



# A Symbiosis of Religious Affections and State Socialism: Bulgaria's Foreign Cultural Policy of the Late 1970s

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## Abstract

State Socialism aimed to create a utopian atheist society, where religion was supposed to become superfluous and therefore disappear. Despite the strong anti-religious campaign in 1950s' and 1960s' socialist Bulgaria, religion did not vanish but remained in the periphery of public and private life. That applied not only to traditional orthodox Christianity but also to different Theosophy-based groups and ideas, which became influential in the policy of the cultural minister of the 1970s Lyudmila Zhivkova. Her large scaled international cultural projects and the lively bilateral relations with India, Nepal and Sri Lanka not only aimed at increasing the country's diplomatic prestige but also at popularising Zhivkova's esoteric conception of national and personal development for which I introduce the term "esoteric nationalism". Further discussing Bulgaria's active participation at the general assembly of the United Nations in 1979, this paper will argue that non-hegemonic religious ideas were not always considered hostile by the Eastern European totalitarian authorities. Moreover, the Bulgarian case exemplifies the potential which an esoteric-socialist symbiosis had nationally and internationally.

**KEYWORDS:** *late socialism, religion and politics, Eastern Europe, esotericism, Bulgaria*

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** *późny socjalizm, religia i polityka, Europa Wschodnia, ezoteryzm, Bułgaria*

## 1. Introduction

Against the popular image of a monolithic homogenous socialist ‘Eastern Block’ of countries, living in Moscow’s shadow and blindly following its political agenda, one crosses many examples of the opposite while working with sources of that time. The normative frame of state socialism in the 1960s and 1970s was not as narrow as in the 1950s, especially for the members of *nomenklatura* and *intelligentsia*<sup>1</sup>, which allowed a relative broadening of the areas of action of both persons and states. It was in these free spaces of the totalitarian system, where religious and political deviation took place. This observation shifts the popularly as well as scholarly reproduced perspective on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe from a mono- to a polyphony of ideas, interests, and agendas. This pluralisation of the socialist narratives took place both nationally and internationally.

Furthermore, considering the individual agendas of socialist countries enables a historical reconstruction of the impact of smaller political powers on the ‘periphery’, like Bulgaria, on the global picture of the Cold War (Dragostinova, Fidelis 2018, 577–687; Dragostinova 2021). Phenomena are often defined by their margins, and therefore analysing the history of esotericism, which stood on the periphery of the religious field, in Bulgaria, which was on the periphery of the ‘Eastern Bloc’, will shed light on central questions of the study of the recent past and of the study of religion, such as: What happens with non-hegemonic religious phenomena in an anti-religious setting? What was the relationship between religion and politics during state socialism? How can two seemingly opposite ideas – socialism and alternative religiosity – merge in a coherent foreign cultural policy? I will answer these questions by drawing a map of the Bulgarian foreign cultural affairs in the late 1970s, paying special attention to bilateral relations and the Bulgarian participation in one major international event – the 34<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York 1979.

I will argue that Bulgaria’s bilateral relations in late socialism were not only driven by national agenda but by the politicians’ spiritual interests as well. This led to the cultivation of a small but diverse international network of esoteric actors and sites amongst which Bulgaria could spread its cultural and political influence relatively independently from the Soviet Union.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *nomenklatura* is used for a limited number of people occupying high-ranking positions in the government and industry of a socialist country. *Intelligentsia* refers to the group of university-educated individuals, working in the spheres of arts, literature or academia, often considered the ‘intellectual elite’ of a socialist society.



Furthermore, deriving from a historiographically constructed notion of a noble national identity, which was based on the esoteric concept of ‘transmigration of the soul’ from the ancient Thracians to the present-day Bulgarians, the country developed a sense of mission. This, paired with the imperialistic tendencies and competitiveness of the Cold War period, constituted the policy which I call ‘esoteric nationalism.’ In addition, I will demonstrate how the programmatic speeches, based on the esoteric notion of ‘development’, which the Bulgarian cultural minister and member of *politburo* Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942–1981) held in 1979 in front of the United Nations, served as a tool to improve the country’s international image during the last decade of socialism.

My research is based on documents from the Central State Archives in Sofia, Bulgaria, as well as on the critical reading of published primary sources.<sup>2</sup> Although unarguably relevant for a comprehensive picture, the economic dimension of foreign affairs will not be taken into account in this paper.

## 2. Foreign cultural policy in late socialism: Outlines and highlights

The international relations of the 1970s should be seen through the prism of the *détente* paradigm, which sought a relaxation of the Cold War tension through negotiations, diplomatic agreements, and mutual disarmament programs. The focus on peaceful coexistence of ‘the west’ and ‘the east’ put culture in the spotlight of foreign (as well as domestic) affairs, and it was considered a main tool both for diplomacy and propaganda. The policy of *détente* went hand in hand with the attempt to create a ‘socialism with human face’, which became part of the socialist agenda after the Prague Spring in 1968.

In Bulgaria, the 1970s were characterised by vivid development of the cultural sphere leading to its pluralisation and relative liberalisation. In terms of foreign affairs, this meant purposive strengthening of the existent diplomatic relations (e.g., with India, Japan, Mexico, and the United States of America) and establishing new ones (e.g., with Sri Lanka and Nepal), as well as the proactive participation in commissions, publications, and meetings of the UN and UNESCO, of which Bulgaria was a member since 1955/6. This geographical and political diversity in the selection of cultural partners is a validation of György Peteri’s concept of ‘Nylon Curtain’ (instead of the

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<sup>2</sup> A first draft was presented at the conference of the CEENASWE scholarly network on the topic of ‘Occultism and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe’, held in September 2021 in Prague.



popularly known Iron Curtain), emphasising the porous nature of cultural borders in the time of state socialism (Peteri 2013, 113–124).

### 2.1. Bilateral Relations: The policy of ‘esoteric nationalism’ and the construction of an esoteric network

Although the relations with soviet and socialist countries were carefully maintained, the target of the international cultural expansion were neutral, developing, and capitalist states, preferably from East Asia and the global south. The following examples illustrate my thesis that two equally important and interconnected reasons were at play in this tendency: a) reasons of socialist and nationalist propaganda and b) the interest in ‘ancient’ or ‘eastern’ cultures and religions. It is noteworthy that although it was typical for this period (Ivanova 2017; Vitanova-Kerber 2021), the interest in non-hegemonic religious phenomena has a long tradition in Bulgaria. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when the first masonic lodges were founded (Georgiev 1986, 15–42), a swift development took place and by the time of the Second World War, a variety of institutionalised or semi-institutionalised theosophical and anthroposophical groups were active in the bigger cities. Esoteric networks of intellectuals and domestic groups like Peter Deunov’s ‘White Brotherhood’ were established in the same period.<sup>3</sup>

On 12 December 1978, Zhivkova spoke to the board of *Komplex Kultura* – the institution responsible for the cultural policy in the 1970s, which she led between 1975<sup>4</sup> and 1981. She reported on the visit of the Bulgarian cultural delegation in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and India, headed by her in November and December of the same year. This report is exemplary for how contacts with new countries were established and politically justified. Talking about Sri Lanka, Zhivkova first made clear that

although the government which overthrew Bandaranaike<sup>5</sup> has more relations with the western countries, the line of neutrality remains unchanged, even though the progressive powers there have many difficulties because of the capitalist way of development of the country. (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 2)

<sup>3</sup> For the spread of non-hegemonic ideas at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Nazarska 2020, 75–92.

<sup>4</sup> Zhivkova’s influence was immense already in 1972, when she became one of three equal directors of *Komplex Kultura*, and in 1973, when she was entitled ‘first among three equals.’ It is safe to say that 1975 officialised what long has been the status quo in the major cultural institution.

<sup>5</sup> Sirima Bandaranaike (1916–2000) was a three-time Sri Lankan prime minister 1960–1965, 1970–1977, and 1994–2000 and chair of the socialist Sri Lanka Freedom Party.



After this almost obligatory political classification Zhivkova pointed out that she was leading ‘the first delegation from a socialist country, showing such exceptionally high interest in their [the Sri Lankan] culture and civilization’ (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 3), from which she seemed very impressed:

We visited the so-called “cultural triangle” of Ceylon. It is this triangle in which their culture and civilization has most actively developed. These are several cities that are arranged to form a triangle, with Ceylon as the center. You all know that Ceylon is connected with Buddhist civilization and Buddhist culture. Even Gautama Buddha himself visited Ceylon and Sri Lanka three times. There are extremely rich and valuable monuments there, which are only now beginning to be restored, to be discovered. (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 4)

The fact that Zhivkova was referring to the history, geography, and prominent figures of Buddhism as if it was common sense, means that religion was everything but a tabu in the context of state-forced atheism. Nevertheless, it was usually reframed as culture or heritage and not directly addressed as religion. Based on this knowledge of the country and the desired possibility to participate in the restoration and promotion of the Buddhist sites, the Bulgarian government signed treaties with Sri Lanka on the exchange of professionals, books, and pieces of art in the spheres of ancient philosophy and Buddhism (Cf. Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 5).

A template of pointing out 1) the country’s suitable (neutral or socialist-friendly) political line, 2) its great cultural and spiritual potential, and 3) the fact that it was not yet approached by other socialist countries, can be also recognised in the report on Nepal, “whose policy was always a policy of neutrality” (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 7), according to Zhivkova. Its cultural value was measured again in its relation to Buddhism and in its status of a developing country, where Bulgaria was expecting to easily expand its own, not necessarily mainline socialist, cultural influence.

Nepal is a country that needs the most and active help in the field of culture. They are now creating their *intelligentsia*, their spheres, and areas of culture, they have no specialists, personnel. At the same time, it is an ancient country associated with Buddhism, it is there, on the border between India and Nepal, that Gautama Buddha himself was born between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Now with the participation of all countries where Buddhist civilization is developing and under the auspices of UNESCO, this place where Gautama Buddha was born will become a great cultural center. So, we must send our specialists



to get acquainted with this civilization and culture, because there is evidence of many common things between the proto-Bulgarian culture on the one hand, and the Buddhist and Hindu culture on the other hand. They have many manuscripts and cultural monuments that have not yet been explored. (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 10)

Here the drive towards innovation and foresight, two cherished virtues during socialism, culminated. Bulgaria not only wanted to discover the 'great cultural center' before the western countries, but it wanted to be the first among the socialist countries, too. Supporting Nepal in the discoveries of its spiritual past was not an expansion of the soviet sphere of influence. Bulgaria clearly followed its own political agenda of what I call 'esoteric nationalism', which was believed to pave the way towards the utopia of communism.

Knowledge of the domestic cultural affairs is essential for grasping the internal logic of 'esoteric nationalism'. In the late 1970s Bulgaria developed a fascination for 'discovering' its ancient past to embrace and popularise it during the then present era of so-called mature socialism. In fact, it was more of an invention of tradition when archeologists and historians developed the idea of *Thracian orphism* (Fol 1986). This contains the prototypical triad of esoteric topoi: the existence of a perennial knowledge, its transmission through 'migration of the soul' and the transformation<sup>6</sup> of individuals into higher beings by this knowledge. In the case of Bulgaria, it implied that the Thracians, who lived in the region thousands of years ago, were in possession of an 'ancient wisdom' which they were able to literally transfer to their descendants, the present-day Bulgarians. Due to this transmission of spiritual knowledge, the latter were then expected to be extremely wise, competent and 'developed'<sup>7</sup> individuals, who, first among all others, had to be able to reach the desired (and utopian) state of communism.

This is how esoteric topoi were utilised to invent a national identity, implying the perception of spiritual superiority and the sense of a mission. This gave new impulses to the Bulgarian nationalism and influenced the foreign cultural agenda. It is in this ideological frame, that the exploration of another ethnic group of the past, the so-called 'proto-Bulgarians', mentioned

<sup>6</sup> Similar to the term *transmutation*, meaning the possibility to transform oneself into a higher spiritual being and reach divine state of mind, coined by the French scholar Antoine Faivre as one of the elements of his concept of "Western Esotericism," which was controversially discussed in the study of esotericism in the last three decades. Cf. Faivre 1994.

<sup>7</sup> On the notion of 'development' see the next section of the article.





by Zhivkova in the citation above, was of great interest to the cultural policymakers. In a process of construction of national identity, the perspective of 'discovering' further elements of ancient culture and spirituality, which could be instrumentalised for the valorisation of the past, were attractive.

Concerning the already established bilateral relations, I will present some snapshots of the connections between Bulgaria and India, since they were blossoming during, and especially at the end of, the 1970s. Here again, Bulgaria was interested in ancient history, with the addition of Hinduism and the legacy of the Russian painter and esoteric thinker Nicolas Roerich (1874–1947), whose son, the painter Svetoslav Roerich (1904–1990) was living in India with his wife, the Indian actress Devika Rani (1908–1994). The promotion of Nicolas Roerich's ideas and works was a central part of the domestic affairs under Zhivkova's rule too – in 1978 the former student of Blavatsky and co-author<sup>8</sup> of *Agni Yoga* was proclaimed person of the year,<sup>9</sup> his works were translated into Bulgarian, German, and English, and his paintings circulated in the galleries across the country and abroad.<sup>10</sup> The personal affection towards Roerich of part of the *intelligentsia*, among which were the writer Bogomil Rainov, the painter Svetlin Roussev, and Lyudmila Zhivkova, was more or less publicly known.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was under these specific circumstances that relations with India became a priority for socialist Bulgaria.

Both countries established diplomatic relations in 1954 and as Bulgarian state officials Lyudmila Zhivkova and her father, the general secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov (1911–1998), visited India several times. In 1976 an *Indo-Bulgarian Cultural Friendship Society* was inaugurated in Delhi and developed 66 branches (Cf. Central State Archives, 405, 9, 619, 120) across India in only two years. In the inaugural speech of the society,

<sup>8</sup> It is said that Roerich's wife, Helena Roerich was receiving the contents of agni yoga from the so-called *mahatmas* (spiritual teachers in the inner logic of theosophy and agni yoga) and Roerich was concerned with the writing and popularization.

<sup>9</sup> The exact expression was an 'all-round developed personality', to whom most cultural events during the year were dedicated. The title was given to Leonardo da Vinci in 1979 and Vladimir Lenin in 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Bulgaria organised events dedicated to Roerich in Austria and Germany. For a report on the events in Germany in 1979 see Central State Archives, 405, 9, 591.

<sup>11</sup> Numerous memoirs and documentaries were created in the 1990s and 2000s, focusing on Zhivkova's spiritual affections, often seeking for 'scandalous' aspects of her private life. They are easy to find online and will not be cited here. Another testimony for Zhivkova's not only affection but also integration in the agni yoga circles, is the book chapter, dedicated to her by the Russian writer and president of the Nicholas Roerich Museum in Moscow Lyudmila Shaposhnikova (1926–2015); Shaposhnikova 2002, 100–117.



the director N. V. Padmanabhaiah pointed out what would become the main theme of the cultural relations between both countries – the national identity based on the idea of being the successor of a ‘great ancient civilisation’ while heading towards prosperity and ‘greatest happiness’ through socialism.

We, Indians, tremendously admire the Bulgarian People who have wrestled their freedom a century ago from Ottoman Rule, and have, with enviable determination and a spirit of dedication, made Bulgaria a mighty SOCIALIST NATION [emphasis in original]. Theirs is a unique example of an agrarian economy being very scientifically transformed to one where there is a happy balance between industrialization and agriculture.

India, the venerated seat of Aryan Civilization, has also attained similar success in putting an end to alien domination on her sacred land, and is confidently and enthusiastically marching towards a Socialistic goal, highlighting her human values and culture that have earned world renown. Both India and Bulgaria are determined to bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number through Socialism. (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 121)

After visiting Nepal and Sri Lanka, in December 1978 the Bulgarian delegation reached India, where it stayed two weeks. Zhivkova’s report, as found in the archive document cited above, showcases that the official trips of the socialist elite were often used not only for meeting local officials and soviet diplomats but also for visiting religious sites. This is how after flying to Delhi and meeting the Indian minister of culture, Zhivkova and her colleagues took a detour over Bangalore, Chennai (then Madras), and Kolkata (then Calcutta), establishing connections with some religious actors.

In Bangalore, the Bulgarians visited Svetoslav Roerich and Devika Rani, who were creating a center dedicated to Nicholas Roerich. Later, in front of the board of *Komplex Kultura* in Sofia, Zhivkova vouched for ‘establishing closer contacts precisely with this cultural center’ and sending material support for its construction and furnishing because ‘in the person of Devika and Svetoslav Roerich, we have extremely great friends’ and ‘we could impose our culture and our presence [in India] precisely through this cultural center’ (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 13). Zhivkova’s personal interest in agni yoga concurred with her political ambitions of strengthening Bulgaria’s own positions (and not socialism in general). It must again have been in Bangalore, where Zhivkova met the actress and world touring yoga teacher Indra Devi (1899–2002) and invited her to give lectures in Bulgaria, as we learn from Devi’s letter from 23 March 1979.





Dear Lyudmila Zhivkova,

Shall write this letter in English so that it can [be] censored if necessary. My previous letter was written in Russian, but I did not get a reply and do not know whether your invitation to come to Sofia to teach yoga still stands.

By now it would probably be better to come in September, unless you still prefer June 15<sup>th</sup>. I can teach yoga and lecture it with or without mentioning Sai Baba, is (sic) that is against your governments policy. Please wire your answer instantly. With all best wishes and honest [illegible]

Indra Devi

(Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 269, 2)

The letter induces two important observations, which seem obvious but in the context of the paper are not self-evident. First, the level of transgression of the socialist norm becomes visible – even for a cosmopolite person like Indra Devi, who by then had lived in the Soviet Union, India, China, the USA, and Mexico, Zhivkova's invitation to perform yoga lectures in a socialist country was nothing she could imagine being consistent with the political line. This leads to the second observation: the (religious) actors had a high level of reflection of the conflict potential of their actions, which was expressed by, in this case, self-censorship. Indra Devi realised that referring to the Hindu religious specialist Sai Baba may cause tension with the atheist political line of the socialist country. This is why, without having yet experienced any kind of state censorship, she herself proposed to leave this part out.

Another religious encounter took place in Chennai, where the delegation visited *Kalakshetra*<sup>12</sup> – a center for arts, founded in 1936 by the artist and Theosophist Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–1986), who was married to George Sydney Arundale (1878–1945), the former director of the *Theosophical Society Adjar*. In the centre, Zhivkova and her colleagues saw a performance of a dance group for traditional Indian dances. Back in Sofia the politician reported:

This dance troupe can help us recover part of our ancient epic – the Thracian legends, the Proto-Bulgarian legends – and how they were presented in the dances. They can help us train our specialists to try to restore some of our ancient traditions. (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 14)

It was the shared nationalist trend of (re)discovering the 'ancient traditions' and the 'ancient past' (which began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during its

<sup>12</sup> Contemporary information about *Kalakshetra* under <https://kalakshetra.in/> Accessed: 10.11.2022.



independence movement), which made India a suitable partner for cultural exchange with Bulgaria at that time.

In Kolkata the delegation “unfortunately couldn’t visit the center of Tagore” (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118) but visited the school of one of his students. Zhivkova highly appreciated the Bengali writer and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and planned to dedicate a year of cultural events in Bulgaria to him too, like she did with Roerich, da Vinci and Lenin. Furthermore, the archive materials state that the Bulgarian officials went to the ‘Ramakrishnanission centre’ in Kolkata, which most probably is a misspelled version of *Ramakrishna Mission*<sup>13</sup> – a spiritual organisation, dedicated to the ideas of the Hindu religious leader Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), who Lyudmila Zhivkova describes as “the greatest philosophical thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>14</sup> In her report to the board of the directors of *Komplex Kultura* in Sofia, Zhivkova proposed for the institution “to start working with this center on the problems of Western civilization,” adding that “In India, they have almost no concept of Western culture and civilization” (Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 16). No information is provided on what kind of cooperation was envisioned between the socialist ministry of culture and *Ramakrishna Mission* but a clear intention to become India’s ‘first access’ to ‘the West’, thus having the control to define *what ‘the West’ is*, can be recognised. These almost imperialistic ambitions of small Bulgaria built a bridge between the two most outspoken goals of cultural policy – expansion of the national sphere of influence and becoming part of an international network of spiritual sites.

## 2.2. Bulgaria in the United Nations: The notion of ‘development’

Socialist functionaries saw the participation in international organisations as a possibility to extend the Bulgarian sphere of influence. Therefore, in the autumn of 1979 Lyudmila Zhivkova travelled to New York to take part at the 34<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly, where she gave two official statements. The first one was a programmatic speech, which addressed

<sup>13</sup> Contemporary information about the *Ramakrishna Mission* organisation under <https://belurmath.org/about-us/> Accessed: 10.11.2022. It is in the very same center, that the Bulgarian Yoga Federation organises yoga courses and retreats nowadays. Cf. <https://yoga-bf.com/%d0%b9%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%b0-%d0%b2-%d0%b1%d1%8a%d0%bb%d0%b3%d0%b0%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%8f/> Accessed: 10.11.2022.

<sup>14</sup> Central State Archives, 288B, 1, 118, 15. Since Ramakrishna lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Zhivkova’s estimation is either a lapsus or she is pointing out that his ideas outlived him and allegedly kept their supreme nature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



some key aspects of the political line of *détente*: nuclear disarmament and the signing of the SALT-II-Treaty,<sup>15</sup> anti-colonialism, international security, and peaceful coexistence. According to Zhivkova, Bulgaria was ‘pursuing a consistent policy of peace, good-neighbourly relations, and co-operation’ while ‘confidently marching towards its communist future’ (Zhivkova 1981, 83). Further, she presented a list of ‘global problems’ or goals of that time, which started by “preventing the danger [...] of a new world war,” continued with “overcoming the economic backwardness in the world [...] using the achievements of technoscientific progress” and ended at “awakening the potential creative power of the human individual, the all-round development and the perfecting of man and human society” (Zhivkova 1981, 80). According to this ascending hierarchy of goals, which Zhivkova formulated for the UN, spiritual issues had primacy over political and economic objectives.

Here again, a look at the internal political affairs is helpful for understanding the terms ‘all-round development’ and ‘perfecting of man and human society’, which originate in Zhivkova’s large-scaled project, called ‘Program for aesthetic education of the nation.’ It envisioned a reform of the Bulgarian socialist society through the exposure of people to culture, which, according to Zhivkova, had transformative powers for the human mind. This was the reason for *Komplex Kultura* to promote the work of Nicholas Roerich and Leonardo da Vinci in 1978 and 1979 in Bulgaria under the motto ‘all-round developed personalities’ – Zhivkova was convinced that they were embodying the idea of spiritual ‘development’ and through promoting their ideas in her cultural policy, she wanted to apply it to the socialist society and, as the quotation suggests, to humanity in general. This is an indication that her utopic ambitions for the ‘perfection’ of society were much greater than the borders of a socialist country. They were envisioned to have an indefinite scope of international implementation and the UN was nothing but a suitable stage for their promotion.

The second statement, which Zhivkova gave on the session of the General Assembly was called ‘In the Name of the Children on Our Planet’ and should be seen in the context of the *International Year of the Child*, proclaimed by the UN in 1979. It is in the same framework that one of the biggest cultural events in Bulgaria in 1979 – *The International Children’s Assembly ‘Banner of Peace’* took place. The art-festival for children from all over the world received great international resonance – 1300 participants from 79 countries gathered in Bulgaria under the motto ‘Unity, Creativity, Beauty’. The idea was

<sup>15</sup> An agreement for the limitation of nuclear arms, signed between Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1979, in Vienna.



to promote values like peace, art, and hospitality between the nations instead of the Cold War animosity. The event was a big PR campaign for Bulgaria, but at the same time it was also a platform for promoting Nicholas Roerich's ideas. For example, the name 'Banner of peace' and the symbol (a red circle with three red dots inside) were directly copied from the Roerich Pact.<sup>16</sup>

Against the background of this huge event for Bulgaria, Zhivkova's second statement was dedicated to the children. It was again a programmatic political statement, reflecting the historical circumstances and the global spirit of disarmament and *détente*.

It is impossible for the question of children to be detached from the [...] principal issue of our time – the safeguarding of world peace. Doing away with war as a means of settling international disputes is not only advisable but vitally necessary premise of our time, the guarantee for the continuation of life on our planet and for the perfecting of the human race. (Zhivkova 1981, 85)

In line with the tendency, observed by the historian Theodora Dragostinova, that international forums were used by both sides of the Cold War for reciprocal accusations in violating human rights (in the case of the 'Eastern Bloc') and violating the principle of non-interference in domestic political affairs (in the case of 'the West') (Dragostinova 2018, 216), I argue that both sides were instrumentalising the notion of peace and peace endangerment against each other. It is against this background that Zhivkova saw the preservation of world peace as a 'principal issue of our time'. Only that to her, ending war was a necessary premise not only for children's welfare but also in a much broader sense 'for the perfecting of the human race' and here is when her esoteric concept of 'self-perfection of the all-round developed individuals', indicated in her first statement, comes to display again.

The concrete meaning of 'perfection' and 'development' becomes clearer when further in her statement Zhivkova juxtaposes two scenarios for the future. She envisions either a positive outcome of the Cold War through 'development' or the negative consequences of 'inertia'.

What will the world be like tomorrow, [...] what will man assert in his everyday work – true, dynamic, bright development – or will the ignorance of the limited consciousness and the inertia of the old continue to give rise to fresh difficulties and ordeals [...]? (Zhivkova 1981, 86)

<sup>16</sup> An international treaty for the protection of cultural values, proposed by Nicholas Roerich and signed by 21 countries in 1935 in Washington D.C.



Since this is a key metaphor in the speech, a short clarification is needed: Here, to the notion of ‘perfecting mankind’ from Zhivkova’s first statement comes the notion of ‘development’. It refers to another esoteric facet of her policy and reveals how, according to Zhivkova’s spiritual theory, can an individual become an ‘all-round developed personality’. In other words, it answers the question: How to ‘perfect mankind’?

Based on theosophical and New Age ideas, Zhivkova was convinced that every individual was able to ‘develop’ his or her consciousness (both quantitatively as ‘expansion’ or ‘broadening’, and qualitatively as ‘elevation’) and thus to reach higher states of mind, culminating in ‘perfection’. ‘Perfection’ was understood individually but also on a national level, where it meant reaching the desired political stage of communism.<sup>17</sup> The main tool for this endeavour was culture, which was considered ‘the great power of changing and transforming human and social consciousness’ (Zhivkova 1981, 2). It was in this context that Zhivkova described her optimistic idea of future as ‘bright development’. The dystopian part of the dichotomy, accordingly, she linked to a ‘limited consciousness’ which later occurs as a ‘low quality of human consciousness’.

According to this logic the ‘limited’, ‘low-quality consciousness’ is portrayed as typical of the ‘old’, ‘undeveloped’, of ‘inertia’ and ‘war’, and to reach ‘bright development’, which for Zhivkova was equal to children’s welfare and world peace, one should ‘expand’ or improve the quality of the consciousness. With this argumentation, speaking on behalf of the socialist country Bulgaria from the highest international tribune, Zhivkova called for an esoteric-evolutionist social reform of the world.

A somehow different notion of development came across the ocean back home. The *Anteni* newspaper reported on the Bulgarian participation in the UN General Assembly with socialist pride and interpreted it as an example of successful socialist propaganda.

The philosophy of humanism and historical optimism and the vivid evidence contained in the speech about the care of socialism for life and its evolution – the children – reminded with new force of the advantages and historical mission of real socialism and contributed to raising the international prestige of the new social order. [...] The socialist countries have not been involved in plundering

<sup>17</sup> In the socialist vision of political and social development the decades of the 1970s and 1980s were called ‘mature socialism’ and were considered to be the last step towards communism, which was expected to start in the 1990s.



the world and are not responsible for its backwardness, but they are still helping to overcome it, based on their international solidarity.<sup>18</sup>

In this rhetoric, the spiritual aspect of Zhivkova's statements is omitted or reframed as 'humanism' and instrumentalised for socialist propaganda. 'Evolution' is not used in the spiritual meaning of 'expanding the human consciousness' but in the materialistic sense of socialist progress, which claimed to put an end to poverty, hunger, and exploitation. This indicates the flexibility of esoteric rhetoric which facilitated its unproblematic adoption and implementation in a socialist, officially anti-religious setting.

### 3. Conclusion

This small cutout of Bulgaria's foreign cultural affairs at the end of the 1970s showcases the fact that in late socialism culture was not merely a 'soft power'. In the time of *détente*, it became the main field of interaction between both superpowers of the Cold War. As such it was not only in possession of more material sources but also of increased freedom of action beyond the bipolarity of the time. Technical progress allowed the wide dissemination of new forms of communication and mass media and put the field of culture in a state of transformation, which went hand in hand with an increased openness towards the new. The discoveries of the Space Age revolutionised science and culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and induced a discourse, in which the notion of 'progress' was renegotiated between material, legal, ethical, and spiritual ideas. At the same time, a whole range of New Age spirituality pluralised and mobilised the religious field across Europe and North America.

In other words, in 'the East', as well as in 'the West', this was a time of general openness towards the new and challenging the margins of what was physically and ideologically possible. This *Zeitgeist* offers one angle of explanation on how the Bulgarian cultural policy, although deviating from the socialist antireligious norms, was tolerated by the state officials: in search of innovation, all means were possible. This is how the cultural minister Lyudmila Zhivkova was able to establish official contacts with Buddhist, Hindu, and theosophical actors – professionals as well as lay people – while representing socialist Bulgaria on state visits across the world. Promoting religious ideas through expensive cultural projects was met with skepticism and even criticism by larger parts of society. This is why it remained part of

<sup>18</sup> Central State Archive, 288B, 1, 7, 150a.





Zhivkova's *personal* political agenda and died out soon after the end of her career in 1981. And yet the socialist functionaries saw this esoteric project as means to an end, namely for Bulgaria's valorisation as one of the cradles of European civilisation – an idea which would create a positive national identity and establish more trust in the socialist system. In the eyes of the party officials, it was not an esoteric network, that Bulgaria was joining, but rather a community of developed and developing 'ancient' nations on their way to socialist modernity, where Bulgaria had a leading position.

In fact, it was a little of both, depending on what was implied by 'development'. Metaphorically speaking, the different notions of the term were like different rhetorical cards, played according to the context. On the General Assembly of the UN in New York, in front of the world's diplomatic elite, Zhivkova played the 'spiritual development' card, drawing a picture of a future where humans have reached a higher state of consciousness, building up a perfect society of peace, art, and cooperation. The media resonance of the very same event, which reached the Bulgarian readers, was that Zhivkova reminded the world of the supremacy of the socialist order over the 'backwardness' of the capitalist system. How was it possible to frame the same speech so differently?

This drastic discrepancy in interpretation was not only a result of a politician's personal esoteric affections or of a totalitarian state's undoubted capacities to twist reality and misinform. It was the specific lexicological flexibility of esoteric language (which it shared with socialist language) that made it into a rhetorical 'chameleon' and likeable narration both for the western and eastern audience. Esoteric ideas have a universalistic and holistic approach to reality and use extremely broadly defined terms like 'development', 'human mind', 'potential powers,' and 'perfection'. For the 'uninitiated' listener they create an overall impression of comprehensiveness and eloquence but do not necessarily transport any concrete (religious) meaning. It is therefore up to the audience, how to interpret them.

This characteristic of esotericism enabled not only its symbiotic coexistence with socialism, but also the revamping of Bulgaria's international image. While still holding on to the socialist positions and goals, in the eyes of the international community it turned from a typical totalitarian state into an open, innovative, humane- and culture-oriented country.

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