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"Good Job, But Bulgarian": Identifying "Bulgarian-ness" Through Cultural Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

By using cultural discourse analysis and ethnography, naturally occurring talk and interviews were examined for local constructions of “Bulgarian-ness” in order to formulate explicit and implicit cultural propositions about being “Bulgarian,” and cultural premises about being (“Bulgarian-ness” as problematic) and emotion (anger, frustration) as connected. This article illustrates the notion of the phrase as a local cultural symbol within Bulgarian discourse that evokes deep cultural meanings for a way of being (“Bulgarian-ness” and the West/East dichotomy), emotions (frustration, hopelessness), and a social world (the “Bulgarian situation”) as continuously negotiated in relation to conceptualizations of “Balkanism.”

Key words: identity, Bulgaria, cultural discourse analysis, post-socialism, emotion

Introduction

> Хубава работа, ама българска.
>
> *Hubava rabota, ama Balgarska.*
>
> Good job, but Bulgarian.

The above-mentioned phrase is widely known and frequently used within everyday Bulgarian discourse. It is used in instances when a job has been performed just barely: not done completely, with minimum effort, resources, or interest. When you sweep but leave most of the dirt behind. When you fix a leaky pipe superficially. When you finish things not in the up-to-code, but in the easiest possible way. The emphasis is not on doing so because of lack of resources or abilities, but out of laziness, lack of desire, or even on purpose. It is *hubava rabota, ama Bulgarska* when the streets with dangerous potholes have finally been fixed (after numerous complaints and delays) but are repaired with faulty/cheap material and start crumbling again within a month. It is *hubava rabota, ama Bulgarska*, when new “organic” foods are introduced in the local market only to soon be discovered as cheap ordinary produce. It is *hubava rabota, ama Bulgarska* when you hire manual laborers to finish a roof and they take the initial payment without ever showing up to work. The examples are numerous. Just as a joke I recently googled the phrase. First, using the Cyrillic alphabet, I only had to type as far as “nice job but” for the search engine to autofill the rest. Pages upon pages appeared with the following content:

- A post with pictures of streets with potholes and faulty asphalt highlighting the lack of repair for years despite numerous complaints (2018)
- An editorial on being lazy in the office enumerating all the ways one can procrastinate and do as little as possible (2016)
- A scathing editorial on the 2016 political debacle and corruption charges of the Brazilian president, emphasizing that the president has "Bulgarian roots," and therefore her "screw ups" can be blamed on that, calling it the *bacilicus bulgaricus* (2016)
- Another scathing editorial on the topic of a major road along the coastline of Bulgaria, which took years to be paved, which was made so narrow, that two cars could barely pass each other (2015)
- A case of an electric pole in a small town, and which was not safe with such strong electricity passing through it that it damaged the road's asphalt (2016)
- A sports' article on the numerous issues with corruption in the Bulgarian soccer leagues (2015)
- An article discussing the opening of a new highway in the country, focusing on the numerous years and EU funding that was appropriated during its construction (2011)

This is just the first page of searches. Most of these situations could occur anywhere: government and administrative corruption is not singularly Bulgarian. Issues of state organizations being slow to respond to road conditions can be observed in many places. And sports teams' scandals are nothing new. So why are these phenomena labeled as "Bulgarian?" What is the character and political significance of such national framings in so-called transitional societies like Bulgaria? With its focus on the micro-discourses of identity in Bulgaria, this project aims to contribute to the larger scholarship on interaction, intercultural and international communication, post-socialism, and transitology research.

As Ghodsee (2011) has demonstrated, Bulgaria is a particularly fruitful post-socialist field of study as it was a unique yet representative case of a country transitioning from socialism to democracy. It is unique—as the country used to be one of the closest allies of the USSR during its socialist period (despite not being part of the Soviet Union), yet representative—as it shares numerous traits with other countries: losing the promise of lifetime employment, the

privatization of property, the creation of free markets, the rise of new nationalism, and a growing nostalgia towards the socialist past. Hence, using cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017) this study interrogates the social identity of "Bulgarian-ness", as constructed through an "us" vs. "others" alignment. I illustrate how a generalized notion of the "others" as related to a post-socialist background is evoked and managed within social interactions in Bulgarian discourse. This is not to say that all people in Bulgaria embrace these symbols and forms of identification, but that such cultural symbols and their meanings are widely available and historically situated discursive resources, which participants frequently employ in interactions.

Whether called a "Bulgarian mentality" (Author, 2018), *Bulgarshtina* ("Bulgarian-ness"), *Bulgarska mu rabota* ("Bulgarian job/way"), or "Balkanism," the symbol and its negative meaning have continuously resurfaced within everyday discourse in Bulgaria in order to refer to traits, behaviors, individuals, and institutions perceived to be problematic. This discursive notion has been adopted to the communal discourse of self- and other-identification. This article explores the following questions: what are the local ways the "Bulgarian job" and "Bulgarian-ness" is constructed and employed in daily interactions? What cultural norms are explicitly constituted through talk about this symbol? What larger cultural values for being, feeling, and dwelling are implicitly highlighted through the use of this symbol? What do these meanings say explicitly and implicitly about the social world which they occupy? How is the use of this symbol related to larger discursive constructions of the West-East divide? What are the implications of such values and self- and other-identification?

"Bulgarian-ness" in the shifting geo-political contexts of communication

Previous research on a Bulgarian identity has predominantly been quantitative and focused on specific diasporas (Tereshchenko & Archer, 2015; Genova, 2017), memory (Avdikos, 2013), identity struggles within Roma populations (Nacu, 2011), identity and life satisfaction (Dimitrova, Buzea, & Jordanov, 2013), and a Bulgarian identity in Macedonia (Nancheva & Koneska, 2015). More recent research on identity has primarily focused on the effects and implications of a European Union membership (Neofotistos, 2009), "European" identity formation (Slavtcheva-Petkova & Mihelj, 2013), "Europeanness" as re-packaged identities

(Davidova, 2006), Bulgarian migrants abroad (Genova, 2017), and national identity (Rice, 2002; Genov, 2006; Mitropolitski, 2014). There has also been a strong focus on transitology and the country's lack or need to "catch up" with its Western democratic counterparts (Szwat-Gyłybowa, 2014). Vassilev (2003) overviewed the problematic "transition" period in Bulgaria as a combination of numerous factors, where "de-industrialization, unemployment, poverty, growing income disparity, mass emigration, crime and corruption have reached alarming and destabilizing proportions" (p.100) by citing a plethora of local and international research.

The focus on the "backward," "primitive," and "barbarian" when referring to the geographical location of the Balkans, similar to Said's (1995) notion of orientalism, has mostly been discussed in detail by Todorova (2009, p.3): "What has been emphasized about the Balkans is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world." Todorova (2009) highlighted the ways such a notion was institutionalized, starting with the Balkan wars (1912-13), in order to become one of the most powerful derogatory designations across disciplines such as history, international relations, and political science. Todorova (2009) also highlighted that this phenomenon began with innocent inaccuracies due to incomplete knowledge of geography passed on through tradition; the following infusion of political, socio-cultural, and ideological notes attached to the term "Balkan" starting during World War I; and the following "dissociation" between the meaning and the "object" coupled with later (post-1989) loaded ascription of said object with particular political ideology.

Todorova (2009) emphasized that such balkanism was not a subspecies of orientalism as, despite the numerous changes the geographical area had endured, historians often continued the discourse and the use of the term as a powerful notion separate from historical time. She (Todorova, 2009) argued that, unlike the often abstract aspects of "the Orient," the Balkans' geographical concreteness, their "Ottoman legacy," and inability to fit in a neat East-West dichotomy perpetuated their construction as not just an "incomplete other" but an "incomplete self." This notion crystallized over repeated use, and while scholars have questioned judging Third world countries by colonial era views of civilization, this has not been the case for the Balkans. The lack of colonial legacy and the discrepancy between Western European "classical"

notions of where the Balkans "should have arrived" and their actual socio-political trajectory opened the door for "balkanism." Additionally, Todorova argued (2009), Christianity (its Orthodox nature) within the Balkans was both positioned as a subspecies of "oriental despotism thus as inherently non-European or non-Western" (p.20) and a stronghold against said oriental other-ness.

This study examines how this larger Western-centric discourse has been adopted and internalized within the local community, where the participants themselves utilize these West-East symbols and their one-sided meaning in order to rationalize the lack of significant political change in Bulgaria as well as to self-identify politically. The East-West divide, as an outcome of 18th-century and Enlightenment philosophies of evolution and progress towards democracy, pitted countries against each other based on economic performance and clumped the East as the epitome of all things industrially backward, lacking advanced social relations and institutions, and possessing irrational and superstitious cultures—all "unmarked by Western Enlightenment" (Todorova, 2009, p.11). Evolution meant the movement was not a simple one, thus positioning the East (thus the Balkans) as both an elastic and ambiguous and a concrete historical experience (Todorova, 2009): with both a "dark Ottoman legacy" in too many crucial elements, constantly attempting to emulate a perceived European-ness, the "ultimate Europeanization of the Balkans (p.13)." And while the Orient held a mystical, forbidden, feminine, and sensual appeal, the Balkans embodied all the negatives, "uncivilized, primitive, crude, cruel, and, without exception, disheveled," a "reflected light of the Orient" (Todorova, 2009, p.14).

Szwat-Gyłybowa (2014) also criticized this notion of the need to "catch up," as prominent within a process view of a country's development, which oversimplified and put a variety of cultural, economic, social, philosophical, psychological, and geopolitical forces on a continuum of development. And even though, Szwat-Gylybowa (2014) argued, such a perspective had an optimistic potential of hope to invigorate countries on the developmental path in the beginning, it still carried the stigma of immaturity linked to a biology focused paradigm of development. Within Bulgaria, in particular, Szwat-Gylybowa (2014) argued that this notion of "catching up" was part of the discussion even before the country became a political nation during

the initial modernization reforms during its time under the Ottoman Empire (19th century). Todorova (1997) had previously argued similarly that such an inferiority was further developed through a wave of students being educated abroad, only amplifying the subservient status Christians had within the Ottoman Empire, where the millet was controlled by the Greeks. It was social practices targeting cultural affinity and the tolerant living conditions in the Ottoman Empire that allowed the community to survive as such, despite being far removed from positions and structural instruments of status (Szwat-Gylybowa, 2014). Later, post-Ottoman Empire, the "catching up" took the shape of cultural universalism and the notion of the "ancient soul" of the people, only to be replaced by skepticism towards ongoing cultural change. Szwat-Gylybowa (2014) highlighted that the phenomenon of "catching up" was further linked to frustration and approached meta-critically in attempts to understand what that means for the country.

One argument against the notion of catching up used emic (to the local Orthodox Christianity) terms to highlight the divergent notions of time—as spherical for the Orthodox East as opposed to linear in the Latin West—a dichotomy that predates the Enlightenment and is linked to a different reality and understanding of culture and history that emphasizes repetition and not progress (Крумов, 2003). Thus, the earlier strive towards change, a Western-like development, and the following frustration and dis-enchantment opened the way for questioning and attempting to define what makes the country not follow such a path, concentrating on the possible differences between Bulgaria and the West (Szwat-Gylybowa, 2014). Such difference was then highlighted as "retardation," "immaturity," (stigmatized) or "religious domination" (prized) despite the lack of everyday practices to support it. Kopecky and Mudde (2000) also emphasized that despite the large number of empirical studies, which examine the wide disparity between the democratization processes in East-Central Europe on one side and the Balkans and post-Soviet republics on the other, there is not much agreement about what explains this disparity and the research is predominantly linear and proscriptive—with Western democracies viewed as the most advanced and the ones to be emulated. We would be wise to heed Kopecky and Mudde's (2000) call for a more nuanced and attuned approach to the diversity (conceptual, political, and cultural) of state and nation building.

In response, the aim of this study is to examine the interactional construction of the "Bulgarian mentality" (and any variations within this umbrella: "Bulgarian job/way," "Bulgarian-ness," etc.) as the "others" (those who exhibit/possess it) and the deeper historically bound cultural understandings, norms, and premises that guide such talk. When utilized in interaction, such terms evoke and manage explicit and implicit statements about how people understand themselves, as situated within their social worlds: who they are (personhood), what is a proper way of feeling (emotion) within their social world, and the world they inhabit (dwelling) (Carbaugh, 2007a). A variety of disciplines have recognized the role of language (Silverstein, 1979; Ochs, 1992; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Mendoza-Denton, 2002; etc.), discourse (Sherzer, 1987; Fairclough, 1992; Urban, 2000; Carbaugh, 2007a; etc.) in the construction and maintenance of social realities, where communication is constitutive of meanings and expressions of and about reality (Carbaugh, 1995). Cultural discourse analysis is a way of analyzing communication as a cultural resource and examining what practices locally "suggest generally" about human communication (Carbaugh, 1995, p. 271).

The cultural meanings, which the participants employ during interaction (about personhood, social relations, dwelling, emotion, and action) are understood as ''hubs of cultural meaning.'' The role of the interpretative analysis, then, is to explain these hubs as the "ongoing meta-cultural commentary" (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 174). Each hub implicates the others, even though they may not be all active within an interaction, and include: meanings about being, personhood and identity (who one is), meanings about relating and relationships (how we are connected), meanings about acting, action and practice (what people consider themselves to be doing), meanings about feeling and affect (what is appropriate, how, and where), and meanings about dwelling and place (sense of place). As the analysis focuses on any one discursive hub as focal (made explicit by the participants' use of particular discursive devices, such as cultural terms, phrases, gestures, etc.), related webs of "interrelated, taken-for-granted, cultural meanings, concerning being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling" (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 174; Scollo & Milburn, 2019, p. xxxiii), called semantic radiants of meaning, are also made implicit (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2012, 2017).

I re-examine the folk notion of "Balkan mentality," or "dark Balkan character" as it has entered everyday interactions and local conceptualizations of the self. This phenomenon is not just confined to academic fields but is also a widely available local cultural notion, which gets creatively used to discuss (excuse or blame) a variety of behaviors and socio-economic problems and thus align politically (Author, under review). This study approaches understanding such mystic generalizations by examining how the community itself utilizes and re-constitutes such folk notions in order to both challenge and embrace their historical past: the creative ways such "Bulgarian-ness" is actively constructed and constantly re-imagined in order to locate and challenge problematic behaviors, self-identify, reinforce social relations, and align politically. First, I discuss specific communication devices which make "Bulgarian-ness" explicit, and then analyze the larger cultural values that are implicit in the discursive use of such resources.

Discourse Analysis of "Good job, but Bulgarian"

Data for this analysis was collected ethnographically (participant observations and interviews) during the period of 2010-2016. I also have a native experience of the area as I grew up and lived in Sofia, Bulgaria until 2003. During my fieldwork I recorded (per IRB standards) and took notes of naturally occurring talk and interviews with 50 participants: over 94 hours of naturally occurring talk at social events (households, public settings, travel, and miscellaneous service encounters). Despite my insider position, I was often interactionally positioned as an outsider, where people frequently mentioned that I have "forgotten how things in Bulgaria are." The participants perceiving me as a "non-Bulgarian" made for more frequent initiations of both non-prompted and prompted talk about "Bulgarian-ness." I recorded spontaneous discourse in formal and informal settings, which was then examined for instances of identification and mentions of Bulgarian-ness: "how we/Bulgarians are", "Bulgarian job", and/or a variation.

The instances of spontaneously occurring talk were then supplemented with more structured interviews (40 hours), which include questions based on the data and my observations as a native: what is considered to qualify as "Bulgarian-ness," expressed attitudes towards the phenomenon, and attitudes towards descriptions of behaviors that could be labeled as "Bulgarian" or the "Bulgarian way." Bulgarian was the tool for analysis, where the collection, recording, and analysis was performed in the Bulgarian language, and then translated into

English for reporting purposes. Coded letters are given to the participants to protect their privacy. Most of the utterances analyzed below come from the unprompted interactional part of the data: as part of a spiral sequence of acts about the problematic socio-political situation in the country. The participants often built upon each other's statements without any prompting on my side. Similarly, a large number comes from 2012 as I spent the longest period (6 months) of continuous fieldwork there during that year.

All data was analyzed through cultural discourse analysis guidelines creating the following steps: 1) An excerpt of the data (instances); 2) Highlighting local norms (propositions) after each (locating two main discursive hubs) using the participants key communication symbols and staying as close to the participants' discursive choices in order to make the local semantic logic in their discourse explicit (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017), and then; 3) Moving laterally and formulating premises of belief and value.

Analysis

"Bulgarian-ness" instances

"Bulgarian-ness" and the "Bulgarian job" were frequently associated with something negative and the participants provided specific instances as examples:

> *Bonus of 100,000 a person. The person on the street has no money for medication while they get bonuses!*
>
> *Here the people [as a whole] is messed up a lot… It is not normal!*
>
> *He goes and kills a person, goes and runs him over and makes a deal with the prosecutor buying them some brandy… and they take the money.*
>
> (March, 2012)
>
> *That guy, you know, created a business… and hires people, you see, hires people and gives them some money, little, like a fifth of what it costs. Then tells them, here, work. Then takes home the rest.*
>
> (April, 2012)
>
> *See how it is with medications… what madness it is here… there was a report and the minister claims he just found out!*
>
> (July, 2012)

All state jobs are like that… so they first exaggerate their need: they need 5 people so they hire 15… And the 10 extra salaries they share amongst themselves. Then give each other additional bonuses. And if they decide to lay you off the state job, you get like 20 salaries!

(March, 2012)

The specific instances the participants brought up ranged from behaviors, individuals, to larger structures and institutions: a person taking "bonuses," a person not having enough money for medication, the people as a whole being "messed up," a person committing a driving violation and then bribing prosecutors, a person cheating workers out of their pay, overpriced medication and the minister knowing about it, as well as state jobs as a corrupt enterprise. On the surface, there is no cohesion (grammatical or lexical) that ties across these instances. However, these utterances highlight larger systems and cultural notions at play, which link and create cohesion for the participants: When one uses the phrase "good job but Bulgarian," it is to highlight all that is deemed problematic as underlying tendencies that can be observed throughout and across participants' experiences.

"Bulgarian-ness" as behaviors

Often the participants offered further instances that can be grouped under the semantic categories of behaviors, laws, and generic "other people." When describing what actions would fall under such "Bulgarian-ness," the following phrases were offered, frequently building on each other with more examples:

They haven't learnt, young people, they come out like this, start buying their driving licenses

They all think that absolutely anything is allowed

Everyone wants what others have

They steal subsidies

They don't want to finish a job but only to take the money

They skin you alive, making a monkey out of you

Here they don't care about credentials

(January, 2012)

Here, everyone wants to screw you over, to take your job… you complete the job and they take the profit

(June, 2016)

It's skinning you [taking everything] *and no one cares at all*

And after them a flood [do not care about consequences]

(March, 2012)

The utterances highlight an array of behaviors as falling under the notion of the "Bulgarian job": behaviors that disregard rules, purchase licenses (corruption in the education and driving system); instead of focusing on one's own job, it is common to focus on others'; engaging others only for profit (swindling and cheating); not completing work but requiring payment, "skinning you alive" as wanting more and more from individuals (whether in the form of work or payments); doing things with no regard for the consequences (often used when discussing environmental and construction issues); disregarding credentials and skills in favor of nepotism and connections; and blatant corruption (stealing agricultural subsidies).

"Bulgarian-ness" as law(lessness)

In addition to behaviors, "Bulgarian-ness" was also discursively assigned to local laws (or lack thereof) by the participants:

Hitting someone on a pedestrian crossing, and 20 leva [$10] *is the fine*

Some hilarious mockery of laws

Look at what laws we have

Ridiculous laws

These laws, all this, is made so the prosecutors, prosecutors and judges, so they can suck money from the rest

(April, 2012)

It's all about skinning others

There are no laws really, there's absolutely nothing

They say "it was legal"! How is it legal, when they create these laws!

What law! When they made it up!

(March, 2012)

Underlying questionable laws that do not punish infractions (pedestrian crossing violations), laws created to impose extra fines and allow for corruption, lack of laws directed at prosecuting said corruption, and laws created to protect and serve a select group of people were discursively positioned as the "Bulgarian way," as a meaning-laden base where problematic behaviors resulted in problematic laws.

"Bulgarian-ness" as "others"

The participants verbal depictions of what is deemed problematic, the "Bulgarian job," included not only behaviors and laws, but the people as a whole:

> *The people became very bad*
>
> *The people became animalistic* [oskotj]
>
> (January 2011, March 2012)
>
> *The people became crazy*
>
> *It is scary, and this is everyone*
>
> (June 2013, July 2014)
>
> *This is a mafia for me*
>
> *That's the same mafia*
>
> *What people, what madness*
>
> (March 2012, August 2015)
>
> *How do these people put up with this, with this misery!*
>
> *It's sheep stuff, never protesting*
>
> *All they care for is getting elected. Once they are that's it.*
>
> *We are sheep*
>
> *That's why they say 'lowered head'* [gets no sword]*, right. Cause that's what we are used to… always " be quiet, calm down"*
>
> (January 2014, March 2012)
>
> *Scoundrels*
>
> *Everyone wants money*

Scary scoundrels

[It's all structures] *which vegetate and suck from the people… And steal money! So all these structures don't work. If* [they] *worked well, we wouldn't be in this situation!*

The money all goes in one small circle [of people]*, all the state money is there*

(April, June 2012)

This array of utterances depicts distinct and multilayered local notions of the Bulgarian people as a whole. The use of the term *naroda* (the people) refers to all the inhabitants as a unit, a cohesive whole that has become "very bad," "animalistic," and "crazy." The literal meaning of the term *oskotj* is "to become like cattle," to become animal-like, and is used to allude to herd behaviors: easily led, easily swayed, without one's own reason. Frequently, the participants used utterances highlighting the people of Bulgaria as a whole "becoming herd-like," with references to "sheep" and "sheep mentality." The people were also described as becoming crazy, "bad," and like scoundrels.

Despite numerous references to "people" as a whole "becoming" problematic, the talk about "Bulgarian-ness" as itself problematic often veered back to specific behaviors, which were labeled as scoundrel-like: stealing and appropriating money, wanting to be elected in government/state position so that one could appropriate more money, and being part of the mafia. Again and again, a particular cultural logic clumped together behaviors related to both engaging in (taking state and government positions, appropriating money) and allowing for corruption (not protesting, being like sheep and voting for particular corrupt individuals, denying reports of said crimes). Utterances that may seem contradictory linguistically (grammatically and logically) become cohesive within a larger cultural logic where "they" (as the problem) are both "scoundrels" and "sheep." The participants frequently did not elaborate or use specific names to identify the "mobster," "the corrupt government official," but used a generic "they," which their conversants used as an object in order to provide further examples of corruption and amounts of money that have been appropriated, and thus align away or distance themselves from.

The participants used segments from a local proverb—*Slonena glavica, sabj ne j seche* (A bent head, no sword can cut), which alluded to a shared belief that it was better not to stand

out, not to disagree even if you were in the right as there might be consequences such as losing your head. This notion was frequently highlighted by participants when discussing the lack of political action, and particularly the lack of protesting against problems in the country. The proverb was also used to highlight the lack of opposition to corruption and the continuous political support (or at least the lack of opposition to) for particular parties and governments that had continuously failed to "fix things" in the country. It is the larger cultural system of these symbols (behaviors, laws, individuals and/or structures) and their meanings (as within a particular "way of being, feeling, and dwelling") that shapes the communicative structuring and grouping of these items together that is particularly interesting. Corruption in government jobs, the judicial system, employment, subsidies, receiving of licenses, high prices of medication, the abuse of road laws, problematic government jobs, wanting money without completing jobs, problematic laws, and lack of an active protest culture are not uncommon and they are not confined to a national border. But here, discursively, they are constructed as the "Bulgarian way."

As communication offers an entry into the meaningful social life of people, paying attention to what is communicated highlights a particular cultural structuring of the world. The above utterances highlight a world in which specific problematic instances are linked to larger problematic issues as an outcome of being "Bulgarian": Many people in the country profit by taking large bonuses (*Bonus of 100 000 a person*) while others are suffering from poverty (*The person on the street has no money for medication)*; many people are committing crimes but can get away with them as they can just pay their way through the legal system (*and makes a deal with the prosecutor buying them some brandy; there was a report and the minister claims he just found out*); problematic business practices are abundant (*That guy, you know, created a business… Then tells them, here, work. Then pockets the rest; they first exaggerate their need: they need 5 people so they hire 15… And the 10 worth of salaries they share amongst themselves; they don't care about credentials*); and laws are created to serve and benefit some and not others (*Hitting someone on a pedestrian crossing, and 20 leva [$10] is the fine; mockery of laws; ridiculous laws; laws… made so the prosecutors, prosecutors and judges, so they can suck money from the rest; there are no laws really, there's absolutely nothing; how is it legal, when they set those laws; made up* [laws]). The utterances further link such behaviors and

practices to the people as a whole: the whole nation's people have become "bad," "messed up a lot," and "not normal": where everyone is the problem (*everyone wants to screw you over, to take your job… you complete the job and they take the profit; they skin you alive, making a monkey out of you; It's skinning you (taking everything) and don't care at all; and after them a flood*), people have become like animals (*oskotj; became crazy*), and no one is doing anything about it (*How do these people put up with this, with this misery; It's sheep stuff, never protesting; We are sheep; That's why they say 'lowered head' [gets no sword] right. Cause that's what we are used to… always 'quiet, calm down')*. Such behaviors and practices are both the national "cognition" and learnt (*They haven't learnt, young people, they come out like this, started buying their driving licenses; They all think that absolutely everything is allowed; Everyone wants what others have*).

The participants' utterances vacillate between constructing the problem as "them," a select circle (*They don't want to finish a job but only to take the money; This is a mafia for me; That's the same mafia; All they care for is getting elected. Once they are that's it; Scoundrels; Scary scoundrels; The money all goes in one small circle [of people], all the state money are there*) and "everyone" (*The people became crazy; It is scary, and this is everyone; Everyone wants money; What people, what craziness*) and the structures they have engendered (*[It's all structures] which vegetate and suck from the people… And steal money! So all these structures don't work. If [they] worked well, we wouldn't be in this situation!*). I argue that this discursive movement back and forth is not just an array of semantic dimensions, along which participants identify themselves through communication, but a result of a particular cultural logic. This logic is rooted within the larger local narrative of the "Bulgarian mentality," or a cultural understanding of national identity as biological, learnt, and deeply embedded within a socio-historic context. According to the myth of the "Bulgarian situation" (Author, 2018), the 500 years of Ottoman "slavery" and the following years of communism shaped and reinforced a "mentality" (way of understanding and behaving within the world) that are deeply problematic. According to the myth (Author, 2018), the "mentality" is biological (cognitive and psychological) and learnt (national)—difficult to change, yet confined within national borders. This can be seen within the utterances as the following premises: "Bulgarian-ness" as a "national

mentality" (being), the "Bulgarian situation" (dwelling), frustration and futility (emotion), and sheepish following (action). Below, I formulate cultural premises of being and emotion as central in addition to dwelling.

Interpretation

Statements of and about "Bulgarian-ness" made by the participants highlight a wide and dense semantic radiation, where often the analysis has to constantly shift between the hub and its radiants. I focus on two central hubs with interconnected radiants, identity (being) and emotion (feeling), as highly interlocked.

"Bulgarian-ness" as a "national mentality" (being)

Within the participants' utterances, an underlying cultural notion of a problematic "other" becomes visible—an amalgam of what they considered problematic. By discursively crafting an "other" as a unit, the participants can then utilize this notion in order to create a diametrically opposed footing for themselves. "Bulgarian-ness," as interactionally constructed, involves such problematic behaviors, which are both to blame and to embrace as formative. There is no "Bulgarian-ness" without the problematic behaviors. But also, there is no "us" without suffering from these problematic behaviors. This notion of "Bulgarian-ness" emerges in the interaction (by sharing instances of how one has been affected by it), fragmented and partial. "Us, without the mentality" is only visible as an opposition to "them, with the mentality." The interactional symbolic play between these levels of identification is observed in numerous interactions, where the participants highlight social positions that are either "us" ("normal" people, not linked to corruption) and "them" (the "others," who are corrupt). Within such an interactional process, the participants move in a spiraling sequence, passing and implicating between the identities of "us" and the "others," with each identity needing and motivating the talk about the other.

Verdery (1996) discussed the roots of such duality within socialist countries, where a moral opposition within the community was common: a division between "good" and "bad," which translated into "against" and "for" the Party. The political opposition understood itself as representing the collective objective of the whole society, which was betrayed by its Party. Such a "social schizophrenia," or split of persona into a "public" and "private" one, was common for many Eastern European countries, where people would perform the mandatory Party-related

activities at work but would "switch off" and reveal their "true" self (a self—critical of the Party and its representatives) in private (Verdery, 1996). This "true" self could only be understood and realized in relation, as "parasitic" to the public/official one, where people's sense of personhood was not only dependent on but required an "enemy." As a result, once the party rule was over, this notion and understanding of the self produced a crisis of personhood as the "them" was gone. A new "enemy" was needed. In the discursive instances here, this identification translated into the need to construct an "other" as a compilation of behaviors/individuals/structures/institutions associated with the country's communist past.

Within the utterances, larger categories and symbols associated with corruption, a specific identity of the "others", as historically grounded is evoked and reinforced. As seen in this data, the "others" are those who possess the "Bulgarian mentality," a specific cultural notion of "national psychology" described by Author (2018): behaviors and ways of thinking, that have historical roots but have come to be associated with a biological/cognitive state. Those with the "mentality" take bonuses and steal from the rest, create laws to benefit themselves, are part of state systems which do not work well, have connections to power, are lazy, and do not serve the people. The participants offered numerous problematic instances, where the "other" is unclear and vague. This generalized "other" is not confined to ethnic, generational, gender, or class categories but functions to replace the outside "enemy," and serve as a target, which one could blame for the economic problems in the country. While there is a large corruption problem in Bulgaria, this article only focuses on the interactional discursive attempts participants engage in in order to define and allocate the root of such everyday problems. According to the participants, the "others" were: clients who came with the sole purpose of starting a quarrel, local government officials who took bribes and did not perform their job, officials who manipulated elections, individuals who took advantage of the system and stole anything that was not nailed to the ground, bankers who were scamming innocent people, and mobsters and oligarchs who had overrun the country. But mostly, it included those who were somehow connected and benefited from such connections.

This fluid and vague compilation of behaviors, individuals, institutions, and structures, which has the "mentality" as underlying "cause," I argue, is the discursive result of the divide

between legality and legitimacy, common for post-socialist countries. Giordano and Kostova (2002) highlighted the Bulgarian land reform as part of the source of such divide, where any new legal framework was immediately and consistently circumvented via social practices (which people deemed more appropriate to their circumstances). In this way, legal norms and institutions started coexisting with other common social norms for conduct that were not very "legal" (or even "extra-legal"), but were locally considered legitimate. Giordano and Kostova (2002) emphasized that the interplay and frequent competition between the "extra-legal" and the "legal" in people's everyday lives led to misinterpretations and tensions between the state and the people—something visible in the data. The authors further argued that the particular case in Bulgaria was made worse due to the additional accumulation of distrust between people and the state over the centuries of Ottoman domination (the *chiflik* system). Additionally, with elites ruling during the years following the liberation and the later years of socialism, where an informal economy, black market, and emphasis on networking were the main resources, this divide between legality and legitimacy was further widened.

Frustration and futility (feeling)

Examining the problematics of "Bulgarian-ness" as an implicit cultural hub could not be fully understood without also highlighting its interconnectedness with emotion as another central hub of cultural meaning: frustration, outrage, anger, and disapproval are visible in the participants' utterances as direct exclamations (repetitions, generic phrases, instances), directed talk (constructed speech addressing those perceived to be problematic), cursing, or non-verbals (sighs and raised intonation). The following excerpt (March 2012) illustrates the act of offering instances of problematic behaviors—in this case the purchasing of driving licenses without passing the road or paper test. As one participant mentioned how many people purchased their licenses and drove after a few days without knowing the rules, his interlocutor quickly aligned in agreement to the mentioning of corrupt policemen, thus clumping them together with the "illegal" drivers. Here, the emotion can be observed in G's exclamation of "to die, their mother" (the Bulgarian equivalent of "damn them") in the last line:

> G: I have been five months in driving school, [while] he became a driver in five days and he bought the license, without knowing the rules, or anything else

N: he bought it!

G: and tomorrow the cops, the corrupted cops will come

N: yes!

G: and they'll defend him... to die, their mother!

The participants provided numerous similar "illustrations" to highlight the omnipresence of anger, defeat, and resentment, which find an outlet in yelling and cursing at others on the streets. Anger as present throughout the "Bulgarian society" is repeated and framed as both a cause and a response to the many cases of police and legal injustice, where criminals and perpetrators are never punished. Cases of such "lawlessness" are reiterated to legitimize and confirm the anger and frustration. Physical violence seems to be the only way to get justice, even to a "normal" (term used frequently by the participants) person, where it is the only means to punish the guilty. Despite their different backgrounds and occupations, lifestyles and history, many participants highlighted "becoming bad" as part of the shared "Bulgarian" experience.

These utterances highlight a cultural notion of anger as the proper feeling in response to such problematic behaviors—proper—as it is engendered by the unfairness, corruption, and general aggression and apathy. This anger is not only expressed in the data explicitly but can also be heard in the voices of the participants: their pitch rises and their utterances are interspersed with exclamations, curse words, and commonly used phrases filled with pathos and accompanied by a sigh such as "what do you expect—who would educate them" (*kakvo ochakvash—koi da gi vazpita*), "I'm getting desperate, you think it can't be worse, but it is" (*otchaivam se, mislish che poveche ot tova ne moge, no ima go*), and "the people has gone totally mad" (*naroda e totalno izterjsal*). Participants also highlighted the ways this constant anger and frustration from dealing with the "others" resulted in physical ailments, once more emphasizing the link between environment and biology (the "mentality" as national and cognitive). They often stressed how the body could not handle the daily stress and irritation by mentioning relatives or friends who "ended up in a hospital because of all the stress. (February 2012)." Thus, implicitly, a larger cultural premise of negative emotions (anger, frustration, and misery) as deeply linked within the national border becomes visible within the data: a cultural notion of understanding Bulgarian-ness as inseparable and intricately linked to anger and frustration. As the "mentality"

is the "national cognition," one is either espousing it (thus causing anger and frustration to others by being a corrupt/lying/cheating/skinning individual, who perpetuates problematic ways of doing things) or suffering from those who have it and responding with indignation, anger, and frustration.

As such, when the participants offer problematic instances they have experienced they do not just tap into shared local knowledge in order to create solidarity and air grievances. They use generic phrases ("it is scary stuff:" *strashna rabota*), numbers (referring to reported amounts of bribes, "bonuses," and other money "disappearing"), and individual instances (stories), as shorthand to evoke and link their experiences within a shared cultural environment. Such common experience binds them together and against those perceived to be the problem. This shared problematic experience is evoked through a recognizable array of generic phrases such as:

"horrible/heavy stuff" *tegava rabota*

"No getting better" *nema opravia*

"Scary situation here, scary" *strashno pologenieto tuka , strashno*

"It's impossible to live here" *t'va e nevazmogno da se givee*

"It's cruel stuff" *gestoka rabota e*

"It's nightmare stuff" *koshmarna rabota*

And by the use of such shorthand they also position themselves as "not the problematic" ones, the ones that do not have the "mentality," and "not the others," thus further distancing themselves away from the East and the Balkans. When using these phrases, the participants employ explicit cultural symbols in order to make implicit statements about "Bulgarian-ness" as tied to the "mentality" and make sense of their present day socio-economic problems, where a particular sense of being is understood as both situated within a national border and as a biological trait that is difficult to change (which then assumes a particular cultural understanding of social relations, proper emotions, and larger dwelling).

The "Bulgarian situation" and mistrust (dwelling)

The participants' speech acts are shaped by their shared cultural knowledge which allows for collaboration in creating the notion of the "others" and in doing so, they also evoke the larger

notion of what social world they inhabit. When offering utterances that comment on the individuals, behaviors, structures, and institutions they find problematic, the participants also highlight a view of the world: where people have gone "bad" and "crazy," where everyone is "out to get you" and "skin you," where everyone "thinks they are above the rules," where things have become "a complete anarchy," a world where corruption on all levels is abundant, laws are made to serve a select group, and problematic work practices are the norm.

The myth of the "Bulgarian situation" (Author, 2018) highlights the enduring cultural premise of social mistrust, where Bulgarians view themselves to be bound within a problematic common fate, which was replayed and re-learnt to a point of becoming a national cognitive feature. This notion of social mistrust (and particularly its production) has been examined within post-socialism studies such as Giordano and Kostova (2002), where they noted that many post-socialist countries have encountered problems in establishing confidence in the state and trust in the institutions, and the legitimacy of legal power. They argued that such a phenomenon is not surprising considering that over a long period of time the state had repeatedly failed to perform its fundamental duties (creating the conditions to guarantee a space in which people can trust each other). Giordano and Kostova (2002) highlighted that such mistrust is based on specific practices stemming from past negative experiences, but is also reactivated discursively in the present (collective memory).

Conclusion

I suggest that examining this Bulgarian case of culturally laden communication offers several insights: the way larger notions of the West-East divide, part of the larger "transitology" discourse, no matter how crude and skewed, have been incorporated and internalized into everyday negotiations of identity and self within the Bulgarian public. Thus, we see the "Bulgarian" (ethnic and national) identity as ongoing interactional work despite its long roots and history, and furthermore, such self-identification can occur as strategic political work through exactly this ideological alignment to the West or the East. As such, this case extends prior scholarly critiques of "transitology" by offering further evidence that the West-East dichotomy is an inadequate geo-political framework for understanding everyday interactions in post-socialist societies like Bulgaria. The case adds to Todorova's (2009) work examining

balkanism as different from Orientalism by illustrating how the "Balkan" self is not just constructed as "incomplete" but is fragmented and built from such West-East pieces, regardless of whether it is perceived with pride (Author, 2018) or used as a political maneuver (Author, under review).

Utilizing Carbaugh's (2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017) cultural discourse analysis allows for further examination of the interconnectedness of the hubs of identity and emotion: in the Bulgarian case we see them as inseparable (political and socio-economic frustration as part of identity work). I highlight the incorporation (constitution and reinforcement) of larger discourses (Balkanism and national identity as deeply problematic, stuck forever in between the West and the East) within everyday interactions in addition to the local cultural organization of communication: the Bulgarian case illustrates the world's larger political and discursive forces in new modes of alignment. International and intercultural communication scholars would benefit from this case as it illustrates the ongoing interactional identity work as a response to a long-lasting change in the larger socio-economic context (in this case, the lack of significant political change within Bulgaria and emigration), where identity work is not only responding to outside and inside cultural and communication shifts but is also strategically used to navigate a status quo one does not perceive to have much control over.

This article tackles the notion of "good job but Bulgarian" (*Hubava rabota, ama Bulgarska*) as a local cultural symbol, that highlights both deep cultural meanings for a way of being ("Bulgarian-ness" as something problematic and related to a "national mentality"), feeling (anger, frustration, hopelessness, and general mistrust), a social world (the "Bulgarian situation" as a "miserable," "no-state," and "mafia country"), and also an attempt to embrace or at least explain why significant change is yet to occur. This "dark legacy" and dichotomization of the West-East was further transplanted onto attempts to make sense of the Bulgarian "transition" from communism to "democracy" following 1989, as the population's frustration with the lack of substantial "democratization" grew. Vassilev (2003) highlighted the difficult move to a capitalist economy (from a deeply centralized one), the short-term effects of market-oriented reforms and the following setbacks, which resulted in economic "stagnation, unemployment, inflation, increasing inequality of incomes, widespread impoverishment," (p.100) and widespread and

deeply rooted organized crime and corruption. This was further affected by party struggles and continuous pursuit of corrupt, self-serving, and incompetent policies, where new policies were often completely divorced from previous (even functioning ones) on a purely ideological basis, without establishing new economic institutions and relationships. It is also the persevering omnipresent habits of malfeasance and crime (theft on the job and institutionalized corruption), which resulted in systemic "criminalized" state (Vassilev, 2003), which get addressed and evoked within interaction. Sygkelos (2010) similarly highlighted the problematic effects from ill-conceived institutional reforms, omnipresent corruption, organized crime, poverty, increasing economic inequality, and a failure to develop a well-functioning welfare state as the core reasons for continuous mistrust in the government as well as the rise of populist nationalism.

Whether labeling behaviors (being lazy in the office, corruption in the Bulgarian soccer league, appropriation of EU funds for a highway), individuals (emphasizing that the Brazilian president has Bulgarian roots), or institutions/infrastructure (streets with potholes and faulty asphalt, a major road along the coastline of Bulgaria, electric pole) under the umbrella of "the Bulgarian job" online or in interactions, the main undercurrent seems to be that if it is "Bulgarian," it cannot be "good." In numerous cases, "Bulgarian-ness," as inseparable from the "Bulgarian mentality," is actively constructed under the generic umbrella of the "others" (those who have the "mentality") through the use of specific generic phrases, and instances of problematic behaviors, individuals, and institutions/structures. Highlighting instances of who the "others" are, thus serves to both self-identify and reinforce local cultural notions of being, feeling, and dwelling (by evoking and managing their common knowledge of a shared cultural notion of the "Bulgarian mentality"), and allows the interlocutors to locate and challenge problematic behaviors, structures, and institutions.

Examining the discursive ways through which a particular social identity of "Bulgarian-ness" is constructed as an "us" vs. "others" alignment is particularly fruitful in order to understand the continuous ways a post-socialist background is evoked and managed within social interactions in Bulgarian discourse. Scholars from within anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, history, and postsocialism (Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery, 2003) have highlighted the need for ethnographic approach to studying postsocialist countries, and,

particularly, the need to examine the everyday implications of the transition from socialism to a market economy. A more nuanced, interpretive analysis of such discourses offers a deeper understanding of the transitory status of countries in the Balkans—one going beyond an image of a "bridge" or "crossroads" (Todorova, 2009).

As people grew up and spent most of their lives within one system, their sense of being, of proper behavior, and sensemaking was inextricably connected to the larger ideology behind that system. And as part and parcel of that larger culture, one cannot fully make sense of the "Bulgarian job" and "Bulgarian-ness" without paying close attention to the ideological and discursive socialist past of the country. Yurchak (2013) similarly discussed the transitional period in other socialist countries, highlighting that even though the popular view of socialist/communist ideology has been one of "truth" and "falsity", or "official public" and "hidden intimate" insider views of ideology, the reality of the process was much more different: people did not just pretend to subscribe to the party ideology; they did not "hide" their different understanding of the status quo.

Burawoy and Verdery (1999) discussed the common for post-socialist countries phenomenon of utilizing familiar (from socialism) symbols and meanings in order to navigate and explain new experiences and patterns (whether that be new market initiatives, new social relations, privatization, etc.), highlighting that such a phenomenon is not necessarily indicative of a leftover "mentality". Such a view would render their way of being "corrupted" and unable to change and adapt to new political forms. On the contrary, Burawoy and Verdery (1999) argued, interaction employs numerous symbols and meanings that are not created from scratch but utilize already familiar forms in new ways and with new sensibilities, which means that what is frequently seen as "restoration," is more often a creative use of already existing elements. An ethnographic approach is very suited to exploring such new, yet old, innovation and revision of forms, which are responses to particularly unstable conditions such as a socio-political and economic transition. It is such novel adaptations of existing forms (and particularly participant notions of self and others) that this study explores.

"Bulgarian-ness" as emerging in everyday interactions within a spiraling act sequence seems to be here to stay: discussing "how bad things in Bulgaria are," "how other countries do

it/anything better," and "the Bulgarian job" are still very prevalent in online and in-person interactions: blog and article posts, discussions of emigration (Locmele & Sotirova, 2018), everyday exclamations, and even small talk. Even though it may not be immediately evident to a non-native, it soon gets noticed that "Bulgarians seem to be very negative" and "Bulgarians complain a lot about their country." This warrants a whole different study, but here I offer a small piece of the puzzle to this "negativity"—interactional constructions of "Bulgarian-ness" as something problematic and long-lived, something not-yet-European and "backward." Such an examination of a national identity highlights the significance of everyday interaction in the negotiation of larger ideological constructs of the West-East divide that have permeated the national consciousness. This both builds on the literature criticizing the larger academic "transitology" discourse but also illustrates how such problematic notions have been adopted locally. As such, despite the long and varied history of the "Bulgarian" identity (both ethnic and national), we should see this case as an example of identity as ongoing interactional work, where a common "other" is creatively constructed in order for one to align to or distance from—a move with very particular political implications (whether one stands with the West or the East).

Despite the wide criticism of employing such an oversimplified and crude dichotomy, the West-East divide is still used frequently to measure Balkan, Post-Soviet, and Baltic countries that do not fit the expected trajectory towards democracy, and as such, this case lends empirical evidence to critiques of "transitology." Furthermore, this case adds to Todorova's (2009) work examining Balkanism as different from Orientalism by illustrating how the "Balkan" self is not just constructed as "incomplete" but is actively constructed as fragmented and borrowing from either the West or the East. By using Carbaugh's (2007; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017) cultural discourse analysis perspective the interconnectedness of the hubs of identity and emotion is explored: they could not be easily separated within the notion of "Bulgarian-ness" where frustration and anger (or satisfaction) with the political and socio-economic situation in the country is then coupled with Western or Eastern ideology. The Bulgarian case offers an example as to the significance of how and why the study of communication in transitional societies is important overall, as it crystalizes the ways in which no discourse and no identity is truly

local—something truly helpful to keep in mind in the ongoing study of international and intercultural communication.

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