

*ICD Forum: Cultural Diplomacy In Europe ~ Contribution Paper*  
**BULGARIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: DÉJÀ VU?**

There is a subtle (I wouldn't call it annoying as subtlety is indigenous to soft power) repetitive pattern in Bulgarian cultural diplomacy nowadays. It follows the stereotypes of intercultural cooperation ere the year 1989 – the fall of Berlin Wall.

Bulgarian cultural diplomacy still has vague but haunting **reminiscences of the past**, and that is happening at a time when there is a vital need for it in order to reconcile with **the challenges of the changing nature of the diplomatic intercourse of the future**.

Which are the problems I identify herein?

First, the setting: **The awkward adaptiveness to new technologies** (there appears to be some obscurity when transmitting the signal, i. e. communicating the message). Bulgarian cultural diplomacy relies, I'd say almost entirely, on the conservative presentation of our culture {hear: the muted audience attending a virtuous performance at a classical concert; see: the awestruck looks of the visitors of an exhibition of regalia of a medieval royal dynasty}. What should be upgraded is **the implementation of the modern hi-tech advancements** when inaugurating traditional products, e. g.: *avant-garde installations instead of exhibits behind glass or the Sound and Light audiovisual show at Tsarevets instead of trite retelling of the same key historical moments by the tourist guide's mouth*. All these examples serve as a *per se* première of Bulgarian culture in its seemingly (outwardly) familiar but (inwardly) specific appearance.

Second, Bulgarian cultural diplomacy is focused on **inherently national products related to traditional handicraft and rites such as folklore songs or dances, national costumes, and so on, and so forth**.<sup>1</sup> Such dollops of authenticity are too hard to be absorbed by the unaccustomed foreigner. Do not forget that promoting traditional cultural products (*ranging from Chinese food to Moroccan handmade cutlery*) is a trademark of the so-called traditional societies from Africa, the Middle and the Far East. But what could be copied and pasted (not just cut and pasted) by them is the **wrapping of these artifacts as merchandise** – take sushi bars as an example of a popular culinary spree. Why are Bulgarian *Gaststätte* in Germany (where they do exist) a sanctuary only for our compatriots and their friends? Here

comes the issue of political marketing whose paragon has recently become *Incredible India*. The attractive incorporation of highly original objects into mass production whets the appetite of the average consumer – a *sui generis* apéritif. It proves out that the hegemony of the Occident (seen by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>II</sup>) is no longer the case since the East is the one that lures the West. Thus, the role of Bulgarian cultural diplomacy can be seen as an alter ego to EU cultural diplomacy (Balkan, Eastern European, whatsitsname). Yes, the West continues to take part in the radical *dépaysement* of Oriental cultures (beyond the borders of the Protestant-Catholic Latin-alphabet writing member states). But there is a major difference – after the researcher has passed the test of otherness (i. e. revelled in the foreign culture) and verified one's capacity to accept it (a process of initiation), one goes on living in this new multicultural context (a process of internalising). The reason why that happens is that the soft power of non-Western cultures has the same or even greater impact than that of Western ones. So, **traditional societies have the unique opportunity to preserve their ethnocentric characteristics by selling them in the form of a typical mass culture output.** {cf.: archeological sightseeing of monasteries provokes a massive Orthodox Christian pilgrims' influx<sup>III</sup>}.

Third, the plot: One drawback concerning the contents of the international presentation of Bulgarian culture is **the constant reference to its communist past**. Wielding soft power means neither a literal continuation of a retrograde foreign policy (chewing over and over again the ideological pattern of the past<sup>IV</sup>) nor a negation such as the hefty anti-communist rhetoric of emigrants' memoirs.<sup>V</sup> In comparison to Germany where the process of “Denazifikation” of the past has been successfully brought to an end, the nostalgia for the communist period in Bulgaria is only digested with difficulty. A fairly interesting recapitulation of the collective memory with a certain “gangster flavour” offers the film “Zift” after Vladislav Todorov's novel<sup>VI</sup>. Such a scenic performance of the visual arts gives civil society the chance for an active participation both as a director and as a scriptwriter (and arises in between the question of public-private collaboration) in conducting cultural diplomacy. Thus, we see the constructivist school of thought (à la Nicholas Onuf<sup>VII</sup>) certifying its thesis that *people make society and society makes people*. Or: **culture is a constructed phenomenon serving certain (incl. political) objectives.**

Cultural diplomacy therefore might be presented as a 3-D cinema in view of the above mentioned films. Cultural diplomatic ties, as the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for the Coordination of International Educational and Cultural Relations Robert H. Thayer puts it back in 1959, are based on mutual understanding.<sup>VIII</sup> **Mutual understanding suggests interaction; in other words a two-way street, not the one-way track of diplomatic ties between representatives at a governmental level.** It also means getting one's national images across and delivering one's community narrative in such a convincing way that they are taken in by the interlocutor (the other country's society). Insight into other countries' culture, not a brief zapping through the channels, is a must for an effective cultural diplomacy.

And the end: the final message is... To be continued via **the linkage between culture and science.** The collective interpretation of cultural diplomacy among an epistemic community (such as the ICD) is possible at such forums as the one currently held.

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<sup>I</sup> Ekaterina Dotscheva "Metamorphosen des Klassischen", Kultura-Heft 26 (2553), 10. Juli 2009; In: *Medienecho Auswahl, Goethe-Institut Bulgarien 2009-2010*, S. 65

<sup>II</sup> "Structural Anthropology", cit. in: Marcel Hénaff "Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Making of Structural Anthropology", University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 22-23

<sup>III</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704216804575423673016971944.html>

*Bulgaria Looks to John the Baptist to Resurrect Flagging Economy: Archeological Find Promises Fame, Tourists; Questions Remain Over Relics' Authenticity* by Joe Parkinson; In: Wall Street Journal, August 13, 2010

<sup>IV</sup> Cf.: The controversial and clichéd remake of childhood years during the "regime" in the Prize-winning (Venice Festival) film "Goodbye, Mama"; In: 24 hours, May 9, 2011

<http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=884407>

<sup>V</sup> Cf. Anti-Bulgarian "orchestrated" hatred in *Sybille Levitscharov's Prize-winning book "Apostolov"* (Leipziger Buchmesse, 2009); In: *Bulgarische Armee, Art Linie*, 23. Oktober, 2009; In: *Medienecho Auswahl, Goethe-Institut Bulgarien 2009-2010*, S. 93

<sup>VI</sup> <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,14921766.00.html>

"Das Oxymoron *Bulgarische Kulturpolitik*", Interview mit Vladislav Todorov, In: *Deutsche Welle*, 19. 03. 2011

<sup>VII</sup> "Constructivism: A User's Manual"; In: *"International Relations In a Constructed World"* by V. Kubálková et al. (eds.), M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1998, p. 59

<sup>VIII</sup> "Cultural Diplomacy: Seeing is Believing"; In: *Vital Speeches of the Day*, delivered at the University of Maine, August 10, 1959, pp. 740-744.