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## The day before the crash – Bulgarian-Soviet relations in the nineteen eighties

**Summary:** this article is devoted to changes in Bulgarian-Soviet relations in the last decade of the twentieth century. Throughout the whole postwar period the relations between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union were exceptionally close. The connections were rather one-way - the USSR gave Bulgaria economic aid and thanks to that the country became more industrialized and almost until the end of the system could count on Soviet loans and raw materials. Bulgaria in turn repaid the political obedience and the demonstration of particularly close relations binding itself with the USSR, which gave foreign and domestic analysts the bases to name Bulgaria „the most loyal Soviet satellite.” However, along with the end of the Cold War there has been a fundamental geopolitical change. „Special” relations between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, of which Bulgaria was proud and which were used, were transformed into a barrier and a cause of problems in the Bulgarian transition to market economy. The path, which Bulgaria had to undergo, proved to be longer than in the case of other the Eastern Bloc countries preserving a greater distance of the Soviet Union.

Even before the overthrow of Zhivkov, a new trend could be seen - the reorientation of Bulgarian foreign policy from East to West. During the autumn session of the General Assembly of the UN in New York, Petar Mladenov spoke with US Secretary of State, James Baker, and almost openly promised him an immediate implementation of changes in Bulgaria. This indicates that the political forces after Zhivkov in Bulgarian Communist Party were prepared not only to follow Gorbachev, but also to reorient foreign policy of Bulgaria - something that was made by other politicians in the last decade of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian-Soviet relations, Petar Mladenov, Theodor Zhivkov, Eastern Bloc, Bulgarian foreign policy, Bulgarian Communist Party

History researchers and political observers are well aware that in the Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria was indisputably regarded as the Soviet Union's most faithful ally. Bulgaria's particular attachment to the Soviet Union was not a random whim of this or that

politician, but the deliberately chosen geopolitical strategy of its communist rulers after World War II. It had its own logic in the years of accelerated industrialization and social modernization, but it became one of Bulgaria's great problems in the 1980s, when the whole Eastern Bloc was experiencing economic and political crisis, and the Soviet Union, after Mikhail Gorbachev's assumption of power, started to dissociate itself from its European allies. This article is devoted to the changing complexion of Bulgarian-Soviet relations in the decade in which "big changes" were triggered.

To understand the processes taking place in Bulgaria in the 1980s, the most important factor is to appreciate the pro-Russian and pro-Soviet attitudes of both those in power and the majority of Bulgarian citizens. This sets the Bulgarians apart from the remaining Eastern Bloc countries. This difference can be explained mainly by reference to historic tradition. In the 19th century Bulgarians, like Serbs, pinned their hopes of liberation from the Ottoman yoke on help from the Russian Empire. For Bulgarians, this hope was realized in consequence of the heavy and bloody Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. Bulgaria was restored as an independent country on March 3rd 1878. This war is deliberately called the war of liberation and even to this day that is how it is regarded by the vast majority of Bulgarians.<sup>1</sup> After the end of World War II, pro-Russian sentiments, though somewhat shaken as a result of Russian's unceremonious interference in Bulgarian issues, survived and reasserted themselves in the pro-Soviet attitudes of the new political class. The Bulgarian resistance movement (1941 – 1944) was a unique phenomenon taking into consideration the fact that Bulgaria belonged to the Tripartite Pact, and in addition sought to achieve the national ideal of unification of all territories inhabited by Bulgarians.<sup>2</sup> The most important factor in strengthening pro-Soviet attitudes in Bulgaria was the profound political change as a result of which, with the support of the Fatherland Front political coalition, the Communists (connected with the Soviet Union) came to power. The defence of Bulgarian interests by the Russians also played a certain role during the Paris Peace Conference of 1946. Bulgaria avoided a repeat of the punitive peace terms of the Treaty of Neuilly of 1919, and a third national disaster,

1 After November 10th 1989, there was a resurgence of the Russophobia that existed before 1944, with the image of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union cast in the role of liberators coming under challenge. However, this was politically motivated (mainly expressed by the right-wing parties) and failed to influence the majority of Bulgarians. For information concerning these views see: *B'lgariâ mežd'u Evropa i Rusiâ. Naučna konferenciâ 10-11 oktombri 1997 g. Slova, dokladi i izkazvaniâ.* S"st. Marin Georgiev. B"lgarska sbirka, 1997. To this day, out of all the member states of the European Union, Bulgarians preserve the most positive attitude towards Russia and Russians. The sociological study BBSS – Gallup International supports this view – M. Georgieva, *Dori sled gazovata kriza b"lgarite ostavat položitelno nastroeni k"m Rusiâ.* v. "Klasa", br. 451, March 9th 2009.

2 R.T. Ablova, *S"trudničestvoto na s"vetskia i b"lgarskia narod v borbata protiv fašizma 1941 – maj 1945.* Sofiâ 1973; *Istoriâ na antifašistkata borba v B"lgaria. 1939-1944,* ed. K. Vasilev, D. Sirkov, N. Gornenski, S. Petrova, Sofiâ 1976, vol. 1-2; *Narod"t protiv fašizma 1939/1945. Istoričeski očerok za antifašistkata borba na b"lgarskiâ narod po vreme na Vtorata svetovna vojna,* ed. K. Vasilev, Sofiâ 1983.

indeed, far from suffering further territorial losses, it also retained Southern Dobrudja which was taken from Romania in 1940.<sup>3</sup>

This historical bedding enabled the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party to rely on popular pro-Russian moods throughout the whole postwar period. Evidence of the mutual benefits flowing from close relations with the Soviet Union is abundant – the construction of the only bridge on the River Danube between Rousse and Giurgiu, opened in 1945, and the numerous loans which Bulgaria often did not repay, to mention but two such benefits. The peak moment in pro-Russian politics came with Todor Zhivkov's initiative of 1963, which was quite extraordinary even for pro-Soviet diehards in the Eastern Bloc. At the plenary congress of the CC BCP [*the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party*] on December 4th 1963, he advocated "the creation of further links and the closest rapprochement ... (in preparation for) unification of the PRB [*the People's Republic of Bulgaria*] with the Soviet Union."<sup>4</sup> At first glance, it seemed that Zhivkov sought to bring the curtain down on the 85-year-old modern Bulgaria, but in practice it was about something else. The historic events, as reflected in documents, which preceded and succeeded the initiative of 1963 indicate that from Todor Zhivkov's point of view, this was to be another attempt at a "great leap" (after the first leap in 1958) in Bulgaria's development, this time with the use of the broad economic aid and inexhaustible resource of the Soviet Union. Therefore, this proposal was kept secret from society and it was only invoked in economic negotiations with Soviet representatives in order to present Bulgaria as a country that was prospectively ready to join the USSR. This 'need for accession' thesis played its role in 1964<sup>5</sup> and again in 1973<sup>6</sup>, when Bulgaria received, by special arrangement, additional supplies of electricity and petroleum, and subsidies for Bulgarian agricultural production. The only thing, which Zhivkov did not achieve by this stratagem was consistent Russian support on the "Macedonian issue" in relations with Yugoslavia. These examples demonstrate the scale of importance of the Soviet Union to for postwar Bulgaria.

One of the fundamental reasons for Todor Zhivkov's political longevity, and he did rule Bulgaria for 33 years, was his ability to find a common language with all Russian leaders, from Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev to Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. With regard to the latter two, any special designs were out of the question; the only thing was to continue the tradition passively because

3 Thanks to Soviet support, Greek territorial claims were rejected. For more on the peace treaty of 10th February 1947, see: E. Kalinova, *B"lgariâ, Vtorata svetovna vojna i p"tât k"m mira*, [in:] *Stranici ot b"lgarskata istoriâ. S"bitiâ, razmisli, ličnosti*. "Prosveta". Sofiâ 1903, pp. 87-111.

4 ЦДА (Централен държавен архив), z. 1Б, op. 5, j. a. 600, k. 2.

5 The results of Bulgarian-Russian economic talks are described in: *V"nšna politika na Narodna republika B"lgariâ*, vol. 2. Sofiâ 1971, pp. 49, 456-467.

6 During his meeting with Leonid Brezhnev in Bulgaria in September 1973, Zhivkov secured additional supplies and Russian financial aid as well as greater support in the so-called Macedonian issue. The minutes of this meeting were published in: "B"lgarska istoričeska biblioteka". № 2. 2000, pp. 62-83.

they ruled too briefly and were too old to contemplate long-lasting changes. The situation began to change after the election in March 1985 of the relatively young Soviet leader – Mikhail Gorbachev. He inaugurated the broad-sweeping reform of the Soviet economy and politics directly related its Eastern Bloc allies. Gorbachev's reforms were neither unexpected nor the fruit of his personal initiative – they were caused by a deepening crisis in the Soviet Union and throughout the whole Eastern Bloc and increasing popular pressure for reforms.

To bring the prevailing state of affairs in the late 1970s and early 80s into sharper focus, I will briefly characterize the economic and political situation in Bulgaria, the USSR and the whole Eastern Bloc. I intentionally give priority to economic affairs because in the field of political relations between Bulgaria and the USSR, there were no real problems to speak of almost up to the dawning of the era of transition. The starting point for the final period of the Eastern Bloc's evolution was the great step forward in East-West relations with the signing of the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation on August 1st 1975, which was endorsed by Bulgaria. As Todor Zhivkov used to say, "great importance is attached to the accepted principles of the inviolability of borders, respect for territorial integrity, without recourse to force, the right of every nation to select and develop its own social and economic system."<sup>7</sup> This statement is revealing of assuaged anxieties regarding international recognition of the permanence of state frontiers. These anxieties stemmed from Yugoslavia's claims to the Pirinian region (the Bulgarian part of Macedonia) and with the continuous threat from the south – from the NATO countries: Turkey and Greece. Helsinki contributed to the consolidation of European security through the principle of peaceful coexistence and simultaneous acceptance of the socialist system that prevailed in the eastern half of the continent. However, tranquility of the Bulgarian leadership proved to be short-lived.

In subsequent years, problems were to arise in Bulgaria on different grounds. In autumn 1978, the West accused the Bulgarian secret service of murdering Georgi Markov, a popular Bulgaria émigré writer, with the help of the KGB, with a poison-tipped umbrella which passed into history as the "Bulgarian umbrella."<sup>8</sup> Soon after that, there was a new charge, known as the "Bulgarian trace", in the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II in Rome on May 13th 1981, by the Turk Mehmet Ali Agca. That "trace" was inspired by the USA with one and the same purpose in mind – to underline the "cosy relations" between the Bulgarian and Soviet secret services.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, the USA was leveling the charges that Bulgaria was supporting

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by: "Rabotničesko delo" July 31st 1975.

<sup>8</sup> This accusation still provokes arguments without leading to its explicit clarification. For more on this topic see: V. Kostov, *B"lgarskiât čad"r*. Sofiâ 1990; K. Todorov, V. Bereanu, *Koj ubi Georgi Markov*. Sofiâ 1991; D. Stankov, *Sled d"lgo m"lčanie. 42 godini v b"lgarskoto razuznavane*. Sofiâ 2001, pp. 241-291; H. Hristov, *Ubijte 'Skitnik'.* B"lgarskata i britanskata d"ržavna politika po slučââ Georgi Markov. Sofiâ 2005.

<sup>9</sup> S. Bildireva, *Atentat"t. Petnadeset godini po-k"šno*. Sofiâ 1996; A. Dimitrova, *Vojnata na špionite. Razsledvane v b"lgarski i amerikanski sekretni arhivi*. Sofiâ 2005, p. 232-252; R. Ug"rčinska, *Istinata*

“international terrorism”, and trafficking in arms and amphetamines.<sup>10</sup> The Bulgarian government was also alarmed by the rapidly cooling Bulgarian-American relations with bilateral political consultations being suspended by the American side in 1981. That same year, the Bulgarian-American Political Council was liquidated, restrictions were imposed on economic contacts, cooperation between their customs institutions was stopped, the accreditation of the Bulgarian Trade and Economic Bureau in New York was denied and funds stimulating trade with Bulgaria were withdrawn.<sup>11</sup>

The deteriorating international image of Bulgaria initially did not give rise to excessive concern in Bulgarian ruling circles because the most important economic partner for them was the USSR. But at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union had greater difficulties in supporting its Eastern European allies. Problems started to appear on November 13th 1978 during talks conducted in Sophia between Zhivkov and a member of the Politburo and Andrej Kirilenko, the secretary of the CC CPSU [*the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*]. Zhivkov expressed gratitude for Soviet support in the shape of 300 000 tons of grain and concern regarding the Soviet intention to reduce the supply of raw materials.<sup>12</sup> The privileged position of Bulgaria, however, allowed Zhivkov to wrest from Brezhnev (during their meeting on January 13th 1979) the further remission of Bulgaria's debt which stood at 1 billion rubles and received a promise of further funds for Bulgarian agriculture, light industry and Soviet tourists in Bulgaria.<sup>13</sup> The economic symbiosis between the Soviet Union and Bulgaria gave Zhivkov grounds to declare during the visit of Andrej Gromyko, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, on December 23rd 1980: “Our economy is developing well in the sense that we have strong back-up. Our socialist countries and first and foremost the USSR are our back-up.”<sup>14</sup>

Changes in international relations (the so-called the Second Cold War), caused by Ronald Reagan's policy towards the USSR, put an end to ten years of Zhivkov's economic game in playing the Soviet card. The Soviet Union found itself far out of its economic depth to compete in the new arms race that commenced, and this forced its leaders do seek new solutions.

For Bulgaria this signalled time for change. This was recognized not because of some sea-change in the national will, but as a result of changes in Soviet policy.

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za atentata srešu Joan-Pavel II. Milenium, Sofiâ 2009; E. Kalinova, *Žurnalistite i 'b'lgarskata sleda' v atentata srešu Joan Pavel II (1981-1989)*, [in:] *Istoriata v meždunaronata žurnalistika: Upotrebi i zloupotrebi*. Sofiâ 2008, pp. 29-57.

10 ДА на МВНР (Дипломатически архив на Министерството на външните работи), оп. 42, j. a. 7375, k. 42, 46.

11 *Otnošeniata meždú NRB i SAŠ*. – ДА на МВНР, оп. 43-4, j. a. 81, k. 1-10.

12 *Sreša v Politburo na CK na BKP s Dr. Andrej Kirilenko – člen na Politburo i sekretar na CK na KPSS na 13 noemvri 1978 g.* – ЦДА, z. 1Б, оп. 60, j. a. 247, k. 28-30.

13 *Stenografski protokol na srešata na Politburo na CK na BKP s dr. Leonid Brežnev, generalen sekretar na CK na KPSS i predsedatel na Prezidiuma na V'rhovnia s'vet na SSSR na 13 anuari 1979 g.* Ibidem, j. a. 248, k. 4, 11.

14 *Sreša na Politburo na CK na BKP s Andrej Gromyko – člen na Politburo na CK na KPSS i v'nšen minist'r na SSSR.* Ibidem, j. a. 277, k. 5.

In 1982, supplies of petroleum were reduced and during his visit to Ukraine, Todor Zhivkov spoke of the negative impact of this move on the Bulgarian economy. He complained to Volodymyr Scherbytsky, the Ukrainian leader, that the reduced supplies of petroleum and the failure to deliver of even the agreed quotas, created large economic problems for Bulgaria. But he quickly moderated his tone adding that: "However, I am not making any allegations; we well understand this situation and we do not want to cause difficulties for anybody. We have to shift and adjust."<sup>15</sup>

Brezhnev's death was a severe blow to Bulgaria although exasperation was often voiced with his progressive senility in the final years of his rule. Changes in the Soviet Union coincided with Bulgaria's rising foreign debt in Western countries which was stimulated by attempts to open up the Bulgarian economy to the West. At the end of 1983, the Bulgarian debt reached 5 billion US dollars.<sup>16</sup> In comparison with the financial burdens of Poland, Hungary and Romania, the Bulgarian debt was not so large, but Bulgaria greater dependence on Comecon [*The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance*] and the USSR itself, and the low level of its economic competitiveness, made its repayment difficult.<sup>17</sup> Bulgaria was in a particularly difficult situation during the short reign of Yuri Andropov (November 1982 – February 9th 1984), who made attempts to put Soviet economic relations with the Eastern European countries on a more business-like footing a quick symptom of which were the reduced petroleum supplies to Bulgaria.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the Bulgarian management looked hopefully at the new General Secretary of the CC CPSU, Konstantin Chernenko, who was seen as a true follower of Brezhnev.

The possibilities which were opened to Bulgaria by the new Soviet government, were discussed by the management of BCP [*Bulgarian Communist Party*] before Zhivkov's official meeting with Chernenko on June 1st 1984 in Moscow. The document that was drawn up at that time, starts with assurances that cooperation with the USSR is the touchstone of Bulgaria's policy, and goes on to propose "a new approach" to the old song on the desirability of a "a comprehensive rapprochement and coop-

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15 *Sreša na členu na CK na KPSS i p'rvni sekretar na Ukrajna Vladimir Ščerbicki i generalnia sekretar na CK na BKP i predsedatel na D'ržavnia s'vet na NRB Todor Živkov v Kiev na 9 uni 1982 g. ibid, j. a. 291, k. 20.*

16 Zhivkov admitted this in a conversation with Dmitri Ustinov, the Soviet Minister of Defence on December 10th 1983. *ibid, j. a. 324, k. 8.* It should be added that on the same day Zhivkov met with American congressmen, who were informed that Bulgaria's foreign debt stood at 2.2 billion dollar, *j. a. 323, k. 31.*

17 Throughout the whole post-war period, the Bulgarian foreign debt was serviced with Soviet support. As regards its debt in the 1980s, see: D. Vačkov, M. Ivanov, *B'lgarskiat v'nšen d'lg 1944-1989. Bankrut"t na komunističeskata iekonomika.* Sofiâ 2008, pp. 174-190.

18 The reduction of Soviet supplies brought Bulgaria great losses; according to data supplied by Wharton School of Economic Forecast published in "Washington Post" and "Washington Times", the main positions in Bulgarian foreign trade were: weapon export – 991 million lw., that is 9.1%, re-export of petroleum – 855 million, that is 7.9% and cigarettes – 588 million, that is 5.4%. ДА на МВНР, оп. 41, j. a. 566, k. 228.



eration of the PRB with the USSR.”<sup>19</sup> What were the new Bulgarian demands? After reiterating Bulgaria’s difficult situation caused by the economic crisis which was “spread by Western countries” and unstable world prices, the document states that Bulgaria was forced to export one third more of its produce in order to maintain its current import levels.<sup>20</sup> Bulgaria’s main demand was for increased Soviet supplies of raw materials and energy.<sup>21</sup> It was about petroleum, ferrous metals, coal, coke and phosphates, because “the country’s industry is built on supplies of these raw materials”. We should also remember the annual subsidy of 400 million roubles for Bulgarian agriculture. Finally, the Bulgarian government warned that without Soviet aid there could be “serious difficulties” with the destabilization of the Bulgarian economy which was not in the interests of either the PRB or of the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> According to Zhivkov, the solution was to work out a long-term and comprehensive programme of economic, scientific and technical cooperation between the PRB and the USSR to the year 2000. Such a programme really was worked out and adopted in July 1985, but it was never implemented.

A real revolution in Bulgarian-Soviet relations occurred when in March 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev took charge of the CPSU. He was known in Bulgaria because he represented the Soviet Union during the official commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the beginning of “the socialist revolution” in Bulgaria, which took place on September 9th 1984. Apart from the ceremonial dimension, the visit also had a political purpose – to induce Zhivkov to forego a scheduled visit to Bonn, which was seen as a symbol of Bulgarian aspirations to become yet another Eastern European country embracing a pro-Western orientation.<sup>23</sup> Irrespective of this unpromising beginning of relations between Gorbachev and Zhivkov, Gorbachev’s election was accepted with enthusiasm not only by Bulgarian society but also by the BCP leadership. Hopes were placed in his age – symbolizing the end of “gerontocracy” – and with the announcement of reforms to revitalize that huge country which was in economic stagnation. During the first meeting of the Eastern European leaders, immediately after his election, Gorbachev spoke famously of assured equal relations, respect for the sovereignty and independence of each country, and their mutually beneficial cooperation in all fields of endeavour.<sup>24</sup> However, it was also something new – a declaration of the necessity of “each party to take full responsibility for the situation in its own country.”<sup>25</sup> What kind of responsibility – was made clear a little later, when, in bilateral contacts with the leaders of the Eastern European countries,

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19 *Pametna zapiska do s’vetskoto r’kovodstvo, obs’dena na zasедanie na Politburo na CK na BKP na zasедanie № 420 na 28 maj 1984 g.* ЦДА, z. 1Б, op. 67, j. a. 3139, k. 5.

20 *ibid.*, k. 6.

21 *ibid.*, k. 7-8.

22 *ibid.*, k. 12-15.

23 J. F. Brown. *Surge to Freedom. The End of Communist Rule in Eastern Europe.* Durham and London 1991, p. 186.

24 M. Gorbačev, *Žizn’ i reformy.* Kn. 2. Moskva 1995, p. 311.

25 *ibid.*, p. 311.

Gorbachev explained the unwillingness and inability of the Soviet Union to bear the burden of economic problems of the whole Eastern Bloc. This statement indicated a change of direction which carried more meaningful implications than the customary expressions of reassurance and fraternal solidarity.

Gorbachev's first visit to Bulgaria took place in October 1985 occasioned by the Warsaw Pact summit. Gorbachev's exchange of views with PRB leaders on October 24th 1985, was still held in the platitudinous Brezhnevite convention as regarded the political sphere<sup>26</sup>, but things economic came in for more animated treatment from. Gorbachev when he said: "As the saying goes, friendship is friendship, but cheese is money."<sup>27</sup> The money in question was the annual subsidy for Bulgarian agriculture which was to be withheld.<sup>28</sup> This declaration came shortly after the long-term programme of economic, scientific and technical cooperation between the USSR and the PRB to year 2000 was signed in 1985.<sup>29</sup>

This new approach to the issue harmonized with critical voices raised at the Comecon meeting of Eastern European leaders in Sofia regarding excessive bureaucracy, inefficiency, and lagging behind in developing key technologies.

The result of these discussions was a note made by Gorbachev "About some issues of cooperation with socialist countries", submitted for consideration by the Politburo of the CC CPSU. The reform mechanism designed to cure foreign economic relations, which was ignited in August 1986, was built on this document.<sup>30</sup> The discussion during the meeting at the highest level of the Eastern European leaders in November of the same year also focused on this reform. It was then that, the existing barter system whereby the USSR's allies received Soviet raw materials in exchange for finished goods regardless of their quality, was questioned for the first time. Some started talking about running their economic relations on market principles. This polarized attitudes: János Kádár and Wojciech Jaruzelski keenly supported the new line because it matched their reformist aspirations, while Erich Honecker and Nicolae Ceaușescu simply questioned it.<sup>31</sup>

Changing the terms of economic cooperation was a serious threat to Bulgaria. In the pre-Gorbachev era, Bulgaria was accustomed to balancing its finances by

26 Gorbachev uses such phrases "our parties are the closest and our relations are filled with the spirit of brotherhood and cooperation (which creates) eternal bonds between our nations". *Protokol ot razgovora*. "Novo vreme", № 6, 1995, p. 81.

27 Minutes of this conversation p. 46. It is about suspending a yearly subsidy for Bulgarian agriculture of 400 million roubles. M. Gorbačev, op. cit., p. 368.

28 Therefore, Gorbachev writes: "In this way, finally it was clear that the economic model, adopted in Bulgaria, like in other countries of the CMEA functioned, to a greater or lesser extent, thanks to (their 'artificial breath' (life support mechanism) by way of an external injection. The Soviet state was not able to pursue economic relations according to that scheme. We put forward the issue of changing economic relations by basing them on the principle of equivalent exchange, which was understood as the suspension of the annual subsidy of 400 million roubles for Bulgarian agriculture." *ibid*, p. 368.

29 M. Gorbačev, op. cit., p. 367.

30 *ibid*, p. 315.

31 *ibid*, pp. 316-317.



re-exporting refined and chemically processed Soviet petroleum, whereby Bulgaria achieved gross receipts of 2.2 billion dollars in 1981-1983.<sup>32</sup> The economic results of Gorbachev's new deal for Comecon countries, in the words of the Bulgarian economist Kostadin Czakyrov were as follows: "In the years 1986-1990 there was also a considerable decline in the physical exchange of raw materials and components, which we received. Petroleum fell by 6 855 thousand tons, coal – 3 000 tons; coke – 1 500 tons, fuel oil – 1 000 tons. There were decreased supplies of manganese ore, pyrite and apatite concentrate, steel ingots and billets, cylindrical products, carbon black, cement, cellulose. This lack of raw materials and components should have been supplemented with imports from Western countries at a price of about 500 million leva. It tightened even more the vicious circle gripping our economy."<sup>33</sup> This explains the rapid deterioration in relations between Zhivkov and Gorbachev that occurred during 1989 and was described in the memoirs of both leaders which were published after 1989.

An additional difficulty for Bulgaria in the mid-80s came in train of a government-inspired campaign to compel the Turkish minority to "Bulgarise" their surnames, which had repercussions in the sphere of foreign relations. The compulsory change of surnames affected around 850 000 Bulgarian Turks (constituting around 10% of the country population) who were forced to assume Bulgarian surnames in what was termed a "revival process".<sup>34</sup> It took place at the turn of 1984 and 1985, that is, at the end of Chernienko's reign in the USSR, and it can be assumed that the lack of strong authority in Moscow encouraged Zhivkov to embark on such a drastic violation of human rights.

However, things changed once Gorbachev took power.

Instead of Soviet support, to which Zhivkov was accustomed, Bulgaria began to meet with criticism after the beginning of reforms in the Soviet Union. An example of this was an interview given by the Soviet ambassador in Sofia, Leonid Grikhov, given in October 1985 to a journalist from a Luxembourgish newspaper. In this interview, the ambassador spoke openly about low work output and the shoddy condition of Bulgarian export goods.<sup>35</sup> In this way, in the second half of the 1980s, the period of extremely cordial Bulgarian-Soviet relations was closed. Todor Zhivkov allowed himself to tell American businessmen jokingly: "Gentlemen, what do you want from Bulgaria – to declare against the Soviet Union? Maybe you want me to do that? And, more importantly, would you be ready to take the goods that we produce? The Soviet Union buys them, and thus the Soviet Union is our colony."<sup>36</sup>

32 "Financial Times", September 7th 1984.

33 K. Čak"rov, *Vtoria etaž*. Sofiâ 1990, p. 200.

34 In fact, it was about an attempt, made by the-seventy-three-year-old Todor Zhivkov, to "go down in history" as the creator of a "homogenous Bulgarian state". The name "revival process" is associated with strengthening Bulgarian national awareness in the 18th-19th century. The motivation for the "revival process" can be found in: *Tezisi po v"zroditelnia proces*. ЦДА, z. 1Б, op. 68 j. a. 3388, k. 111-152.

35 *Publikacii za B"lgaria v Luksemburgskite vestnici*. ДА на МВНР, op. 42, j. a. 4112, k. 7.

36 *Stenografski protokol ot razgovorite na T. Živkov, p"rvi sekretar na KC na BKP, i Fransoa Miteran [Francois Mitterand], p"rvi sekretar na KC na FSP, 18 oktombri 1977 g.* ЦДА, z. 1Б, op. 60 j. a. 231, k. 13.

Zhivkov understood the danger to him personally that flowed from the Soviet Union's critical attitude to Bulgaria. As an experienced politician, he decided not to follow the example of Honecker and Ceaușescu, who rejected "perestroika", realizing that it would lead to their removal. Instead of openly opposing Soviet reforms, Zhivkov started his own on a large scale. In this way "the concept of July" of 1987 was born.<sup>37</sup> It anticipated economic transformation in accordance with market principles, limited political pluralism and a new constitution.<sup>38</sup> The reforms announced in Bulgaria seemed to be more extensive and deeper than anything thus far seen in the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> Their implementation started in August 1987 when the National Assembly passed a package of laws under which a lot of ministries were abolished<sup>40</sup>, the previous total of twenty eight regional administrative authorities were transformed into nine districts with a reconstruction of the regional local government capitals, a special committee to prepare a new constitution was appointed, rituals such as official parades, the obligatory decoration on national offices with portraits of party leaders and other such celebrations of the regime were eliminated. Some foreign analysts see in "the concept of July" another Bulgarian attempt at a "great leap"; and undoubtedly, it became part of the transformation processes commenced in countries like Poland and Hungary. Simultaneously, Zhivkov demonstrated inexhaustible political energy, by means of which he wanted to avoid placing himself among the Eastern European leaders of conservative predisposition, and in this way defend his power.<sup>41</sup> This administrative shake-up, however, brought fresh chaos into the governing system<sup>42</sup> and Zhivkov turned out to be one of the conservative leaders of Eastern Europe. He expressed his disapproval of "perestroika" in a somewhat idiosyncratic way – by trying to overtake it with his own faster and more original reforms.

37 This package of changes was discussed and accepted at the meeting of the CC BCP on the 28th and 29th of July 1987. *ibid*, op. 65, j. a. 83, 84.

38 T. Živkov, *Memoari*. Sofiâ 1998, pp. 349-353; N. Ahiel, *Todor Živkov i ličnata vlast*. Sofiâ 1997, pp. 336-346.

39 Gorbachev directly accuses Zhivkov of an attempt to overtake him from the left. M. Gorbačev, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

40 Soon after the formation of Georgi Atanasov's first government on 19th June 1986, came the July plenum which approved numerous changes that were to be implemented as a matter of priority. On August 19th, it was decided to eliminate various councils of economic, social, administrative development – and individual ministries – education, finance, trade and health, which were transformed into great "super ministries". T. Tašev, *Ministrite na B'lgaria 1879-1999*. Sofiâ 1999, pp. 604-606.

41 Richard Cramptom, the British specialist in Bulgarian studies, also assesses that in this way: R. Krampt'n, *Kratka istoria na B'lgaria*, Sofiâ 1994, p. 306.

42 This is confirmed by one of Zhivkov's closest co-worker: "All public energy was directed at an end in itself 'accumulation' and 'opening' of ministries and resorts. When the economy was stable, it was accepted as something explorative and innovative. The Reform of 1987, however, changed the economy and seriously affected the central bodies of the planning and financial system of the country. Decisions were taken in secret in Euxinograd [*a former late 19th-century Bulgarian royal summer palace*]. Upon their approval of the Politburo, they were quickly announced as decrees". K. Čak'rov, *Vtoria*, p. 174.

Economic changes, both Soviet and Bulgarian, demanded the intensification of contacts with non-Comecon countries that were able to provide new technologies. This change of orientation triggered competition between the Soviet satellite states and undermined the undisputed leadership of the Soviet Union in the Eastern Bloc. For Bulgaria, the scientific and technical resources of Japan and West Germany were of the utmost importance in its drive to establish special relationships with these two countries, which irritated the Soviet leadership.<sup>43</sup>

“The concept of July” provoked a direct conflict between Zhivkov and Gorbachev. During their Crimean meeting on October 16th 1987, Gorbachev criticized Zhivkov, not because of his unwillingness to carry out reforms, but because of the rapid speed at which he wanted to democratize Bulgaria. His real anxiety was aroused by the party position determined by “the concept of July”, which, according to Zhivkov, “would not be ‘the major problem of power.’”<sup>44</sup> The problem of the leading role of the Communist Party was central to Leninist theory, therefore, the modification of this doctrinal article of faith sounded like heresy to the General Secretary of the CPSU. Gorbachev initially failed to grasp that Zhivkov did not intend to resign from power, and all he wanted to do was to dress his rhetoric in pseudodemocratic robes. The fact that Zhivkov appreciated the situation can be seen in the words he spoke at the beginning of September 1989: “... there is no alternative to perestroika in Bulgaria as well: its realization puts on the agenda our ability not only to revive socialism but also to maintain its principles. If we are not capable of this, it may give rise to situations which put at risk not just perestroika, but socialism itself.”<sup>45</sup> Thus Zhivkov, like Gorbachev, wanted to “democratize” socialism not because he wanted to jettison it, but in order to save it from disaster.

The last years of socialism in Bulgaria (1987-1989) were filled with reforms aimed at organizing and gradually replacing the centrally planned socialist economy with a market economy. The mechanism for doing so was typical of Eastern Europe – through top-down reforms without searching for initiatives coming from society, and thus it held fast to the paternalistic approach characteristic of Soviet-style state socialism. During these reforms the Bulgarian authorities showed more determi-

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43 Gorbachev was particularly angry at attempts to make these moves without informing him. According to Zhivkov, during their meeting in October 1987, Gorbachev said: “You have people with a pro-Western orientation around you... People who think that new technologies should be taken from West Germany, from the West... And if you have people of pro-Western orientation around you who would only think about a ‘mini-FRG’ and a ‘mini-Japan’, you should not keep them close to you. You should not look anywhere else but to socialism for all the answers to questions and all the solutions to the tasks to be completed...”. T. Živkov, *Srešu nakoi l’ži*. Sofiâ 1993, p. 32. Petar Mladenov also mentions this in his memoirs: *Život*’t. *Plusove i minusi*. Sofiâ 1992, pp. 302-316.

44 T. Živkov, *Srešu nakoi*, p. 38.

45 Zhivkov spoke these words to one of the Polish reformers, Mieczysław Rakowski, who was replaced as Prime Minister by the Solidarity activist Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Rakowski visited Bulgaria towards the end of summer, and was greatly surprised by Zhivkov’s realism which sharply differed from the opinions of the remaining leaders such as Erich Honecker, Miloš Jakeš and Nicolae Ceaușescu. M. Rakowski, *Jak to się stało*, Warsaw 1991, p. 258.

nation than during the previous campaigns, mainly because of the alarming economic condition that forced Zhivkov to admit: "We are defeated by capitalism."<sup>46</sup> The liberalization of the economic sphere started with "Decree 56" on restructuring the Bulgarian economy as adopted in January 1989.<sup>47</sup> This document discussed the necessity of introducing new forms – state and private companies and partnerships as well as granting complete freedom of private economic initiative.<sup>48</sup> In autumn 1989, bills on a new approach to national insurance and health care involving private initiative were also discussed, but they remained on paper after the forced dismissal of Zhivkov on November 10th 1989. The Bulgarian leader had run out of time or the opportunity to take matters further.

Gorbachev obviously did not support Zhivkov, the age-old Bulgarian leader, and Zhivkov, from his vantage point after 1987, started to appreciate that direct Soviet influences in Bulgaria were becoming dangerous both to himself and the system. The economic danger for Bulgaria began to appear when Gorbachev demanded (together with Hungary and Poland) the "dollarization" of intra-Comecon relations.

During "perestroika" a paradoxical situation surfaced in outline: the official Bulgarian authorities criticized the Soviet Union more sharply, whereas the man-in-the-street followed Soviet newspapers, magazines and television (relayed every Friday), which were liberated from censorship by "glasnost", with mounting attention and interest. And Bulgarian society began to put pressure on its authorities to follow the Soviet example.

In the years preceding "perestroika", Bulgarians exuded increasing indifference to the Soviet Union and to what was said in the Soviet press and to Soviet culture. This situation changed radically with the onset of "glasnost" in 1987. The first signs of freedom of speech in the USSR led to an unexpected increase in subscriptions to the Soviet press. Suddenly, it became the most wanted press in Bulgaria competing with the most popular Bulgarian titles. Ten of thousands of Bulgarians subscribed

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46 Zhivkov's statement was supported with economic data; in Bulgaria, the per capita income was 4000 dollars while in Western countries it was 20 000. *ibid.*, p. 259.

47 "Rabotničesko delo", January 11th 1989.

48 The thesis on the necessity of radical organization and economic changes were presented in Zhivkov's paper "Further practical progress of the July strategy in the process of rebuilding of our society", discussed by the Politburo of the CC BCP, November 28th 1988. This document speaks of the necessity of "attracting foreign investments through the creation of joint partnerships, consortiums, developing free trade zones and other forms with partners from non-socialist countries... The fundamental organizational form should be a company... Companies can be set up on the basis of all forms of socialist property and therefore their initiators should be state bodies, public organizations, banks, economic institutions, cooperatives, individual citizens and others. A company has the right to make direct technological, investments and establish market contacts with other companies and economic organizations in the country and abroad... By economic regulation we must enable the development of new mechanisms in our conditions and forms of management... (and) do this in the most diverse forms, including stocks and shares, mechanisms of involvement in participation, and other forms of economic associations in the country and abroad should be used". ЦДДА, з. 1Б, оп. 68, j. a. 188-88, k. 18, 40, 42, 55.

to periodicals like: “Moskovskiye Novosti”, “Literaturnaia Gazeta”, “Argumenty i fakty”, “Ogonyok”, “Novy mir”, “Niewa” and “Druzhba narodov”. A change of attitude to the new Soviet regime was particularly positive because Bulgarians compared Gorbachev’s team with the aging Zhivkov who was proud of the title of “dean” of the Eastern Bloc leaders.<sup>49</sup> Born at the beginning of 1988, the Bulgarian dissident movement was directly inspired by Soviet dissidents and became a fact thanks to the political liberalization promoted by the Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup> Thus, at the end of the 1980s, the picture of the Soviet Union in Bulgaria was supplemented with features such as reform-minded attitudes and freedom of speech, which could only be received positively.

The opposite process running in parallel with the observably improving image of the Soviet Union in Bulgarian society, was that of the collapsing image of the Bulgarian regime as personified by Todor Zhivkov. This experienced leader quickly understood the scale of the danger arising from Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforming activity. However, he could not openly express his disapproval; on the contrary, during all Bulgarian-Soviet meetings, from the first one in October 1985 till the last one in June 1989, he declared his deep devotion to the Soviet Union and its new leader.<sup>51</sup> His real attitude was seen, however, in his speeches at closed meetings. There, Zhivkov openly talked about his anxieties connected with the rapid restructuring of the Soviet political system that was ahead of the economic changes.<sup>52</sup> Zhivkov’s increasing disappointment with the Soviet regime was combined with a sense of helplessness and fatalism, as can be seen in his conversation with Mieczysław Rakowski, the Polish Prime Minister, at the beginning of September 1989. To say to a Polish person who might be traditionally biased against the Soviet Union that: “In the past we idealized that country”, but added bitterly: “if the USSR staggers, this is the end of us”<sup>53</sup>, perhaps reflected Zhivkov’s despair.

Paradoxically, it is the strongest element of “perestroika” – the Soviet press – that also turned out to be the most dangerous to the preservation of a positive picture of the Soviet Union in Bulgarian society. Bold publications about the crimes of the Stalinist era, and literature on this topic – “Belye Odezhdy”<sup>54</sup> and “Not By Bread Alone...” by Vladimir Dudinstsev, “Doctor Zhivago” by Boris Pasternak<sup>55</sup>, “Children

49 Interestingly, Zhivkov underlined his position not only to his Eastern European allies, but also during the meeting with, John Whitehead, the America Deputy Secretary of State, February 4th 1987 r. ЦДА, z. 1Б op. 60, j. a. 392, k. 1-33.

50 The fundamental feature favouring the Bulgarian Dissident Movement is both its late appearance as well as its close links with the Soviet Union. Cf. I. Baeva, *Političeskata kultura na b’lgarskoto disidentstvo*, [in:] *Collegium Germania*, vol. 4. Sofià 2003, pp. 278-294.

51 At the final meeting, Zhivkov declared for the last time: “We are the only republic which did not cause, does not cause and will not cause any problems”. ЦДА, z. 1Б, op. 68, j. a. 3698, k. 71.

52 *ibid*, k. 83.

53 M. Rakowski, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

54 A book issued in the Bulgarian language in 1989 by the prestigious publishing house “Narodna kultura”.

55 A book issued in the Bulgarian language also by the publishing house “Narodna kultura” in 1989.

of the Arbat” by Anatoly Rybakov<sup>56</sup>, “Juvenile Sea” and “Chevengur”<sup>57</sup> by Andriey Platonow, “Life and Fate” by Vasily Grossman and many others – got a lot of publicity in Bulgarian society. While for educated people they constituted a real revelation and a stimulus strengthening their distrust of the Bulgarian political class, the effect on the average Bulgarian was somewhat different. These Soviet books give a very different image of Soviet society, calling into question not only the meaning of the October Revolution of 1917, but also its subsequent development, whose part was also that of Bulgaria after World War II. Bulgarian readers of the Soviet press began to ask questions, which were previously unthinkable, e.g. if the system was built on crime and pointless sacrifice, what was the purpose in linking it with Bulgaria? In this way, the period of the most intensive reading of the Soviet press and literature contributed the most to the creation of a new image of the Soviet Union – a country built on crime<sup>58</sup>, the severe restriction of freedom and misconceived economic programmes. In order to absorb this changed picture, some time was needed; in 1989, the Soviet Union and Mikhail Gorbachev were still popular with Bulgarian society, and the concept of necessary changes also in Bulgaria was, as a rule, was perceptibly inspired by their images.

In 1989, the situation in Eastern Europe changed suddenly under the influence of ongoing events: the Polish Round Table admitted Solidarity to power-sharing, Gorbachev declared that he would not be driven by the Brezhnev Doctrine, and on June 4th-6th 1989 the PZPR (the Polish United Workers’ Party) lost the elections in which Solidarity scored a resounding victory. These changes occurring in the Eastern Bloc forced Zhivkov to react. His response also sparked off an acute crisis in Bulgaria connected with the final stage of the so-called revivalist process when, following the protests of Bulgarian Turks, Zhivkov was forced to grant the right to dissatisfied people to leave the country on May 20th 1989. In this context, on June 23rd 1989, the last meeting of Zhivkov with Gorbachev took place in Moscow. It came about mainly due to Zhivkov’s efforts, because Gorbachev was not particularly willing to meet him because of both personal reluctance and the internal and external problems that were racking the Soviet Union.

Shorthand notes of this meeting reveal Todor Zhivkov’s attitude to Mikhail Gorbachev.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, he did everything to appeal to Gorbachev and demonstrate his allegiance – as evident in his generous praise for the successes of the Soviet leader in the international arena and a reiteration of the promise that Bulgaria would not pose any problems for the Soviet Union. Simultaneously,

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56 A book issued in the Bulgarian language in 1989 by the Plovdivski publishing house “Chr. G. Danov”.

57 A book issued in the Bulgarian language in 1990 by the publishing house “Profizdat”.

58 The role played by the popular columnist Arkady Vaksberg in the delegitimization of the Soviet system was of particular significance; see his four-volume work *Triumph and tragedy. I.V. Stalin. Političeskij portret* dated 1989, and military historian Dmitri Volkogonov, in his two-volume book *Siedmiu wodzów*, published in the Bulgarian language in 1996.

59 Minutes published in: “Novo vreme”, № 11, November 2007, p. 104-112.



Zhivkov insistently asked whether Gorbachev did not bear any grudge against him. Gorbachev did not respond but the fact of asking such questions indicates that Zhivkov knew about the critical statements directed at him, that reached the CPSU from Soviet alumni: Andrey Lukanov and Petar Mladenov. Zhivkov definitely wanted to obtain Soviet support on the so-called “Turkish issue”, therefore he tried to promote a “new internationalism” initiative, but it was unacceptable to the Soviet leader who was counting on the sympathy of the West in the field of human rights. On the other hand, Zhivkov took leave to criticize the Soviet leader, something that in other circumstances would have been unthinkable. He articulated his objections to the course of Soviet “perestroika”: “This, what is happening here, worries me because of the fact that the restructuring of the political system is grossly ahead of the restructuring of productive capacity.”<sup>60</sup> Zhivkov simply underlined his right to a different approach: “We rather should not act as you act.” He tried to strengthen his arguments on the necessity of Soviet aid without shrinking away from uttering the direct threat that: “Bulgaria will disappear but the Soviet Union will also disappear.”<sup>61</sup>

Zhivkov’s desperate attempt to arrest the breakdown of relations with the USSR failed. For the first time in Bulgarian-Soviet relations, a fundamental rift appeared. It was not based on the previous arguments over the scope and nature of the USSR’s economic aid for Bulgaria or disputes over the prices of transferred goods, but exclusively on the essential changes that had to be made.

The real importance of this meeting was seen during later discussions about it in the Politburo of the CC BCP. Zhivkov openly stated that: “The mood was exceptionally good, and has nothing in common with the untrue information that they receive from some of our comrades ... However, it is clear that some people at the embassy, and maybe also with the use of other channels, were subject to information of our comrades and for some time there was some tension ... Now everything was completely overcome.” The most important of Zhivkov’s aims during this meeting was to receive again Soviet support for him to stay in power. He had already had information on the start of Soviet and Bulgaria’s preparations for his removal from power. Zhivkov used to successfully take advantage of his amity with the Soviet leader as a defense tactic in his quest to remain in power, but the meeting with Gorbachev showed that there was an irreversible change. After less than four months, it turned out that Gorbachev simply calmed him down when there were preparations for the inter-party revolution in the BCP aiming to overthrow “the dean” of Communist leaders of Eastern Europe.

It happened with the help of the longtime Bulgarian foreign minister and member of the Politburo of the CC BCP, Petar Mladenov, who, along with Andrey Lukanov, received Soviet support for removing Zhivkov. Despite their later denial of any such thing, this help was evident in the activities of the Soviet Ambassador, Victor

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60 ЦДА, з. 1Б, оп. 68, j. a. 3667, k. 83.

61 *ibid.*, k. 73.

Sharapov<sup>62</sup>, and other embassy staff members.<sup>63</sup> This Soviet factor was employed during internecine party struggles which led to the overthrow of Zhivkov on November 9th-10th 1989. On October 24th 1989, Petar Mladenov distanced himself from Zhivkov with “an open letter”, in which the Soviet Union played an important role. In it he said: “we reached the point of even isolating ourselves from the USSR... But if you do not believe in anything else, we should believe the USSR and the CPSU.”<sup>64</sup>

Even before the demise of Zhivkov, a new trend could be seen – the reorientation of Bulgarian foreign policy from looking eastwards to one that was opening to the West. During the autumn session of the General Assembly of the UN in New York, Petar Mladenov spoke with James Baker, the US Secretary of State, and almost openly promised him an immediate implementation of changes in Bulgaria.<sup>65</sup> This indicates that post-Zhivkov political forces in the BCP were prepared not only to follow Gorbachev, but also to reorientate Bulgarian foreign policy – something that was carried through by other politicians in the last decade of the 20th century.

In conclusion, we could say that even if, relations between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union were exceptionally close throughout the post-war period, they were predicated on a somewhat one-way interest: the USSR gave Bulgaria economic aid thanks to which the country became more industrialized and, almost until the end of the system, it could count on Soviet loans and raw materials. Bulgaria in turn repaid with political obedience and the demonstration of particularly close relationship. In binding itself so closely with the USSR, foreign and domestic analysts had every reason to dub Bulgaria “the most loyal Soviet satellite”. However, the end of the Cold War brought in train a fundamental geopolitical change. Bulgaria’s “special relationship” with the Soviet Union, of which Bulgaria was proud and which it exploited to the full, became a barrier and the cause of problems in its transition to a market economy. The path, which Bulgaria had to tread proved longer than that of other Eastern Bloc countries which had preserved greater distance between themselves and the Soviet Union.

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62 V. Šarapov, *Moskva i KGB namat pr”st v 10 noemvri. Intervju na Aleksenia Dimitrova*. “24 časa”, February 27th 2002.

63 This is mentioned in the journal, published by Tom Tomov, a Bulgarian journalist, of the former Soviet diplomat in Bulgaria Nikita Tolubeyev, a friend of Lukanov. T. Tomov, *Prevrat”t*. “Trud”, November 10th-17th 1998.

64 P. Mladenov, *V imeto na B”lgaria. Pismo na P. Mladenov. 24 oktombri 1989 g.* “Meždunarodnio-tnošenia”, 1990, № 1, 5-7.

65 P. Mladenov, op. cit., pp. 22-23.