



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

### **Benjamin Hodges**

Dept. Anthropology  
University of Texas at Austin

### **Title of research proposal**

**Balkan Futures: Commercial and State Images of the Future in Bulgaria**

### **Topic of research**

The topic of research is the formation of images of the future in Bulgaria and their role in informing and forming the public. More specifically, it is a study of television production in Bulgaria and how it creates and influences an image of Bulgaria's future. Since the transition to a free market economy and democracy this means the interplay of both governmental and commercial media. These different, but not necessarily competing, visions represent the future of Bulgaria. Quite literally, they visualize a goal for Bulgarian growth and success as part of the European Union. This research does not proceed from the direction of policy analysis in order to determine the direction and timber of local Bulgarian politics and public sentiments. Instead, I have chosen to proceed from the side of the public, to witness these images as they comprise an image of Bulgaria's future. This focus on popular culture and specifically its visual character in television is relatively new terrain for ethnographers. Through ethnographic and archival research of television production in Bulgaria, the project aims to learn from the very act of production, relevant desires, hopes, and aspirations of contemporary Bulgarians.

In particular, I am interested in how Bulgarians are choosing to make not only sense, but also sensation out of the dissonances and resonances of their everyday lives via the virtual images of popular media. The vibrant Pop culture of music videos and commercials are certainly more than simple mimicry of Western media. As Bulgaria struggles with its Post-Socialist realities and its hopes for inclusion in the European Union, its producers and audiences approach the fantastic spaces of Bulgarian Popular media as the literal terrain of Post-Socialist reconstruction.

### **Relevance and contribution to field.**

This research is relevant to a variety of fields of study. In the area of Balkan studies, it represents a new focus on the rapid growth and success of local media. Rather than a simple story of commercialization and importation of western media, local television production

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represents the production of a local “alternative modernity” (Gaonkar 2001). In terms of Bulgarian Studies in the United States most of the work of my colleagues has focused on minority communities and/or rural communities, e.g. Creed 1998 and Ghodsee 2005. The remaining need to focus attention on the urban populations is clear. Additionally, in the realm of media studies my research offers an alternative site for testing and applying the insights of research in other countries and publics. In truth, the rich media tradition of Bulgaria, as well as other former Socialist states is only now becoming known to western academics due to a combination of new access and a first generation of scholars who have been granted the right to study such material.

### **Summary of approach and research methodology**

My research methodology relies on the tradition of ethnographic research and participant observation in American anthropology. The uniqueness of this particular research lies in the dynamic nature of the sites involved in producing the public images of Bulgaria’s future. Specifically, this has involved following the work process of local producers and researching the history of such production in Bulgaria. Numerous local media producers involved in producing content for Channel One, the Bulgarian State television, and the commercial stations, Nova Television, Planeta, MMTv, and Planeta have served as informants. Additionally, I have branched out into study of a few of the international companies that have set up workforces in Bulgaria. The production of media for other markets and publics is an interesting contrast to the local productions. My interest here is in how the image of this work itself circulates as part of Bulgaria’s future as a member of the European Union. My historical research has involved study at the Cryllia and Metodii Library in Sofia, using both its book holdings and its photo archive. This historical research also involved research into the holdings of the national film archive. My goal with this archival research has been to examine the tradition of visual modernism in Bulgarian television and mass media.

### **Summary of your research findings and preliminary conclusions**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet influence in the early nineteen nineties, much debate has been expended both internally and internationally as to the future of the Balkans. The Post-Socialist agendas of Neo-nationalists, Socialists, and Royalists have all played a part in defining the local political atmosphere. Amidst these local debates, the prospect of inclusion in the European Union has become a reoccurring goal. Excluding Greece, Bulgaria, together with Romania will be the first Balkan countries to enter the European Union on January 1, 2007. The recent international attention hoisted on Bulgaria as a result of this integration is in contrast to the peripheral position it occupied during the Balkan wars of the nineteen nineties and its earlier absence from Western media due to its tight alliance with the Soviet Union. While over shadowed by these conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria struggled with its own difficult transition to a market economy, suffering along the way hyper inflation, illicit privatization deals, and massive emigration of its professionals and students. This same period also saw the development of private media conglomerates which expanded the media of Bulgaria beyond its prior State run industries. It was my assumption going into this research that this local media would be as focused on EU integration as the foreign coverage of the region.

My research findings and preliminary conclusions represent a shift away from my initial assumptions as to the relationship between ideas of modernity and the move towards the European Union. These two things, the prospect of the European Union and the concept of modernity are not as wedded as I had assumed. Indeed many seem exhausted with the discussion about the EU and yet remain hungry for a modern lifestyle that is just as often referred to as a “normal life.” What I do remain confident in is the importance of the image of the future in Bulgarian public life. If the question of the future is a potential source of exhaustion and annoyance, the image of the future remains a part of the daily diet of mass media. Here too, I still have found the role of commercial television to be of central importance. The growth of

cable television, radio, and locally produced recording artists has greater significance than as merely an economic indicator of the growth of local business. The new terrain of privately produced media is the very site in which Bulgarians' aspirations and desires are articulated.

Amidst the burgeoning development of online communities, commercial radio, and other such media, television remains a predominant mass media in Bulgaria. The National Statistics Institute in Bulgaria (NSI) reports that "nearly one-half of all households in the country have cable television, or approximately three million people (delivered by over 800 service providers); the ownership of a TV set is about 93 percent" (Boychev 2004). These statistics point to the central role television production plays in expressing and giving shape to the public image of Bulgaria. In approaching Bulgarian television it is tempting to witness the familiar and strange as part of the same story of development towards "Western standards" of mass media production. The images and content of Bulgarian television, however strange or familiar to outside audiences, circulate in Bulgaria in their own unique ways. It has been my goal to trace something of the circuit between these locally produced images and the general future that Bulgarians desire.

At this moment in Bulgaria television, different influences and traditions are combining with new technological possibilities to create a unique media terrain and image of the future. This mixture of traditions and trends is the subject of much internal debate. Writing in one of Bulgaria's many lifestyle magazines, Todor Peev notes the convergence of two traditions and trends in one evening of programming; "recently, the battle for the highest viewership rating brought together two of our national television stations, who offered in the same night two very popular forms of entertainment for us- the second season of Big Brother against the Plovdiv Concert of the summer Popfolk "Planeta Prima" (Peev 58, 2005). One is a "live soap opera with kitsch folkloric décor," the other a "grandiose, by Bulgarian standards, concert in the Plovdiv stadium "Botev" with the lighting effects, ballet dancers, and fireworks" (58, 2005). On the surface these two programs would seem to represent very different traditions and directions in Bulgarian television. The reality show seems to point to the trend of importing foreign programming and the concert suggests a continuation of the local tradition of televised musical stage shows. But these two styles of entertainment, one a staged spectacle with roots in Socialist-era state parades and festivals and the other an imported voyeuristic reality program have more in common than not. They both offer abstract spaces designed specifically for the purpose of being televised. They both invite viewers into virtual spaces, spaces that exist only to be broadcast and consumed. Together with viewers they form the new public space of Bulgaria. Rather than escapist, I contend that these virtual spaces are all the more real for their fantastic qualities.

I approach these images and industries of popular media not as escapist but rather as sites for the complex interplay of local realities, global aspirations, and public feelings. As the Italian theorist Mario Perniola notes, many "take for granted that virtual realities are not true realities but at best systems of representations of reality that aspire to take its place." (Perniola 2005, 67). But if we accept that virtual realities are not mere *systems of representations*, but rather alternate realities as real and possessed of as much complexity as any other; then we can begin to understand how such virtual spaces such as those of television operate as an extension rather than a pastiche of everyday life. Technological means of production in this context are more than mere means of communication, e.g. conduits for meaning. The very technologies themselves have an inseparable affect on audiences. The use of technology, editing techniques, and special effects demand their own attention in these media images. The new programs of Bulgarian television, even though drawing from a variety of aesthetic and cultural traditions, share in a similar reliance on technological means of abstraction, emphasis, and exclamation in creating an affective circuit with their audiences. And in my conversations and interviews with producers of this material I have discussed a similar focus on the technical character of the image, its aesthetic qualities as much as its content. While this may seem normal for media producers to be concerned with the quality of their craft; what is interesting here is that this technical/aesthetic debate is carried over into the larger public. It is not abnormal to overhear a discussion of the quality of one channel's signal verses another. The

quality of production is read as a not only a sign investment but also felt as part of new modern Bulgaria.

It is also important to note that these images of popular television, e.g. music videos, game shows, and reality television, are built up against a recent history of political disintegration and the reality of aging infrastructure. The virtual character of this imagery is an answer to these concerns. It addresses the time of the future, of that which can be. Still these media images are not a plan, like an architectural scale model that is meant to lead to a larger more real version. No these models and images of a virtual future are successful because they stay removed from the everyday. They remain virtual. The recent success and mainstreaming of the music known locally as Pop Folk is an example of this fixation on the virtual. In spite of its use of Turkish motifs and musical styling it is not the story of growing ethnic sensitivity in Bulgaria; rather it is one of many examples of Bulgarians' fixation on quality and the virtual potential of the pop music video genre. The attention I have hoisted on this popular genre and other pop imagery in Bulgaria in this research is my own form of mirroring the attention that Bulgarian audiences give to it. The absent peoples, bodies, and traditions, of course, remain even in their absence. Indeed, these absences are a further reminder of the virtual character of popular media in Bulgaria.

This research is ultimately a study of a particular moment in contemporary Bulgaria, a moment in which desires for progress and success are manifest in the cultural expressions of television production. Through ethnographic study of specific sites of media production, including music video shoots, commercial, and serial programming, I have sought to locate these desires in the instance of their production. The choice to focus on these sites of production is a strategic move to counter a tradition of viewing such productions as super-structural results of deeper socio-economic factors. In such a rush to interpretation, one can necessarily skip over the back story behind the production of an image. In this back story images reveal themselves to be not only heavy with meaning, but also invested with energies and an excess of potential affects. What I have discovered in this research is not so much a history of Bulgarian television, its development from State to private production, as it is the story of how such production creates a virtual world in which possibilities resonant with, bounce off of and bring news of the both the future and the past.

### **Suggestions for future research**

There is much future research still to be done to better understand the nature of the Bulgarian public and the role of the mass media in producing and reflecting it. Specifically the growing role of foreign corporations and workforces in Bulgaria will provide an interesting site of cross cultural communication. The debates and discussions revolving around local and foreign populations in the rest of the European Union are now taking on their local character in Bulgaria. At the same time, it is interesting to watch the growth of Bulgarian online communities. The internet cafes of the early 2000s have given way to a more domestic form of computer use as computer ownership has come within reach of more and more of the population. The effect of greater computer use on the role of television and the character of the Bulgarian public will be an interesting subject of research. Similarly, the role of the Cyrillic script as a marker of Bulgarian identity in the EU and online is a promising subject for future research.

### **Recommendations for the US policy community**

While I am certainly not used to making recommendations to the US policy community, I do see great opportunity for the US to strengthen its bonds with Bulgaria. US business is accepted and anticipated by a workforce eager to raise the local standard of living. The political terrain can appear confusingly fluid at times, but generally represents a desire for faster development and a return to the relative standard of living enjoyed during Bulgaria's most favored nation status in the years of Soviet influence in the Balkans. The recent re-election of Georgi

Parvanov is a manifestation of the public's desire to continue along the path to EU integration. The role of ATAKA, the relatively new nationalist party lead by presidential candidate Volen Siderov, has unfortunately exploited xenophobic concerns in a segment of the population. But the rise of such ultra-nationalist parties is not unique to Bulgaria. The opportunity to exploit this sentiment is in direct proportion to the lack of opportunities this population perceives. The US and Bulgarian governments would do best to not so much combat such xenophobia as to move around it by developing sustainable work opportunities at home and abroad.

Additionally, I would like to note that organizations such as the Goethe Institute and Pro Helvetica sponsor a large number of local cultural organizations and events in Bulgaria. And while the local US embassy and cultural attaché are surely doing a fine job within the context of their positions; the local perception of the US is that it cares less about culture than about economics. At the same time appreciation for US culture, arts, film, and music remains large. It would certainly not hurt the US to sponsor performances or visiting artists to bring to Bulgaria some of the American spirit with which it was once always associated.

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