation". The myth, as I illustrate, highlights what larger cultural meanings manage national identification and understandings of self within the "us" vs. "them" dichotomy previously identified by Verdery<sup>9</sup>, and offers a deeper understanding of the tendency towards finding outside fault for any difficulties and mishaps in the country itself. Verdery<sup>8</sup> argued that this can be observed in the way some national selves have been constructed within historiography in Romani and other Eastern European countries, where the nation has been represented as an innocent victim, subjugated and oppressed by other nations and not its own members. In Bulgaria, this outside oppressor was the Turkish Empire, in other Eastern European countries it was the soviet socialist system and the communist regime—all doing everything possible to ruin the nation's economy and culture—thus the party oppression was just another in the long series. This would offer deeper insight as to how the self, created during socialism, is characterized by "an internalized opposition" to outside "others" (p. 96), and produced particular conditions, which allowed the rising of scapegoating as a political tactic for the explaining of social problems<sup>9</sup>.

### **Ethnography of Communication**

Ethnography of Communication (EC) is a distinctive theoretical framework, methodology, as well as a philosophical orientation, which allows for the understanding of communicative practices, such as *oplakvane*, and their role in maintaining realities. It presumes and investigates communication as the entrance point to, and a metaphor of, social life<sup>10</sup>. EC developed as a response to the need to understand speech and its social life. It provided a theoretical ground for the comparison between the diverse and distinctive functions and ways communities use speaking (and not just language) in the performance of daily life. The EC lens allows for the investigation and understanding of speaking as implicating the cultural economy of a community.

Since its first appearance, EC has engendered a plethora of theoretical and philosophical extensions, such as Cultural Communication Theory<sup>2</sup>, Speech Codes Theory<sup>11</sup>, as well as Cultural Discourse Theory and Analysis<sup>12</sup>. Some studies under the general umbrella of EC are: Katriel's work in the 80's, in which she examined several significant communicative styles of speaking such as griping practices<sup>4</sup> and dugri, or "straight talk"<sup>13</sup>.

### **Cultural Communication and Myth**

Within the EC tradition, Philipsen's work since 1975 further develops Cultural Communication Theory and Speech Codes Theory, where culture is conceptualized as a socially constructed, historically transmitted system of symbols and meanings, premises and rules<sup>11</sup>. He understands cultural communication as distinctive (wherever there is a speech community, there will be at least one distinctive communication system), and communal (the role of cultural communication to play out and relieve the individual-community dichotomy by the use of various communication forms, thus, creating, maintaining, and reaffirming a shared identity). He suggests three cultural forms of communication (ritual, social drama, and myth)<sup>2</sup>.

Philipsen describes ritual (in which the codes are celebrated and affirmed) and its purpose—to maintain consensus and affirm the past, and myth (in which the codes are used to make sense of the communal conversation, as it articulates and applies these codes) as “a great symbolic narrative which holds together the imagination of people and provides bases of harmonious thought and action”<sup>2</sup> (p. 251), its purpose—to creatively bridge past and present, the individual and the community.

The mythic form of communication is a “symbolic narrative”<sup>2</sup>, that provides the link between past and present, between the individual and the community. Such cultural forms show the ways in which individuals are grounded socially within the larger symbolic community and history they relate to, and pool cultural meanings from. As Geertz<sup>14</sup> and Carbaugh<sup>15</sup> argue, such meanings are situated historically and in social occasions, widely accessible, and individually employed. The cultural myth as a form is understood as a story in which the following elements are present: some type of person is confronted with a problem, and finds solution. The telling of such a cultural myth is meant to uncover deeper and significant features within the larger culture<sup>11</sup>.

The story is popular and culturally plausible, appealing to the particular audience because it is grounded and supported by the symbolic myths and rudimentary values within the specific society. Thus, how a particular cultural myth is told reveals features of the said culture. As Hymes<sup>10</sup>, Philipsen<sup>2</sup>, and Carbaugh<sup>15</sup> emphasize, a myth is the larger symbolic story which represents who people are and who they should be. Thus, myths provide the cultural communal resources for how one should act, feel, and be, of how one is to make sense of their own as well as others’ lives. In this way, myths weave the grand story by utilizing the rhetorical and interpretative resources, symbols and meanings, as well as the “rich” points within a particular culture.

## Narrative

Among the scholars to further develop Philipsen’s idea of cultural myths is Berry, who suggests that studying the role of cultural myths, and particularly where story lines (public and personal) meet in various cultures is of crucial importance for enriching intercultural communication<sup>16</sup>. He further focuses on the function of narratives as present in the forms of myths, fables, comedy, etc., which offer positive and negative models, thus organizing and providing consistency to larger cultural values and understandings across time and place. Since such narratives are expressive of the values of the particular place and time, by utilizing Philipsen’s cultural communication approach, one could “hear” the culture of a particular place and time within exactly such myths and the discursive resources they provide in making sense of the world. Berry argues that if a personal story is “heard”, “understood”, or “converges” with a common myth, then a common cultural code is discovered, and vice versa, whereas if a personal story is not understood or heard as resonant to a larger cultural myth, then this signifies the lack of a common code or common culture<sup>16</sup>. I examine the public myth of “the Bulgarian situation” for a code of personhood (or what constitutes “Bulgarian-ness”) that enables Bulgarians to “hear” and enact *oplakvane* appropriately.

## Ethnographic notes

I am a native of Bulgaria, where I lived and received my formal education, and have performed fieldwork there every year since 2011. This project is based on my personal experience as a native *oplakvach* as well as observations of naturally occurring talk during various social events and discussions with around 50 participants (spontaneously expressed attitudes, descriptions of the “situation in Bulgaria”, and elicited responses to

prompts/question about the situation, and (in)appropriate uses of *oplakvane* (both term and enactments). The collected data provides the base for the analysis of *oplakvane* as a distinct communicative term, the practice it refers to, and the construction of the myth of “the Bulgarian situation,” and includes over 94 hours of naturally occurring talk. In addition to the recordings, I have collected media print, online, and video data including: newspaper articles, the bTV rubric “The Reporters,”<sup>17</sup> and online content (blog posts and their comments, online political articles, facebook political groups and organizations’ posts), caricatures (altered photographs), text messages, and songs. The following construction of the myth is based on my observations and recorded data, and is endorsed by the participants. I use utterances (in quotations) directly from the data to compile the myth of the “Bulgarian situation”.

### **The “Bulgarian situation”: The “country”**

The participants describe themselves as living in a “non-country”, a statement in which the word *dargava* (state) is used to emphasize the political aspects of the term. Thus, a connection to the perceived to be non-existent democratic state of the country. To them, the country is not “democratic” because the values and beliefs associated with such a concept are not present in Bulgaria, or if they are, they are distorted. The statement “this country can be only if they took all people out of it and inserted a new people” is used to culturally manage this discrepancy between what “democracy” seems to them and “what the situation is” in Bulgaria. The country is often described as “not for living”, but for “survival”, which implies that there is no enjoyment and satisfaction, just bare needs being met. Physically, it is a country where “the roads are barely usable, and it is dirty”. The traffic is horrible because of bad roads but also because of people not obeying the rules and driving aggressively. It is a country with “horrible parking problems because instead of coming up with long-term solutions, the corrupt officials steal money and do not complete any construction projects” and only increase fees and taxes for their own gain. The participants refer to Bulgaria as an “incompetent country”, a “scary” place, where everything is “madness”, “rotten”, a “not normal country”, or an “anti-country”, an “idiotic country”, “unlike any other European countries”, a “concentration camp”, a country in which “good people are few and far between”, and a country with “bad” future.

Often when utilizing the term *dargava* (country), the participants are implicitly referring to the people residing in the country, and not the geographical entity. Under the umbrella term *dargava* (country), however, they include specific “ways” of acting, behaving, and thinking. Thus, the term “Bulgarian situation” is used by the participants to allude to the social, economic, and political environment. Their negative evaluation gets highlighted in various curse words they sometimes use when enacting *oplakvane*: “this f\*\*\*ed country”, “rotten country”, and “this screwed up country”, once more, meaning not the geographical aspect of the country but mainly the nation’s population.

Apart from using the term *dargava* (country, state) to allude to the complicated cultural relationship Bulgarians have with democracy as a political system, the participants use the term to shift focus to the people. The response participants give when asked what the problem in Bulgaria is frequently includes “*Bulgarshтина*” (Bulgarianness), and “*Bulgarska rabota*” (the Bulgarian way). Thus, any socio-economic and political problems are often related to the way Bulgarians behave. When asked to elaborate, the participants say that Bulgarians “do not follow rules, and particularly laws and regulations, even ones protecting their well-being.”

A participant mentioned how this is different from the case in other countries—how people there want their common areas and parks clean, throw their trash at designated

areas, and keep their roads in good conditions, unlike in Bulgaria—where “we” do not do these things “just because”, because “we feel above the law.” Giatzidis describes this as a common practice for post-communist countries, where destroying public (thus party) property and disobeying laws is a way for people to regain autonomy from the government—they perceive any rules and laws as connected to a grand scheme or plot by the government and are thus perceived to not be in their interest: not complying as a form of rebellion<sup>18</sup>. However, instead of understanding this tendency as a cultural phenomenon, as response to a particular historical political context, discursively it is constructed as “being a Bulgarian”.

### **The concept of the national “mentality”**

Through this larger cultural narrative about “the way Bulgarians are” a particular cultural code of a national identity, a code of *nacionalen mantalitet* (national mentality), i.e., an endemic term used to refer to a compilation of behaviours and ways of thinking that have been created over time, becomes visible. In many instances, the participants explicitly place the spotlight on the “national mentality” by claiming it to be the “reason” for the “Bulgarian situation”, or implicitly, by placing themselves in opposition to the specific behaviours which fall under it, thus distancing themselves. This cultural notion of a “mentality” being “national” highlights the fusion between the cognitive and biological (one that is “genetic”, ingrained, and not easily modified) and nationalism (defined by imaginary but powerful borders). Frequently, these biological aspects to the cultural construct “national mentality” are further emphasized when participants compare Bulgarians to animals, having animalistic traits, and needs: they are “like cockroaches and can survive anything.” Bulgarians are also frequently described as being “sheep who blindly follow anyone in front of them, and have short memory span and easily forget bad previous [political] leaders.” Bulgarians are often said to have a “herd mentality” and a “herd” way of thinking.

The participants use the word *oskotj* (become animalistic) to refer to the present day population of the country, alluding to people becoming so focused on survival that they start fighting teeth and nails for the resources available. Often this attitude is connected to the communist past, when there was nothing in stores and only people with connections did not starve. This culturally reinforces the notion of that so many years of not-having have made Bulgarians into “everyone-for-themselves, animals, focused on hoarding material possessions”, or in the words of another participant, Bulgaria is a country where “while some are [living] in the trash, others are shopping”.

This “national mentality” is claimed to have developed during the Ottoman occupation and further solidified during the decades of communism, the following period of political transition, and is responsible for the present day “situation”. The mentality is the combination of all “bad” behaviours Bulgarians have accumulated such as: “stealing, being corrupt, not following rules, being aggressive towards one other, screwing each other over”. The mentality is also viewed as a specific “Bulgarian work ethic” where people tend to make money without working, “through connections in the government” (mainly developed during communism), and quick, presumed “shady” deals (companies such as Lukoil); the mentality affects “the way laws are created”, which do not serve people but political interests and has resulted in a corrupt justice system that protects criminals.

Additionally, participants claim that aspects of the “national mentality” can be observed in politicians, who purchase votes only to steal as much money as possible before their mandate runs out. However, what constitutes “theft” and “cheating” is also very cultural,

as a practice of “cheating the system” also developed during communism but was considered a form of rebellion against the system and thus was encouraged and highly valued. An example is that it is considered a “theft” if someone steals from your house, but is not if you cheat on your water/electric bill (since you are only taking back what the system has stolen). In such instances, *oplakvane* is used to manage the cultural tension and differentiate between who has the “mentality” and is doing the “wrong” cheating/thieving and who is not.

The participants consider the “mentality” to be omnipresent and affect everyone, since even those who might not have it themselves are still subjected to other’s negative influence; where “even if they work honestly, they are bound to lose”. Thus, only one way of relating becomes culturally valued—suspicion, mistrust, and negativity. This cultural line of suspicion weaves itself into the grand narrative and cultural understanding of the country as a whole. The place Bulgarians inhabit is a dark place, roamed by creatures: cockroaches, sheep, swindlers and cheats. Descriptions of Bulgaria as a “mafia country”, a place where “not that the country has its mafia, but the mafia has its country” then become frequent exclamations at public places even in front of strangers.

So what is one to do? How is one to act in this situation based on animalistic, horrific “mentality?” I would like to highlight the particular cultural meanings about action, which can be extrapolated from this narrative. These instances illustrate the communicative practices available in Bulgarian discourse, which show the participants to perceive themselves as “blindly following like sheep,” listening and obeying despite reason, and “putting up with any government regardless of how dysfunctional it is.” This is illustrated by a frequently used by the participants proverb: *Slonena glavica, sabj ne j seche* (A head bowed low, a sword cannot reach), which alludes to a shared belief that it is better not to stand out, not to disagree even if you are in the right. This inactivity is reflected elsewhere where the participants agree that “Bulgarians should be left on their own since they would only succeed in destroying each other, achieving complete annihilation as a people, and only then would the country [as a geographic place] have a chance.”

Another option is to reciprocate, be a *govedo* (animal, beast) in response, which the participants perceive to be partially due to (a) the “mentality” being genetic (we all are afflicted), and (b) the understanding that only a *govedo* can understand another *govedo* (one has to act like them). They consider this to be their right when the judicial and political system is perceived to be useless.

If, by some chance, one does not have the “mentality”, the only solution expressed in numerous acts of *oplakvane* is to “save” themselves and leave the country (emigrate). In practice, many young people do so. Many middle aged people as well, in search of jobs. However, when this solution is offered within enactments of *oplakvane*, even though the participants are explicit in their opinion that all “normal” people “should” emigrate, the sentiment is never truthful in the sense of information sharing. The purpose of such utterances as part of the enactment is to express the frustration of the socio-political and economic situation. By stating how they could sell everything they own, and go to any other European country, they are expressing bitterness of how things are not working in Bulgaria, and is meant and understood to serve a cultural function of affirming a shared fate.

## The Myth

This larger narrative that engenders this cultural notion of biology (the “mentality”) and nationalism as intricately fused in the case of Bulgaria highlights history and geography



as the origin. It all began because Bulgaria was situated at a focal place between the “East” and the “West,” and once held borders “at three seas” (the period of 1100s, famous as the “Golden Age”, where the country encompassed significant territories) only to succumb (due to inside political rift between the royal heirs) to the Ottoman Empire. Once the royal heirs of the Second Bulgarian Empire (14th century), started to squabble and turn against each other, the country was left without a cohesive stronghold and soon submitted to the invaders. The length of the Ottoman occupation is frequently blamed in discourse on the particular “herd”, “sheep” mentality—an “inability of Bulgarians” to return to the values and strength of character of old times. This narrative highlights the “mentality” as something that “went genetically wrong with the nation” and allowed the present-day socio-political and economic decay. Most Bulgarians grow up with a narrative of glory of the Bulgarian history and roots that were corrupted, and lost during the Ottoman occupation, which were affected in such ways as to “mutate” into a “national mentality”, instances of which can be seen nowadays everywhere. This Bulgarian concept of mutation, and the reinforcement of negative behaviours by outside forces (Ottoman, socialist, etc.), constitutes a particular cultural national identity, which is mutually intelligible, deeply felt, and widely accessible.

### ***Narodopsihologij* (“National psychology”)**

Through these utterances, a grand narrative of the “Bulgarian situation”, as caused by a “national mentality,” is constituted within various discourse. Within social interaction, the participants’ speech reveals assumptions of the presence of a historically crafted way of being and thinking, which is shaped and reinforced within the particular context of the Ottoman occupation and the socialist influence, which followed. This is not unlike the way other national identities are fashioned, but in this case, the particular creation myth supports and emphasizes inactivity within the political sphere as it links the social and the biological. This “national mentality” is coded as unchangeable, a constant that is historically and contextually prevaricated and “burnt into the genes” of Bulgarians. It is coded as something that arose within a particular setting but fused with the cells and the neurons of a particular nationality, and thus, cannot be altered easily.

This way of coding, understanding, and reconstituting a national identity that perpetuates a specific socio-economic and political status quo has deep implications for understanding the self, the place the self inhabits, and how this self ought to act within its surrounding. The point is not to simply understand the way Bulgarians act, see themselves, and their country, but also how it implicates the way they perceive national boundaries and the individual’s place within it. Thus, this myth is illustrative of not only Bulgarians and their relation to their motherland but also of how the world functions as a whole, and the connection between biology and nationhood. The grand narrative links the political situation of a country in transition to the larger “traits” of Bulgarians that have prevented successful political transitions. This origin narrative of the birth and rise of a “Bulgarian national mentality”, is highly visible in the presence of a larger field of studies present in Bulgaria: one called *narodopsihologija* (national psychology).

When the participants are prompted to explain what specifically they mean by this, a very popular joke is mentioned:

In hell, each country has its own boiling cauldron where all sinners are stewing together. Each cauldron has devils guarding it with pitchforks, making sure no one escapes. However, they do not have anyone standing guard at the Bulgarian cauldron. Why is that?

Because any time one of the sinners attempts to climb out, the rest make sure to pull him/her back down.

This joke is so well known that is often mentioned partially just with the mere: “you know how it is in hell, right?”. There is a Bulgarian proverb with similar meaning: *Ne e vagno az da sam dobre, a e vagno Vute da e zle*. The direct translation is “it is not important that I am well, as long as Vute [generic name for a neighbour] is not well”. These two instances of common cultural knowledge provide insight into the conceptualization of *narodopsihologia*, i.e., “Bulgarian national psychology”, a popular term in published works within ethnology, sociology, and history. In many interactions, the reference to this common “mentality” is subtler and appears when the participants are discussing how things in the country are not likely to change. Participants frequently mention that, in “normal countries this [generic problem] would not be happening” and “there, people know there are rules”. Thus, the trait (people behaving problematically) is attached to all other Bulgarians—in this case the government and clients—and the cultural notion is once more reinforced.

Data from an office setting includes participants that describe instances, in which clients yell or curse *zaradi takiva kato vas njmam pari* (“because of people like you I don’t have money”) and calling the service providers (technicians, secretaries, and even the managers) *chorbadjii* (term from Turkish, used to emphasize power and money acquired by connections to those in authority), where any examples of problematic people are attributed to the “mentality”.

In another interaction, the sentiment as to how Bulgarians deal with each other is made explicit again: “all are hyenas. And everyone wants to screw you over!” and the proper response is: “you have to be a bigger hyena than them” since “you don’t have a choice”. These behaviours, according to the participants, are learnt: in one interaction, a participant mentions thieves in churches who are disrespectful and then elaborates how *v Bulgaria se nasagda negativno vsi4ko* (“everything negative is instilled in Bulgarian”), especially “lawlessness” (*bezzakonieto*). Even more fascinating is the way other countries have started learning these “Bulgarian ways” of doing business. A participant’s statement (also echoed by a Romanian businessmen visiting Bulgaria) illustrates this:

[F]oreign companies with which you have a contract also take advantage of you because they say ‘ah you have cheap labour, and you can work for no pay’ [where] they [non-Bulgarian businessmen] also learn that this is how it works [and they] will not try this elsewhere, in other countries, because they know they can only get away with it in Bulgaria.

## Summary and Discussion

Understanding the notion of the “Bulgarian situation” as a larger narrative, a mythic construction played out within communicative practices, allows for the fuller comprehension of codes of personhood, social relations, dwelling, and action as not only infusing communication but also being reinforced through interaction. By evoking and managing the conception of the “Bulgarian situation”, particular understandings of proper action (in this case inaction) within the political and social domain, are being highlighted and reinforced culturally. Examining such a conceptualization of a political and socio-economic situation as linked to a national identity through biology, which is constituted through interaction, offers insights as to the significance of communicative practices to not only reflect but also shape worldviews and social life.

This particular national identity, which is both painful and convenient, is detested (as it allows a very “herd,” subjugated, surreptitious, ugly, and opportunistic way of

operating to persevere) yet, admired as a method of survival, which lead the country into modernity. In my data people often *se oplakvat* (complain) about how no one in Bulgaria follows the rules and thus, the country as a whole will not be able to improve socially, yet, they themselves proudly profess their own disregard for similar rules, and the way they tricked or outsmarted a government official. This paradox, makes sense through an ethnographic perspective, when the context is taken into consideration—the created dichotomy in the way identity is constructed and understood as well as the biological roots of the “mentality”.

Such a divide between legality and legitimacy, where the new legal framework is constantly circumvented via social practices that people “deem more appropriate to their circumstances” and result from this “national mentality” illustrates how legal norms and institutions coexist with other norms and social conduct “locally” considered legitimate despite being “extralegal or even illegal”<sup>18</sup>. This discrepancy gives rise to misinterpretations and tension between the state and the citizens, and results in the “social production of mistrust” both in Bulgaria and in other post-socialist countries<sup>19</sup>. In the Bulgarian case, this production of mistrust was exacerbated throughout the centuries of Ottoman domination, with the situation not changing substantially in the period from the liberation until 1944, with the country being ruled by elites pursuing their own interests<sup>20</sup>. In addition, the following socialist years, as the informal economy, black market and interpersonal networking developed, this discrepancy only more firmly took root.

Bulgarians were given “citizenship” but do not consider themselves citizens yet. Being a part of a democratic society provides benefits but also comes with responsibilities and giving up some rights. Not following the rules of such a democracy is also beneficial for some—corruption, money laundering, trafficking, and stealing subsidies from European Union funds. Thus, a communicative practice of *oplakvane* (complaining) has evolved to manage the tensions created by the disillusionment with a socio-political and economic status, and the ongoing political transitions that never lead anywhere. However, because *oplakvane* is not recognized as a separate communicative practice, with particular goals and ends, it becomes the most accessible and easily understandable way of speaking many Bulgarians utilize in various situations. Furthermore, *oplakvane* evokes and reaffirms a particular cultural reality of the “mentality”, which explains and allows for political inactivity. If the practice is recognized as a ritualistic form of communication that serves some purposes but it is not an all-encompassing way of speaking, it would put into question the reality it manages.

My study makes a kind of prevalent communication practice “scrutable” for people, so they no longer have to (or even can) just blindly go about doing it, once it is introduced to them. It frees the practice for thought and inspection. Such seeping of *oplakvane*, as a communicative practice that evokes and solidifies a cultural understanding of national identity as biological, “learnt” but fused with cognitive processes, and the resulting socio-political and economic situation, not simply affect but stifle other possible discursive tools that might otherwise constitute a different notion of agency and political action.

## Conclusion

Examining *oplakvane* through cultural discourse analysis and ethnography of communication provides one more example of the significance of common culture, and

furthermore, a deeper understanding of the locally existing social relations, the cultural landscape, and the various ways the individual is imagined.

Understanding how the presence of such a communicative practice in Bulgaria allows and maintains a cultural understanding of reality based on problematic behaviours, determined and fused with organic matter within a cultural understanding of a national psychology, allows for not only gaining crucial insight into the way communication and culture shape social interaction but also a way to disrupt the learnt understandings of sociality and personhood that prevent us from enhancing our daily lives.

If the participants view *oplakvane* as a “useless” communicative practice, then, this would put into question the reality the practice reaffirms and reconstitutes. Recognizing a communicative practice as such a ritualized form, which evokes and utilizes the larger myth of the “Bulgarian situation”, would draw attention away from the reality it employs, and shift focus to the participants as somewhat active members in the construction and maintenance of this reality. Here, we see a clear example of discourse as the starting point of understanding identity and social realities. We evoke and creatively manage this discourse as a resource to perform the cultural and communal function, as it is imbued with and shaped by the voices of our past.

The discourse, which positions and repositions us in a particular place, allows and restricts particular actions. It utilizes and reaffirms the culture-scape we navigate in order to make not only our actions but also the actions of others coherent and legitimate. And maybe, if we could enter ethnographically this cultural terrain through communication and discourse, we could see how a particular myth of the specific “Bulgarian situation” (the historical processes and factors that have led to our present socioeconomic and political ineffectiveness) is played out and reaffirmed in our individual lives, thus, rendering it true. This approach of merging and understanding communication culturally allows for not only the comprehending of the “problem” in Bulgaria but also for an intervention and the disruption of such a myth that keeps us within a cultural reality of inaction and socio-political stagnation.

Through ethnographic examination of the discourses available as cultural resources within the larger Bulgarian interactional terrain, I offer a way of re-seeing the practice as it relates to member-ing within the cultural community within Bulgaria, I offer not just one more example of understanding the role of cultural terms for communication as they provide insight into the deeper inner-workings of cultural communication, the use and significance of speech codes as carrying the meaning for and of personhood, social relations, action, and dwelling, but also I highlight the importance and nuanced ethnographic work within communication that needs to be done within Eastern European countries. The field of ethnography of communication (as related to cultural communication, and the development of cultural discourse analysis) is still largely unexplored when understanding issues of identification, national “characters”, and the role of socialism/communism as shaped and played out within moments of interaction in Eastern European areas.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes

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