

Perspectives

Central Asian Studies in Bulgaria: Main Trends and Perspectives

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The latest radical political shifts in European and Asian post-Communist space remapped a multitude of political agents as well as their related academic fields. Disciplines like international relations, political science, history and sociology "conceived" new regional studies, each one intertwining specific methodological approaches with empirical case studies. Central Asian studies in Bulgaria emerged as a separate academic field within this long-term and erratic structural process. Moreover, the Bulgarian scholarly community suffered from similar political, economic, social and academic processes that occurred in the Central Asian countries themselves in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

The Bulgarian scholarly community has sought to develop Central Asian studies despite several obstacles, including the relative paucity of material means that characterizes economies in transition. It is useful to discuss several conceptual issues that have impeded this development.

First, Bulgarian researchers of Central Asia were for too long separated from the international scholarly community with respect to Russian studies and, to a lesser extent, Middle Eastern studies. Russian studies in particular has long overshadowed Central Asian studies and hampers its emergence as a distinct field of study at both the empirical and the methodological levels, while Middle Eastern studies represents a corrective that assists in establishing its emergence. This is because there inheres in the field of Middle Eastern studies sociology of knowledge; it is characterized by an internal logic of development and is linked to a research outlook that is strongly tied to broader-based academic fields, such as, for example, Islamic studies. Experts in Central Asian studies thus find themselves poised between Russian and Middle Eastern studies in their attempt to establish their approach to their subject.

The vagueness of Central Asian studies as a rubric is a second disadvantage with which Bulgarian scholars must contend. To be sure, this covers a broad region eastward from Bulgaria, but at the same time its borders are not well fixed. This results in the absence of a commonly agreed upon regional focus among researchers. If there is no doubt that the field of Central Asian studies includes the five former Soviet republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan), still there is less than full agreement about whether it includes the regions populated by the many non-Russian nationalities in South Russia, or Ukraine or the Caucasus, not to mention those territories lying to the south of the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. This absence of consensus is especially evident with respect to Turkish studies, as well as with respect to Turkey as a country neighboring Bulgaria, and in addition to the questions surrounding the many Turkic minorities in Bulgaria (Turks, Gagauz, Tatars, and Circassians, to mention but a few). A similar ambiguity characterizes the consideration of Bulgarian minorities in Ukraine and Moldova. These last-mentioned fields of study were developed in Bulgaria respectively as Turkish/Ottoman studies and studies of Bulgarians abroad (also called Bulgarian National Cause Studies).

It is instructive to ask whether Turkish studies and studies of Bulgarians abroad are part of Central Asian studies, or whether they should be considered as separate and strongly independent fields of research. The work of Bulgarian scholars on local Islamic (predominantly Turkic) minorities is an important part of Bulgarian studies of the Bulgarian ethnic background. Insofar as these Islamic and Turkic minorities settled in Bulgaria during the period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, beginning in the fourteenth century and lasting into the

nineteenth, those studies may also be considered as Central Asian studies in the Bulgarian context.

Another cause for confusion in this, the early development of Bulgarian studies of Central Asia, is the avoidance of research on the Islamic peoples of the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Both Bulgarian public opinion and state plans for academic development remain caught within a framework according to which the Bulgarian citizen must be of the Christian confession. This intellectual and material environment complicates research on Islamic peoples, who continued to be perceived as "others." Thus, studies of the proto-Bulgars and of pagan and Christian tribal organization are very well informed theoretically, but such is not the case for Bulgarian statehood of the Volga River basin with its Islamic connections. These Bulgarians were renamed Tatars and Bashkirs by a decree of Lenin in 1920. Bulgarian studies of Central Asia should include this ethnic uprooting, and also such political and military organizations as the Volga Bulgarian Muslims Committee (led by the Vaissovs, father and son), the Green Guards, and the Kazan-based Bulgarian National Congress (BNC). The BNC reappeared in 1990 and asserts that Bulgarian studies of Central Asia should include the rewriting of the history of the Tatarstan Republic and the cultural autonomy of the Bulgarians there. Efforts in this direction up to now have been modest and exceedingly insufficient. Moreover, these peoples have demonstrated a willingness to be included in the Bulgarian national outreach to the Bulgarian Diaspora. Thus Gousman Khalil, leader of the BNC, participated in a pan-Bulgarian council held in Bulgaria in 2000, where he appealed for the restoration of the sepulcher of Khan Kubrat, the founder of Great Bulgaria in Ukraine.

Unlike the titular nations in the five ex-Soviet Central Asian republics, many Muslim peoples in the Russian Federation (Tatars, Bashkirs, Bulgaro-Khabardines¹, Chechens, Daghestanis and others) did not obtain political independence. Archives not yet easily available may shed light on historical events of crucial importance in this connection. So these peoples, as objects of study, remain absorbed in Bulgaria by Russian studies and explicitly ignored by Middle Eastern studies, notwithstanding the fact that they are integrally a part of the Islamic Diaspora.

¹ In the usage established during the Soviet period, these peoples and the associated autonomous administrative unit, are referred to as Kabardino-Balkars – Ed.

Another main problem that Bulgarian Central Asianists face is the strong and persistent influence felt by an unsteady political and ideological climate left over from the Cold War. Narrative empirical descriptions and deductive inferences are presented in a simplified dichotomous and bipolar explanatory framework. Soviet Russian ideological approaches of the period of communist rule in Bulgaria (1944-89) are privileged, while analyses by Western scholars are denigrated. The so-called "ethnic theories" (which will be described below) exhibit precisely such a profile. Among Bulgarian experts on Bulgarian ethnicity, adherents to the Soviet-Russian school continue to minimize the significance of the Central Asian roots of the Bulgar tribe, even though these are established beyond doubt. This school emphasizes the Slavic origin of the Bulgarian nation, while the school employing Western methodologies (whose members are usually graduates of Western universities) focus on Bulgarian ethnic supremacy within the process of the establishment of the Bulgarian nation. Caught in this ideological framework, Central Asian studies has been marginalized.

Themes of Central Asian Studies in Bulgaria

Taking into account the above-mentioned hindrances to the development of Central Asian studies in Bulgaria, the following main themes of these studies may be enumerated as follows.

1. Ethnic theories are the leading and most important constituent part of Central Asian studies in Bulgaria. They derive from Bulgarian historical science rather than from the study of international relations, insofar as the latter were only recognized in the 1970s with respect to the study of different international regions. Ethnic theories include predominantly ethnic geographical studies that examine the process by which Bulgar civilization was established, its subsequent growth and flourishing, and also the massive migration of peoples from Central Asia into the Caucasus and the Balkan Peninsula. This aspect of Bulgarian Central Asian studies is characterized by a renewed popularity of the so-called Turkic-Hunnic theory, which postulates the origins of the Bulgar tribe in Central Asia. Early in the twentieth century the Turkic-Hunnic theory was very popular. Among its prominent exponents were Ivan Shishmanov (1909), Stefan Mladenov (1928), and later Ivan Douichev (1973). All of them focused on the Altaic region as the motherland of the Bulgars, a numerous tribe that

settled there and shared territories within the so-called Turkic-Hunnic tribal alliance, with the Huns, Khazars, Oguz, Kumans, Avars, and others. In the 1930s Dimitar Sasselov (2000) advanced the Turkic-Hunnic theory by locating the Bulgar motherland in the Tarim Valley (today the Taklamakan Desert, Western China). Sasselov saw kinship ties with the early-medieval Onogur and modern Uyghur, as well as with the Bashkir and Chuvash ethnic communities. Another proponent of the Central Asian roots of the Bulgar tribe was Vesseline Beshevliev (1981), who situated the Bulgar tribe as a Pamiri civilization settled on the frontier between the most ancient agrarian peoples of the East on the one hand, and the many nomadic groups of the Tien Shan Mountains and Altaic areas, on the other.

Since the end of the communist period, which saw the "slavonization" of the Bulgarian nation and the attendant marginalization of research on Central Asian ethnicities, contemporary Bulgarian historical scholarship seeks to rehabilitate the Turkic-Hunnic theory among Bulgarian ethnic concepts. The most important representative of this theory today is Petar Dobrev (1998). Dobrev's work uses a comparative approach and relies on ancient annals, paleolinguistic details, and toponymic studies, arguing that the Bulgars set up an advanced civilization in the fertile valley of the Balkh region (today in Afghanistan), establishing there a tradition of statehood and a flourishing culture. According to Dobrev's theory, nomadic invasions triggered Bulgar migrations in the direction of the Don River and the Caucasus Mountains. There they established several states, the most significant among them being the so-called Volga Basin Bulgaria. Both the Balkan and the Volga Bulgarian states inherited the political principles of Khan Kubrat's "Great Bulgaria." In 1237 the Golden Horde of Chinggis Khan subjugated the Volga Bulgarians (Dobrev 1998: 107-08).

2. A second theme of Central Asian studies in Bulgaria, but quite limited in comparison with the first, concerns so-called "travel" studies (travelogues, diaries, memoirs, and documentaries). These are reputed to be reliable sources for studying political, religious, social, ethnic, and cultural identity in Central Asia. The authors and editors imbue their works with emotion-laden rhetoric, but by this artifice they are better able to concentrate on the specifically Bulgarian aspects of Central Asia's complex history and its ever-changing political organization. Taken together, these works respond to that instinct of Bulgarian public opinion which seeks

to propagate an overarching idea of a historical motherland common to all Bulgarians. Also they stress the grim circumstances in which the descendents of the Volga Basin Bulgarians live today. They are to be found in the Russian Federation, spread out over Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, the Chuvash Republic, and Karbardino-Balkaria.

Chronologically, the first travelogue was that by Georgy Vazov (1938), who observed the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway, and whose descriptive work relies upon a wealth of military and diplomatic documents. This Bulgarian former defense minister shed light on the Russian conquests of Khiva, Merv, Samarqand, and Bukhara, but he also traced the identities of the local ethnic communities.

Among contemporary travel notes, worth mentioning are the narrative monograph of Vesseline Iliev (1997) and the documentaries of Maksim Karadzhev and Tsetan Tonchev (1998). Karadzhev and Tonchev produced two documentary travelogues focusing on two main themes: the cultural propinquity of the Balkan with the Central Asian Bulgarians, and the crimes of Lenin and Stalin against the non-Russian nationalities, with specific focus on the experiences of Tatar and Bashkir Bulgarians, as well as the Chuvash, who are lineal descendents of the Bulgar-Suvars.

In the context of the development of Central Asian studies in Bulgaria, we may add to the category of travelogues the diplomatic memoir. The Bulgarian former ambassador Ivan Mateev (1992) has explored the ethnic conflicts and period wars in post-Soviet Afghanistan. Based on his personal contacts with local warlords and political leaders, he predicted the appearance of the Taliban dictatorship. To those who are today concerned with the fundamental origins of the current situation in Afghanistan, Mateev's book represents a true challenge.

3. A third theme in Bulgarian studies of Central Asia is minority studies. Especially prominent in this category are studies of the Muslim confession and of communities of Turkic origin, not only from Anatolia but also from the Caucasus (Azerbaijan in particular) as well as from Iran and India (the latter including Roma of the Muslim denomination). Indeed, such topics, long prohibited or distorted under the communist regime, received a powerful impetus in the Bulgarian context when post-totalitarian political governance necessarily

emphasized democratization and international standards for the protection of human rights. Scrupulous and comprehensive studies by many Bulgarian historians, folklorists, ethnologists, linguists and archaeologists revealed the country's multiethnic social background. Such studies undertaken since 1989 have sought to refute the theories that were popular during the totalitarian period, in particular the assumption that the state comprised only one nation. Such an assumption characterized the so-called "Revival Process" (1986-1989), during which the then-ruling Communist Party claimed that Bulgarians citizens bearing Turkic-Arab names had been forced by the Ottoman government to convert to Islam, and changed these "back" into Slavic names.

Many state and non-profit institutions as well as individual scholars and researchers conducted multidisciplinary studies to refute such claims generated during the totalitarian period. The Institute of History, Institute for Balkan Studies, Institute of Sociology, Institute of Folklore and Institute of Ethnography — all part of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences — formed working groups and published significant works on minority issues. Also such NGOs were established as the Bulgarian Center for Middle East Studies (BCMES), the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR), the Center for the Study of Democracy, and the Center for the Study of Ethnic Conflicts. Most of these were assisted by special funding from the Open Society Foundation and by contacts re-established with academic institutes in Macedonia. Over three thousand foundations addressing concerns of the Roma community have been registered, but they appear to implement programs of international aid rather than to conduct research.

The research conducted in these institutions was published mainly during the period 1989-1994. Based on their findings the protection of human rights was implemented and the enhancing and strengthening of minority organizations became a principal tendency of political development on the local level. Thus, for example, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which organized the Bulgarian Turks, won recognition as the third parliamentary actor in post-communist Bulgarian life. According to Dr. Ali Eminov (2000), more than three hundred publications appeared that were dedicated to Turks and other Muslims in Bulgaria, including books, monographs, papers, articles, periodicals, dictionaries, training aids, poetry and

prose. Of these, over two hundred were produced by Bulgarian scholars themselves. IMIR, in cooperation with British and French research centers, sponsored over thirty fundamental works, some of them becoming thematic topics for ensuing conferences, workshops and roundtables.

These works include a six-volume collection of articles addressing different subjects concerned with the day-to-day life of Balkan Muslims and theoretical outlines addressing the Islamic religion (Zhelyazkova 1997), the characteristics of Muslim culture in Bulgarian lands (Gradeva and Ivanova 1998), the fate of Turks who emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey (Zhelyazkova 1998), general features of Muslim culture (Lozanova and Mikov 1999), intricate aspects of Albania and Albanian identities (Zhelyazkova 2000), and Bosnia as a new Muslim state in Europe (Zhelyazkova 2001). Chukov (1999) has analyzed the complex ethnic situation during the transitional period after communism, and how and why Bulgaria peacefully accommodated to a pattern of multinational coexistence in contrast with Macedonia and some former Yugoslav states. A significant portion of that work was performed by political scientists and sociologists (Dimitrov 2000, Popov 2000) seeking to assist local political parties to formulate their positions on various ethnic questions. Even leading politicians, including the country's president (Parvanov 2000) and the head of the MRF (Dogan 1999), tackled the topic. Stoyanov (1998) analyzed the Bulgarian state's contradictory policies regarding Turks, Gagauz, Pomaks, Tatars and Circassians. A wealth of archival documents permitted the editor to establish variation in the hospitality and ethnic tolerance of the Bulgarian nation, as well as the attitudes of political authorities to Muslim minorities since 1878, the year of Bulgarian independence.

The ethnologist Karahanova (2000) has studied the Alians and Kazalbash settled in the northeast of the country. There have also been important publications of folkloristic works, dictionaries and poetry (Naumov and Shukriev 1996, Nunev 1998, Hasan and John 2000, Slavov 1999). Archaeological research is not well funded, but Nickolchovska, Todorova and Shukerova (1996) have studied Momchilgrad's monuments and their relation to traditions of the local Turkic minority.

4. Over the last two years Bulgarian studies of Central Asia have given increased attention to the region's energy potential. There are two reasons for this: first, the continuing and increasing interest on

the part of the international community; and second, the Bulgarian incentive to assist in the development of Central Asia's export capability. In particular, some pipeline routes to Western markets are projected to cross Bulgarian territory. Notable in this regard, for example, is the work of Zlatev and Denchev (2000), the former being executive director of Lukoil-Bulgaria, a Russian company, and the latter a columnist in Moscow newspapers. Their monograph relies on extensive information publicly available and discusses the most recent developments of the Russian strategic approach to Central Asian pipelines. They discuss various Bulgarian options for cooperation with Russia, Greece and Central Asian states, including the Novorossiisk-Burgas-Alexandroupolis route. They also delve into such related subjects as the role of oil and gas in modern history and world geostrategic thinking, Russia's role in the elaboration of international energy strategies, and problems of Central Asian and Balkan pipelines construction.

Andreeva-Chukova (2001) falls into this category and is part of the Institute of History's two-year project on historical perspectives on East-West relations. Andreeva-Chukova treats the geopolitical impact of Central Asian energy on international political and economic security in light of the September 11 terrorist attacks. In particular, she examines the relations between the newly independent states on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the United States, Russia, China, Iran and Turkey. Also, this study sheds light on those actors' chosen economic and foreign policy orientations, interpreting the national security concepts of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in light of their progress towards democratization and of their domestic ethnic and religious conflicts.

Bulgarian economic reviews and newspapers have recently published a series of articles on pipeline-related subjects in view of the advanced stage of discussions among Bulgaria, Greece and Russia over the Novorossiisk-Burgas-Alexandroupolis line. These articles emphasized the pressure that Russia and Greece have exerted upon Bulgaria for the diminution of its joint-stock capital.

The Role of BCMES in Central Asian Studies

The most recent research pertaining to Central Asia in the fields of international relations and political science is carried out mainly by researchers at the

Bulgarian Center for Middle East Studies (BCMES). BCMES is a non-profit organization officially established in 1998 in the context of the development of Bulgarian civil society and as a way to counter the above-mentioned resistance to Central Asian studies by experts in Russian affairs. BCMES is the only center in Bulgaria that addresses the subject of the newly independent Central Asian states. The significance of Central Asia as an object of study has been enhanced not only by the events of September 11, but also by the planned enlargement of NATO in November 2002 and the possible enhancement of the Black Sea fleet. In this connection BCMES plans to set up a parallel Center for Black Sea Studies dealing also with the southern tier of the former Soviet areas. Such a center could draw its staff from graduates of the Varna Free University and Burgas Free University in international relations, political science, history and law. A newsletter, tentatively titled the *Black Sea Review of International Affairs*, is likewise foreseen. BCMES's ongoing projects and potential future themes include:

1. General features and perspectives on Central Asia. This work intends to collect and popularize political, economic and cultural information about Central Asia for the benefit of academic and public audiences in a format that is half-publicistic, half-encyclopedist. Andreeva-Chukova and Chukov are pursuing this project.

2. History and perspectives of relations between Bulgaria and Central Asia. Nikolai Yovchev from Varna Free University has sought to classify Bulgarian diplomatic staff reports from Almaty and Tashkent, held in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, from the standpoint of prediction of future trends. Ambassador Kiriak Tzonev is working on Bulgaria's relations with the Islamic world and the Arab countries in particular, a theme he has been developing since his retirement in 2000.

3. Translation and analysis of the constitutions of the principle Islamic states. Dr. Angel Orbetzov, the Bulgarian government's special envoy in Afghanistan, is expected to provide significant assistance with his special knowledge of Iranian, Pakistani and Afghanistani political life, institutions and law. Chukov will coordinate these studies, which will employ linguistic and legal experts outside the BCMES staff.

4. Pipelines in the Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia continue to be a topic of interest.

Andreeva-Chukova coordinates a joint project of BCMES with the Institute of History, exploring the possibilities of Balkan pipelines transporting Central Asian oil and gas to Western Europe.

5. Dr. Pavel Pavlovitch and Evgeni Gospodinov are involved in short-term projects on various problems of the ethnic and religious background of the Balkans and the Islamic world. They include in their studies the multifarious Islamic and pre-Islamic faiths and ethnic characteristics of the Caucasus emigrants in Varna. Chukov likewise has a short-term project on Volga Bulgarians/Tatars in the category of studies of the Bulgarian diaspora (also called Bulgarians Abroad).

The field of Central Asian studies in Bulgaria is still at an embryonic stage in terms of its collection of elementary quantitative data, as well as its development of diverse themes and methodologies. The list of references below only indicates the present main orientations, and they only hint at the evolving problématique. It may be concluded that three measures will especially assist the further development of Central Asian studies in Bulgaria: accelerated collection of quantitative information, increased involvement of individuals and institutions (especially state institutions) knowledgeable about Central Asian issues, and deepening international cooperation with foreign scholars from North America, Western Europe, Central Asia and Russia through exchange of organizational and methodological experience as well as discussion of possible joint projects.

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