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## PERSPECTIVES UPON BULGARIAN SOCIALIST/ POST-SOCIALIST EVERYDAY LIFE OF THOSE WHO “REMAIN” AND THOSE WHO “LEFT”

Dilyana Ivanova Zieske, William Frederick Zieske

### Abstract

This article explores perspectives among Bulgarian immigrants in the United States in remembering everyday life during the socialist and post-socialist periods and compares their reflections upon these periods with the views expressed by those who remained in Bulgaria. Our research uses extensive ethnographic data, including interviews with Bulgarians who did not emigrate, and with those whose personalities were shaped under socialism and remained in Bulgaria long enough to experience the post-socialist transition before emigrating.

We analyze how and to what extent the experience of immigration renders more complex and nuanced migrants' perspectives toward the socialist and post-socialist periods, and the role that nostalgia, alienation, broadened cultural experience and anxiety play in evolving those perspectives. We compare how the alternative notions of nostalgia and rejection of the socialist past life are articulated in the memories of those who “remain” in Bulgaria, and in the memories of ones who “left”.

**Keywords:** *Memory, Socialism, Post-socialism, Immigration, Nostalgia, Everyday Life*

The past three decades have witnessed significant scholarship focusing on perceptions of the socialist past as expressed by those who lived in Soviet bloc nations and later experienced the socio-economic and political transitions that began in 1989. To a large extent, this literature has focused on nostalgia that might appear ironic, misplaced, or merely quaint through the lens of Western societies that opposed the Soviet bloc. Angé and Berliner point out that the academic “works on nostalgia are paradigmatically ‘Eastern European’” and show the “crucial role played by nostalgia in the process of remembering” (Angé and Berliner 2015, 2016: 1–2).

Socialist nostalgia is only one aspect of a much more complex range of emotions expressed in everyday-life memory-telling among Bulgarians who experienced socialism. Nostalgia is commonly mixed to various extents with memories told in starkly negative terms, described as “nostalgic hybrids” by Gerald Creed (Creed 2010: 30-31).

This article explores the complexity of positive and negative attitudes expressed in the retold memories of socialist and post-socialist everyday life, as opposed to “real existing” socialism and post-socialism periods in Bulgaria. We study contrasting notions of nostalgia and antipathy toward socialist past life as articulated in the memories of two groups of Bulgarians: those who “remain” in Bulgaria, and those who chose to emigrate to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

We approach these complexities and nuances “by adopting a holistic and in-depth approach to data gathering” (Manolova 2015: 171). Our approach employs multi-site ethnography methods: primarily semi-structured and unstructured interviews, assisted by participant observation, self-reflection and photo-interviewing;<sup>2</sup> and study of material culture, events, and social media. The result is seen in a historical-anthropological perspective, placing the ethnographic data considered here within a broader historical context.

Our respondents are limited to those now in their 40s to 70s, who received their education and shaped their identities during the communist regime, and reliably carry first-hand memory of socialist everyday life. The respondent group represents several generations of new immigrants of varying social status and background. While the research group is predominantly drawn from Chicago and its environs, where the authors live and participate in the Bulgarian community and events, respondents from other urban centers – Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Denver – were also interviewed.

Our approach benefits from the combination of emic (inside) and etic (outside) anthropological perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The primary author DIZ is Bulgarian-born, lived through the transition (aged 13 when the socialist structure fell in 1989), and emigrated to the United States in 2006; the co-author WFZ is an “outsider” – a United States citizen from birth, without experience of living under socialism or of the post-socialist transition. By combining these two perspectives, we hope to achieve more objective and reflective research results.

The primary author conducted most of the biographical interviews for this paper in Bulgarian, with respondents in America and in Bulgaria. With few exceptions,

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted in several stages from 1999 through 2020. Many of these have been analyzed in previous publications, including Ivanova 2014. Certain immigrant interviews were conducted in connection with the American Research Center in Sofia digital project, “The Immigrant Suitcase. Virtual Museum of the Bulgarians in North America” ([www.immigrant.bg](http://www.immigrant.bg)).

<sup>2</sup> The “impact of photographs in interviewing” can challenge respondents to express their true memory. Photo-interviewing stimulates them to reconsider their lives and even engage in dialogue with themselves (Collier and Collier 1986: 118-122).

<sup>3</sup> For more about the “emic” and “etic” research approaches, see Roth 2003.

interviews were conducted with minimal interference of questions, a narrative type of interview developed by Fritz Schütze, giving the narrator an opportunity to “follow his red fiber” (Popova 1994: 84). Questions were not focused upon nostalgia, anti-nostalgia<sup>4</sup> or any other assessment of the past and did not directly elicit memories through these lenses; rather, the respondents chose and recounted memories organically without being steered or focused by the interviewer.

Our measurable indicators for the respondents’ positive and negative attitudes toward the past include evident expressions of emotion, use of emotionally “loaded language”, and the extent of attention and detail given in retelling certain memories. We consider this process for measuring the respondents’ attitudes toward past experiences more reliable than focused social surveys.

### *Those Who “Remain”*

Since the advent of democracy in 1989, Bulgarian society has been conflicted over how to remember, process and package the nation’s recent past. Rival factions in democratic Bulgarian national politics, as well as cultural and social debate, have been divided between “demonization” of the nation’s experience under socialism, versus “normalization” and acceptance of the past. These are often expressed in strong nostalgic terms, as well as through “commercial commodification” of the socialist period (Kiossev 2011: 649 – 651)<sup>5</sup>.

This leads to “nostalgic hybrids with a significant dose of negativity and precautionary counter-discourses that follow the forms of nostalgic expression but broach no Socialist affirmation” (Creed 2010: 31). Bulgarians “who define their feelings about the past as nostalgia are not advocating a wholesale return to communism<sup>6</sup>, or [expressing a] ‘restorative nostalgia’” (Creed 2010: 42). These forms of nostalgia are not a wish for return to socialism, but rather develop from the realization that there can be no return. These expressions of ambivalence – a mixed antipathy and nostalgia for the pre-democratic period – result from dissatisfaction with the perceived failures of the transition and loss of the community and economic security

<sup>4</sup> For how distance can negatively distort memory and lead to actual anti-nostalgia, see Frankl 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Bach, who studies nostalgia toward the former German Democratic Republic, argues “that what we call nostalgia is a collective phenomenon that emerges through the effects of commodification, which transforms everyday objects into nostalgia objects and thus makes them capable of transmitting cultural knowledge” (Bach 2015, 2016: 124-125). Like elsewhere in the post-socialist world, it has been observed that popular culture in Bulgaria has experienced a “revalorization of Socialist-era consumer goods and products” and that this process of commercial commodification is characterized by “a revitalization of some Socialist ideas, and transvaluation of maligned Socialist materials culture (especially that of more propagandistic character) into kitch” (Creed 2010: 30).

<sup>6</sup> Nina Pehlivanova noted that people in her research were wise enough to realize the irreversibility of the democratic changes (Pehlivanova 2006: 78).

experienced in the socialist period, mingled with vivid recollections of negative experiences during the period (Creed 2010: 30 – 33).

The social trauma of the democratic transition experienced by Bulgarians has been enhanced by failures to realize the promises, ideals, and expectations of building a great Western-oriented post-socialist society. Widespread disillusionment with the transition, marked by economic crises and corruption, has magnified and driven the socialist period's demonization versus normalization conflict deep within the Bulgarian consciousness.

Bulgarians commonly express these conflicting attitudes toward the recent past when they relate memories of everyday life during socialism. Two main memory groups among Bulgarians can be distinguished – one group romanticizing the communist past and another rejecting it. Also evident in the oral stories of those who experienced the socialist period is the phenomenon of “memory splitting” or a “hybrid memory”: a combination and confusion of red nostalgia, and equally strong negative memories, for the socialist period (Ivanova 2014: 118).

Patterns of narrative cores emerge from our respondents' biographical narratives. Thematic patterns in the stories of life under socialism differ based upon the respondents' identification with various groups that experienced Bulgarian socialism and its fall from different perspectives – as former communist activists and leaders, dissidents, political prisoners, common people. Consequently, these groups' perspectives on the period also differ. The former communist activists and leaders focus more on their own contributions to society, and not surprisingly these people tend to glorify the socialist past even when they occasionally criticize it. The narratives of former dissidents, political prisoners and political refugees reveal the dark side of the communist regime, through stories of terror, death, and injustice.

Common people, who were neither in leadership positions nor dissidents, generally share stories of major life episodes – childhood, youth, education, work experience, marriage, leisure time and rest, public and family celebrations – but also recount the pervasiveness of communist ideology's impact on every aspect of life in society, economic shortages, corruption, clientelism, censorship, and so on. Mixed attitudes and hybrid memory are mostly observed in the narratives of this group. For example, E.B., who spent her life through high school under the socialist system, expressed her enjoyment of the school yard and dancing *hora* outdoors in the warm weather, but bitterly recounted that she could not get exempted from the agricultural work of the school-organized brigade despite her allergy to sun: “you simply had to work, and that was it” (Ivanova 2014: 138).

Those who spent most of their youth and adult life under socialism, the so-called “sandwich generation,”<sup>7</sup> though tending to share nostalgic views (Pehlivanova 2006: 8-9).

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<sup>7</sup> The generation of people in their 40s and 50s during the first years of the democracy is called by Nina Pehlivanova the “sandwich generation” because they lacked the free time for rapid social adaptation and became pressed between the demands of the extreme changes in society and the strains of their individual life situation (Pehlivanova 2006: 8-9).

livanova 2006: 8-9), also present negative memories of socialist everyday life.

Nostalgia mixed with bitter memories, and disillusionment in the present; there is no doubt that Bulgarians experienced deep dissatisfaction with their everyday life after 1989. Based on observations and published statistics from the late 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>8</sup> Maria Stoilkova points out that Bulgaria during this period of transition ranked among the unhappiest nations in the world. According to her, this stemmed from the serious discrepancy between expectations and reality in post-communist Bulgarian society (Stoilkova n.d.: [2]).

Respondents' evaluations of post-socialist Bulgaria also do not seem to travel in one direction. Even those who criticize the communist past and embraced the democratic future express open frustration with how the democratic changes in Bulgaria have unfolded. Workers during the socialist period often recount the pain they feel from privatization and the liquidation of factories and other enterprises in the 1990s. For example, one who exhibits a clear disdain for the communist past shared that after she retired in 1995, she went back to get some paperwork and saw the factory where she had worked deteriorating: "I started crying and went back home...They destroyed 'Peter Karamnichev'"<sup>9</sup> (K.N.). Other respondents commonly express a strong sense of loss from seeing factories and businesses where they or their family members worked being shuttered or demolished.

Emigration has been another result of disillusionment with Bulgaria's democratic transition, and of the sources of that disillusionment – the permanent economic crisis (Karamihova 2004: 49) and lack of social and political stability. This situation has resulted in a growing diaspora of Bulgarians throughout the West, including the United States.

### *Those Who "Left"*

Bulgarian emigrants have been drawn by a utopian image of the West generally (Manolova 2015), and by an image of American exceptionalism. The promise of a share in what has become known as the "American Dream", enlivened by tales of immigrants' success and prosperity, feeds expectations of a better and easier life in the United States.

The United States actively disseminated this brand of exceptionalism throughout the Cold War – with communist Bulgarians as one of its intended audiences – through "propaganda efforts over the world, targeting in particular the population of America's number one foe – the Soviet Union and its satellites" (Rodimtseva 2012: 36). Irina Rodimtseva goes on to explain in her dissertation that "Voice of America began regular broadcasts in Russian in 1947, soon adding programs in other lan-

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Stoilkova references an article collecting data from diverse studies of happiness and life satisfaction levels in many countries during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Leigh and Wolfers 2006).

<sup>9</sup> A plastic products factory in Ruse.

guages for the Soviet bloc countries... In 1949, Radio Free Europe joined the enterprise of projecting an ideal America into the Second World.” (Rodimtseva 2012: 36). Since the end of the Cold War, not only mass media, but also the rosy picture shared first-hand by immigrants when they make return visits to their homelands, has perpetuated idealistic views of the West in Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria (Manolova 2015: 172).

Despite Western nations’ limitations on immigration, the elimination in 1989 of travel restrictions imposed by Eastern Europe’s former totalitarian regimes unleashed a wave of migration to the West (Angulo 2008: 251 – 252). Recent Bulgarian immigrants are dispersed among most large urban centers in the United States and Canada, maintaining community organizations, events, and a level of visibility outside of their communities.

Although immigration estimates vary widely, it is clear that after 1989, hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians have migrated to the United States, perhaps as many as 100,000 finding their homes in Chicago and its near suburbs. This migration, spurred by imagined utopian visions of America, was heightened by the economic crises that have gripped Bulgaria for the past three decades (Manolova 2015: 172).

Our immigrant interviewees represent a wide variety of demographic profiles, current and past occupations, and backgrounds. These include former museum specialists (currently caregivers), nurses (both in Bulgaria and in the United States), former school teachers (one now a massage therapist, another now a hairstylist), truck drivers, tradesmen and factory workers, housewives, journalists (one of them a cook in a chain restaurant and the other a writer, now both retired), an accountant (currently retired), a former pilot (currently in pizza delivery), a former engineer (now a real estate agent), a medical professional, and others.

As Mila Maeva observed regarding memories of the socialist/post-socialist everyday life among Bulgarians in England, so too Bulgarians in the United States place their autobiographic narratives within the broader context of migration (Maeva 2017: 251): their settlement and life in the new country, and the inevitable comparisons between “Bulgaria, before and after” and “Bulgaria (or Europe) and the United States”. Despite the wide variation in these immigrants’ life stories, their narratives generally focus upon three thematic cores – life in the Motherland (socialism and post-socialism), the Journey, and life as an Immigrant.

Like those who remain in Bulgaria, most of our immigrant respondents who experienced the communist regime in Bulgaria share memories of everyday life during that period that are permeated by communist ideology and the pervasive influence of propaganda in their personal lives. Their emotional attitude toward past life under communism varies from complete rejection or demonization, to openly-expressed red nostalgia. It is also common to find hybrids of highly positive

and very negative reactions to the communist past within the same respondent's narrative.<sup>10</sup>

Our ethnographic data illustrates that individuals who claim it was better during communist times, at the same time recount painful memories, such as struggling to find housing in the cities (Ivanova 2014: 121 – 127)<sup>11</sup>; and bitterly remember Bulgarian communist authorities concealing the danger of radiation from Chernobyl.

One informant who strongly expresses nostalgia for the socialist period throughout her interview recalls: “So, regarding Chernobyl... the damage had already been announced on the news. But on the news they didn't tell people that it was dangerous, that the radiation could spread, and that it could be in all of Europe, even in Bulgaria and further. And we were eating vegetables, we were walking outside in the meadows. And even my daughter was walking outside in the rain on May 1st, through the fields in the village, which didn't make me happy at all, but what could we do at that moment? No one was saying anything, meaning that they made announcements like: ‘You should avoid yogurt, because it could probably have a dangerous radiation level.’ And actually none of the common people in Bulgaria realized at the moment the gravity of the damage” (I.S., a former museum worker, currently a caregiver).

While the housing shortage and Chernobyl may be two of the most dramatic and common examples, other expressions of mixed feelings toward the communist past, among those who openly claim that it was better, are numerous. One openly-nostalgic respondent is evidently still upset by his prominent father being exiled by the authorities after he told jokes about communist leaders (S.S., a truck driver, retired). Another respondent who cheerfully describes life in the socialist period recalls that a Communist Party member was rewarded with a job that his brother should have gotten, leading his brother to flee to the United States, in turn resulting in the authorities harassing the remaining family members – including getting the respondent himself fired (A.K., a former journalist, now a retired cook).

Frustration with Bulgaria's process of transition, and consequent disillusionment, is often revealed as a reason for emigration. While the trauma of disillusionment with the largely unfulfilled democratic transition in Bulgaria encouraged much of the immigration since 1989, immigrants experienced a second, and perhaps more

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<sup>10</sup> A similar observation has been made from interviews of immigrants from the former Soviet Union: “Extreme pessimism associated with the USSR often caused over-optimistic expectations of life away from it. Confronted with the sobering reality of immigration, our informants resorted to two conflicting strategies: demonization of their country of origin or its idealization. Quite often the two merged within the same interview” (Yelenevskaya and Fialkova 2004: [3 – 4]).

<sup>11</sup> One of the problems identified with the intensive urbanization under socialism was “the shortage of housing areas, which led to somewhat unbearable conditions of living” (Brunnbauer 2010: 191). Milena Benovska defines the problem “as a real living crisis” which led to the development of “clientelism” – the “search for connections” and resort to corruption when searching for housing (Benovska 2001: 188).

traumatic, disillusionment – realization that the American Dream is not quickly and easily attained. This second trauma of incomplete or unfulfilled adaptation has a strong influence on the views expressed by “those who left” toward everyday life under communism.

Among the immigrant’s major challenges is the almost universal loss of social, professional and education status. For example, first-generation Bulgarian immigrants typically cannot continue their former professional trajectory. More often, they are relegated to entry-level or lower-status jobs due to limited English and cultural proficiency, their immigration status, or employers’ lack of respect for educational and professional qualifications acquired in Bulgaria. It has been observed that migration to the West from Eastern Europe generally is characterized by deprofessionalization, demotion/relegation, and discrimination (Krasteva 2014: 381).

One immigrant with a background in university teaching and business who arrived from Bulgaria in 1998 at the age of 38, describing the first years of immigration and his “dirty job” in a hospital laundry, exclaimed, “I don’t want even to remember about that time” (D.D., currently a businessman). Such use of emotionally loaded language reveals anxieties over “losing the past” and “fear of the future” when faced with undergoing successive quick, drastic adaptations (Karamihova 2004: 165). “Cultural shock”, stress and even depression are often evident in the immigrant narratives in other, often dramatic, ways. One of the respondents shared that when she came for the first time to the United States as a 16-year-old schoolgirl with her parents in 1993, she started stuttering. The anxiety and depression she experienced prompted her parents to send her back to Bulgaria for several years to live with her grandmother (D.V., currently a medical professional).

Another respondent who openly expresses red nostalgia shared her disappointment with the limited social benefits available in the United States. After 1989 she worked as a grade-school teacher in Bulgaria, earning a very low salary which she did not receive regularly. The economic challenges she and her husband experienced in the early 1990s led them to move temporarily to Belgium, and then Germany. When denied permanent status, they returned to Bulgaria, ultimately emigrating to the United States in 2005 with green cards through the US Diversity Program.

Comparing her European migrant experience with her life in the United States, she observed: “I do not know how it is [in Germany] now, but I believe that it is better than America. In America, the social politics is not strong while in Germany is very good. For example, if you are not working there, and have some difficulties, you receive some social benefits, while here [in the United States] it is not exactly like that.” Her disappointments in both the “American Dream” and the reality of post-socialist Bulgaria were evident, as was a very strong nostalgia for the socialist past: “I think, to many people [in Bulgaria] this security that we had back then is missing. We had some security because people had jobs and some money, and it was possible for them to go on vacation. My parents were not rich, but we could go on vacation to the sea and in the mountains every year” (M.K., currently a hairstylist).

On the other hand, there are immigrants who, regardless of their sympathy or antipathy towards the former communist regime, speak enthusiastically about their life experience in the United States. One who describes her immigration to the United States in very positive terms, without any cultural shock, shared strongly nostalgic memories of her adult life under socialism. “I want to say what was nice about socialism; at least for museum workers... our salaries were enough to cover all our bills, to save, to go on vacation. There was always money for museum fieldwork, so they even had to force us to go do fieldwork. We did not have to beg for money... This is the biggest difference ... the democracy is violating the democracy... When the democracy came, I just got tired of working for money with which I could only pay the heating at home, after 25 years working at the museum... This was too much for me!” (I.S., currently a caregiver).

These stories (M.K. and I.S.) illustrate the “Bulgaria, before and after” and “Bulgaria (or Europe) and the United States” comparisons common throughout these interviews. They are also exemplary of the many stories, interlaced throughout interviews of our immigrant respondents, expressing frustration with the democratic transition. This theme permeates the immigrants’ interviews, especially among those who express nostalgic feelings toward the communist past.

On the other hand, there are a number of immigrant respondents who relate severely bitter memories of life under socialism in Bulgaria. Their interviews contain stories of harassment and injustice by Communist party officials against themselves, their family members, or both, and a strongly anti-nostalgic view. In emotionally-loaded language one of them shared: “My father’s advice was to be less rebellious, because I was going to have a family, children...but I told him, I would never become a Communist... and I always had troubles, I had troubles during high school, then at the University. I always had troubles. That is why I do not like to go back to Bulgaria. Every brick, every sidewalk reminds me about my unhappy past, for my Motherland which I love with a pain in my heart and soul...but it has been always a *step*-mother to me. Believe me!” (K.M., an accountant, retired).

Another common theme in interviews with immigrants sharing strong anti-communist feelings is the advent and development of democracy in Bulgaria. In most cases, this time is recalled with excitement, often with stories of a personal role in reform groups and events heralding the end of the socialist period: the dissident ecological Society of Ecoglasnost before November 10, 1989; founding the first democratic parties, such as the Union of Democratic Forces (officially established on December 7, 1989); the protests of November/December 1989 and the 1990s.

They enthusiastically recall efforts to build democracy in Bulgaria in the 1990s, typically followed by disillusionment. “After the fall of the Berlin Wall we believed! The excitement and euphoria were so big! . . . We all believed that Bulgaria would become a lawful and civilized state. And I wasted 4-5 years in working for my Union of Democratic Forces, for my beliefs, but then I realized that it was a waste of time, because they infiltrated us with former policemen, communist agents... and I

realized that it would take generations for this country to become normal and democratic, and that this is pseudo-democracy. And since His Majesty Life does not have a second episode, our decision, of my brother and my kids, was to go to California where we have a cousin... to find a way to run away from Bulgaria” (K.M., an accountant, retired).

The advent of democracy in Bulgaria is recalled as a profound experience, expressed as a commonly shared feeling of astonishment at witnessing “history happening” first-hand. One university history student recalled his excitement at being able to read and discuss openly with his professors the political changes, and crimes of the communist regime. For him, “this was an enormous social, historical chance – to live and witness this turning point [in history]” (H.T., currently a massage therapist).

Jonathan Bach describes some East Germans gathering up relics of the socialist past before it was destroyed or lost, which for some was a “consciously desperate attempt to grasp the past as it slipped away before their eyes” (Bach 2015, 2016, 126). This honoring of the socialist past by treasuring its material remnants is exhibited among our respondents, including one immigrant who recalled very pleasant memories of his 33 years working in Sofia as a newspaper printing professional. Despite the cheerfulness with which he described his life under socialism, he told of the end of socialism with surging emotion.

Returning from work one day shortly after November 10, 1989, he witnessed the anti-government protest in front of the Parliament building. He saw people from the crowd trying to break into the building, while others were destroying and robbing the government Mercedes vehicles outside, and got caught up in the excitement: “I should tell you I got so moved from what I witnessed – for the first time people were rebelling against the authorities! ... and I remember ... I took a piece of stuffing from the seat of one of the Mercedes cars because the seat was ripped, and with this stuffing, I came to Chicago... I put it in my luggage” (D.D., currently retired). Including this highly symbolic object in the limited space of his immigrant suitcase suggests a process of self-inscription in objects which scholars observe “among persons whose sense of social self was disrupted by displacement” (Bach 2015, 2016, 127). In the case of our immigrant respondents, this displacement was compound – first from the socialist past, and then from the homeland.

Our Bulgarian immigrant respondents who were interviewed in connection with the Virtual Museum Project “The Immigrant’s Suitcase” were often asked what they brought in their suitcases when they first came to the United States, and asked to show the belongings, or photos of them. Often, these included not just the practical, but objects of symbolic or sentimental value – belongings that transmit cultural heritage, ranging from what Bach describes as “non-commodity, gift-like” objects to actual valuable commodities (Bach 2015, 2016, 128). Mementoes marking the end of the communist regime (like the car seat stuffing) are purely dependent upon

the individual's memory for their value, while others are memorabilia of modest but recognizable value, such as souvenirs distributed through the socialist-era *Balkantourist* enterprise system. In perhaps the strongest evocation of nostalgia among the many examples of suitcase-borne relics, one respondent brought a single socialist-era fork in his luggage when he came to Chicago twenty years ago, and still refuses to use any other – even going so far as to bring it to friends' homes for dinner parties. These stories illustrate how “the re-articulation of identity happens through commodification” (Bach 2015, 2016: 128).

Considering this “commodification of one's own past” (Bach 2015, 2016: 128) triggered our curiosity to investigate socialist-period products in the Chicago area's Bulgarian ethnic grocery stores. These stores exercise an advantage over competitors who offer Eastern European specialties but do not share Bulgarian heritage, by importing products that use identical or similar packaging from the socialist period. In the Des Plaines, Illinois store Malincho, our respondents' demographic group can load their carts with Amphora chocolates, Zlatna Esen (chocolate biscuits), Detska Zakuska (chocolate-covered biscuits), Lokum Obiknoven (Turkish delight), Mecha Krav wine, and more – all with pre-1989 vintage package designs. Georgi Gospodinov and Yana Genova quipped that the reappearance of these items in the contemporary Bulgarian market “suggests a successful economy of the memory and nostalgia. Or for the successful nostalgia for the economy of the limited choice” (Gospodinov and Genova 2006: 147).

Commercialization of immigrant nostalgia by offering socialist-period brands and packaging offers immigrant customers the opportunity to satisfy (and stimulates) their nostalgia, including for the socialist period, through consumption. These products have been continuously offered for years – evidence of sustained demand for them in competition with comparable lower-priced domestic products. Undoubtedly, this demand is partly due to immigrant consumers' nostalgia for socialist material culture, in addition to offering a link to their identity, their childhood, and their homeland.

A similar combination of identity fulfillment and nostalgia stimulus can be seen in the immigrant community's organized events and holidays, including several that evoke the dual socialist/post-socialist heritage and identity. For instance, the Bulgarian community in Chicago celebrates with large festivities holidays and festivals rooted in the socialist period, prominently March 8 (International Women's Day) and June 1 (the Day of the Children) (Ivanova 2015: 348). On the other hand, since 2007 Chicago's Bulgarian community has celebrated the Day of the Democracy on November 10 with a feast, speeches and entertainment. A former Cold War refugee, Hamid Russev (owner of the weekly newspaper “Bulgaria”) founded the annual event in honor of the victims of communist repression. Over the years, this gathering has been held in various banquet halls and other locations, enjoying a large attendance by the area's Bulgarian community (Ivanova 2015: 345). These celebrations suggest that the “communism versus democracy” debate

continues as part of the individual and group identity of Bulgarians in the United States.

Finally, we have observed this debate continually recurring in social media postings on Facebook groups of Bulgarian immigrants. Diverse political events and figures, social and cultural topics and holiday observances spark heated and even antagonistic arguments regarding the concepts of communism and democracy. Current “hot” topics – such as the COVID-19 Pandemic, the 2020 protests in Bulgaria against the government of Boyko Borisov and Attorney General Ivan Geshev, the recent presidential elections in the United States – provoke hostile arguments among immigrants who almost inevitably turn to comparisons and contrasts with socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria, and debate over how good or bad it really was to live under socialism. This is one way that Bulgarian immigrants exhibit their need “to participate in the political argument about the moral evaluation of communism” – which is always influenced by each individual’s particular memory groups and political sympathies (Luleva 2006: 182).

Of course, these social media forums are rooted both in the desire to maintain Bulgarian identity, and immigrants’ efforts to form a new Bulgarian-American identity. These vying desires and efforts trigger rumination over the experienced socialist and post-socialist pasts in Bulgaria, and how to articulate and clarify feelings toward each of these discrete pasts. Although this is a struggle experienced by those who “remain” in Bulgaria, it is further magnified for their immigrant counterparts, burdened with the comparison of their Bulgarian and United States experiences, and the additional struggle for a cohesive identity as both Bulgarians and immigrants in America.

### *Conclusions*

The memories of both groups of respondents present a (re)constructed past that is not a reliable history of real existing socialism, but reflects how the socialist past is perceived, expressed, and used for the narrator’s identity construction in the present (Luleva 2006, 183). There is no dominant narrative or consensus view of the socialist past in Bulgaria (Luleva 2013: 8), but the everyday-life memories of immigrants in the United States present an even more fragmented, complex, and conflicted set of attitudes toward that shared past. This pattern among the immigrant group of respondents can be contextualized through the lenses of marginalization, social trauma, and identity-maintenance.

Daniela Koleva observed a correlation among Bulgarians: those expressing red nostalgia also express feelings of marginalization in the present (Koleva 2011: 431). Bulgarians who lived through disappointment in the post-socialist transition widely exhibit such feelings, and we find expressions of marginalization to be deeper among our immigrant respondents, most of whom have experienced substantial loss

of support networks and status by coming to the United States. Likewise, after experiencing the anxiety and social trauma of the democratic transition (Creed 2010), subsequent immigration inflicts a second social trauma – that of migration to a new, distant world – which is poignantly recounted in the stories of our immigrant respondents.

The interplay of forces upon the post-1989 Bulgarian immigrant, inflicting a compounded social trauma and tending toward marginalization, result in magnification and intensification of the complex array of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia “hybrids” we find expressed in the memories retold of everyday life during socialist rule in Bulgaria.

Bulgarians who did not emigrate express longing for what they remember as strong community ties and friendships during the socialist period, weakened or severed during the transition; but this feeling tends to be expressed more emphatically among those who left for the United States. The breaking of established community ties and forms of status forged in Bulgaria, and the increased need for connection and networks in their new country – perhaps a deeper need for Eastern Europeans, who have been accustomed to a collectivist society – deepens nostalgia for socialist times, when reliance upon neighbors and friendship circles forged intense community bonds.<sup>12</sup>

To some extent nostalgia for youth, the communities and the land left behind also becomes confused with red nostalgia. The challenging, often perplexing and even chaotic life of the recent immigrant, described vividly by many respondents, naturally leads to the telling of nostalgia-tinged stories of socialist times, when they lived a more untroubled life.

These tendencies toward nostalgia are further complicated by disillusionment with Bulgaria’s political transition, the process of immigration and disillusionment with the promise of the “American Dream”, and the personal need for maintaining identity through this series of dramatic life events.

We find that the heightened hybrids of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia for life during communist rule in Bulgaria, influenced by the increased marginalization and social trauma experienced by these migrants, are not only expressed in our respondents’ private interviews. These are also exhibited publicly through material culture, festivals and events, and social media interactions – suggesting that these nostalgic hybrids also find use as an expression and affirmation of identity, a subconscious way to maintain and explain group and individual continuity during the processes of adjustment and searching for visibility in the new country.

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<sup>12</sup> This particular nostalgic tendency has also been observed among immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Yelenevskaya and Fialkova 2004: [9]).

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*Dilyana Ivanova Zieske, Research Associate,  
The Field Museum of Natural History  
1400 S. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, IL  
dipljana@gmail.com; divanova@fieldmuseum.org*

*William Frederick Zieske, Attorney,  
Zieske Law and Fine Arts Legal  
105 S. Roselle Road, Suite 100, Schaumburg, IL  
william.zieske@att.net*