

Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women's Emancipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria

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Introduction

There is a popular joke in Bulgaria about a woman who sits bolt upright in the middle of the night in a panic. She jumps out of bed and rushes to the bathroom to look in the medicine cabinet. Then, she runs into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. Finally, she dashes to the window and looks out onto the street. Relieved, she returns to the bedroom. Her husband asks her, "What's wrong with you?"

"I had a terrible nightmare", she says. "I dreamt that we could still afford to buy medicine, that the refrigerator was absolutely full, and that the streets were safe and clean."

"How is that a nightmare?" the husband asks.

The woman shakes her head, "I thought the communists were back in power."

This joke highlights a popular nostalgia for the "good" parts of communism that was just starting to re-emerge in the early years of the 21st century. Evidence of this nostalgia has begun to appear in the most unlikely places. In the summer of 2003, in the seaside resorts of Bulgaria, souvenir vendors were selling *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (CCCP) and *German Democratic Republic* (DDR) t-shirts to tourists. At the same time, compact disc pirates in Sofia were running out of the CD *Golden Songs of Russia*, with a red and yellow cover and the "Hymn of the USSR" as the first track. In front of the Alexander Nevski Cathedral, Bulgarian antique dealers sold all kinds of socialist pins, buttons, and medals, busts of Marx and Lenin, and old postcards of the now-destroyed Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum. These things had always been for sale to curious tourists who were hoping to pick up a few communist era trinkets, but these days the antique vendors say that nostalgic Bulgarians are becoming their best customers. Walking along the streets in Plovdiv or Varna, or in cafes and bars in Sofia, one can often hear a cell phone with its ring tone set to the chorus of "The Internationale".

On the one hand, these artefacts of the past are probably a form of popular kitsch that Bulgarians have had for some time to distance themselves from the oppressive nature of

communism. On the other hand, these increasingly visible manifestations of communist nostalgia may also be a product of the frustration that many Bulgarians feel about their dramatically decreased standard of living since Bulgaria began its transition to free markets and liberal democracy in 1989.

This nostalgia may be particularly acute among Bulgarian women who, according to the World Bank, are now suffering from “time poverty”.¹ The fiscal constraints imposed by the International Monetary Fund on successive Bulgarian governments have meant an inevitable decrease in the public services that once allowed Bulgarian women to combine their productive and reproductive work in society. As kindergartens, hospitals, and schools have been systematically closed throughout the 1990s, Bulgarian women have been the ones responsible for providing care to children, the elderly, and the sick. At the same time, real wages and salaries in Bulgaria have declined to such low levels that few families can afford wives and mothers that stay at home. These dual pressures have placed a heavy burden on Bulgarian women and may have helped to modify their attitudes towards Bulgaria’s relatively short-lived experiment with Marxist-Leninism.

A 2001 *United Nations Development Program* (UNDP) survey found that a nationally representative sample of Bulgarian men and women had very different opinions about the communist government that fell in 1989. When asked who was to blame for the deteriorating situation in Bulgaria, 47.6 % of the men blamed the “rulers during the socialist times”, versus only 39.3 % of the women. Both men and women, however, felt strongly that Bulgaria’s economic problems were caused by “rulers during the transition” (70.4 and 70.5 %). Another question asked respondents: “What would make you protest in front of the parliamentary building?” 31 % of the men said they would protest against the “introduction of forms of dictatorship” (read by Bulgarians as a synonym for the reintroduction of communism). Interestingly, only 22.3 % of the women said they would do the same, indicating greater tolerance of “dictatorship” among Bulgarian women in 2001. Women also showed greater intolerance of reductions in the social “responsibilities” of the state; 40.2 % of Bulgarian women said they would protest against a drastic increase in the costs of health care versus only 28.8 % of the men.² Another UNDP study found that women were more likely to vote for governments that imposed higher taxes but had more state social responsibility. Men preferred lower taxes and individual social responsibility.³

By exploring some of the gains Bulgarian women made under the socialist system, this brief article aims to explore the possible explanations why Bulgarian women may be more inclined to support leftist political parties and have a less critical view of the communist past than their male compatriots. It is my contention that the communist governments between 1944 and 1989 were both ideologically and materially committed to women’s equality in ways that fundamentally reshaped gender relations in Bulgaria.

1 World Bank, *Bulgaria at a Glance*. World Bank data from www.worldbank.org (access date August 2nd, 2002).

2 See United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *National Human Development Report Bulgaria 2001: Citizen Participation in Governance, from Individuals to Citizens*, Sofia 2001, 75.

3 See UNDP, *National Human Development Report Bulgaria 1999: Bulgarian People’s Aspirations, II*, Sofia 1999, 63.

Admittedly, there was still gender discrimination and occupational segregation under communism, and Bulgarian patriarchal values never disappeared completely. There was, however, a real commitment to women's education and women's full incorporation into the public sphere that resulted in some of the highest labour force participation rates for women in the world. Furthermore, the communist state carried out many policies and programs that helped ease the Bulgarian woman's notorious "double burden" of paid employment and family responsibility.

The end of communism meant the end of most of these supports, and many of the negative effects of the economic transformation have disproportionately accrued to women. Shrinking state budgets and calls for restructuring the economy have inevitably compromised women's position in the new free-market economy. At the same time, women in Bulgaria still believe in the fundamental equality of the sexes and continue to look to the state for social support. It is therefore not surprising that Bulgarian women may have some fond memories of what they call, colloquially, "the old system".

Bulgarian Women and Communism

From the beginning of the 20th century, Bulgarian women were organized and active in the struggle for women's emancipation. In fact, Klara Zetkin, a most influential German Socialist Feminist, claimed in 1925 that Bulgaria had one of the best developed women's movements in Europe.⁴ Already before the advent of communism, Bulgarian women were highly valued not only as wives and mothers, but also as workers and citizens. In customary law, women had the right to inherit and own their own land. When a woman married, the land constituted her dowry, yet, in case of divorce, a woman was fully entitled to take the land back.⁵ As early as 1934, the Bulgarian Supreme Court of Appeal passed a special rule which made violence against one's wife punishable by law.⁶ Furthermore, in multi-generational households the wife rather than the eldest son became head of the family upon the husband's death. In 1944, when the communists took power, women's rights were extended; they could stand for election and were thus officially incorporated into the Bulgarian polity.⁷

The equality of men and women was one of the key ideological tenets of socialism. The notion that women should and could be emancipated through socialism was first theorized in the work of Friedrich Engels. In his 1884 book, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", Engels argued that the cause of women's oppression did not stem from the dominance that men held over them, but instead from the institu-

4 Klara Zetkin's, Lenin on the Women's Question. An Interview with Lenin on the Woman Question (Lenin po vuprosa za zhenite) was widely read in Bulgaria during communism. See www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/works/zetkin2.htm, 18.

5 Marija Todorova, Historical Tradition and Transformation in Bulgaria: Women's Issues or Feminist Issues?, in: *Journal of Women's History*, 5, 3 (1994), 129–144.

6 Council of Europe, International Workshop on Problems of Equality in the Current Period of Transition in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Sofia, Bulgaria, Strasbourg 1993.

7 UNDP, Human Development Report 2002, New York 2002, 239.

tion of private property. Engels described an ideal, primitive, matriarchal communism that was destroyed by the emergence of private ownership. The accumulation of surplus value through capitalist production allowed for the emergence of social relations in which men became dominant. In reference to slave societies, Engels wrote: “The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male.”⁸ In Engels’ view, gender-based inequalities predated class-based inequalities although they are both the result of the emergence of private property.

Women could not become independent because capitalism encouraged a model wherein they were economically dependent on men’s wages. The capitalist system relied on women not only to reproduce the next generation of workers but also to feed and nurture the current one. Women’s unpaid labour in the home allowed the industrialists to pay their workers lower wages and therefore extract greater surplus value. At the same time, women were at the mercy of their husband’s will. Thus, women in the working class were subject to a terrible double oppression. Furthermore, Engels understood the odious and exploitative nature of what Lenin later called women’s “domestic slavery”, arguing that the only way to liberate them from the control of their husbands was to incorporate them into the paid labour force. He ignored the fact that many peasant and working class women were still dependent on their husbands even though they already worked outside the home.

August Bebel’s book on women under socialism built upon Engels’ ideas and further conflated women’s inferior status with the inferior status of the proletariat.⁹ Although Bebel conceded Engels’ original idea that women were both oppressed by men and by capitalism, he, and Lenin after him, argued that the *only* way to liberate women was to liberate the working classes through the elimination of private property. Women’s true liberation was only possible through socialism. This model eventually became enshrined in later communist doctrines, which considered women’s labour force participation as the essential condition for achieving social equality. These ideologies also coincided nicely with the Bulgarian state’s need for ever-increasing amounts of labour to support its plans for rapid industrialization following the Soviet model.

In theory, the increase in the roles of women in the productive sphere, however, would mean a decrease in their roles in the reproductive sphere. Lenin, among other early communist theorists, considered housework as “barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery ...” and chastised husbands for not helping their wives in their domestic responsibilities.¹⁰ Alexandra Kollontai also attacked the traditional family, seeing maternity and childcare as oppressive burdens from which women

8 Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, in: Robert C. Tucker ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York et al. 1978² (1884), 734–759. Engel’s work was also translated into Bulgarian (Proizhod na semeistvoto, chastnata sobstvenost i durzhavata).

9 August Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism* (Zhenata i sozialisma), New York 1904.

10 Vladimir I. Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women* (Za emantsipatsijata na zhenata, 1919), cited in: Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism 1860–1930*, Princeton 1978, 378.

needed to be free: "To become really free woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive. For women, the solution of the family question is no less important than the achievement of political equality or economic independence."¹¹

To this end, the communist state attempted to socialize domestic work as much as possible. In order to support women in their "new" roles, communists supported policies which created public canteens and child care facilities and, in addition, granted women generous maternity leaves, child allowances, and early retirement. Barbara Einhorn, however, has pointed out that women were thus discursively constructed as both workers and mothers while men were not seen as both workers and fathers. The communist state created a model whereby women took on responsibility in the "public" sphere without men taking on any responsibility in the "private" one.¹² Socialist ideology about the liberation of women was lop-sided, somehow positing that women's freedom was something that could be granted to them without changing men's social roles and duties. This fact ultimately resulted in what has been called the "double" or even "triple" burden of women under communism: the obligation to be a devoted wife and mother, a dedicated worker, and an active member of the community.

In spite of the "double burden", socialist women's activists distanced themselves from what they called the "bourgeois" feminist movements in the West. Western feminists were considered naive and to be accomplices in the very system that oppressed them. In socialist theory, men and women needed to stand together and fight for the equality of all classes and sexes. Women had no grounds to separate their struggles from those of men. This meant that women's issues had to take a back seat to workers' struggles creating a dichotomy between gender and class analyses that still divides feminists to this day.

Although the "woman question" was subsumed under the goals of the wider revolution, communist ideologies regarding the equality of men and women played a large role in reshaping gender relationships in society. Katherine Verdery has identified what she calls "socialist paternalism", whereby states of the former Eastern bloc transferred authority away from the household and cultivated a "quasi-familial" dependency on the state. Rather than promoting citizenship by granting political rights or by acknowledging ethno-cultural similarities, socialist paternalism encouraged a moral tie that bound subjects to the state by their equal rights "to a share in the redistributed social product".¹³

The other side of this "state paternalism" is that, to a certain extent, both men and women became equally dependent on the state. Men's wages were kept down to encourage women's labour force participation. The partnership between men and women was redefined from one of economic necessity to one that idealized a notion of sexuali-

11 Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Women's Question* (Sozialnata osnova na vuproza za zhenite), in: *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, ed. by Alix Holt, Connecticut 1977 (orig. 1909), 58–73, 64.

12 Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women's Movements in East Central Europe*, London 1993, 5.

13 Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton 1996, 63.

sed, romantic love. Alexandra Kollontai wrote: "All sexual relationships must be based on mutual inclination, love, infatuation or passion, and in no case on financial or material motivations. All calculation in relationships must be subject to merciless condemnation."¹⁴

The state guaranteed economic security and the means for satisfying basic human needs; socialist men and women theoretically had few purely economic incentives to marry. Although there was *de facto* labour segregation, which concentrated women in lower level positions and in traditionally feminine professions,¹⁵ women were not economically dependent on men. In fact, single mothers had considerably more benefits from the state than married women with children; they were given priority for housing and access to other social services. This created some disincentives to marriage and afforded women relative independence from men.

Socialism never completely defeated local patriarchies, but the Eastern Bloc countries were able to boast some of the highest female labour participation rates in the world. In 1989, on the eve of the collapse, 84.7 % of Bulgarian women were employed as waged workers outside the home.¹⁶ As paid workers, women were entitled to all the benefits of formal employment: their own wages and pensions, access to personal credit plans through workplace co-operative savings schemes, paid holidays, access to enterprise-owned hotels and camps, and so forth. Some women also managed to infiltrate traditionally male professions such as steel processing and engineering, and were thus able to earn some of the highest wages available in the economy. In addition, women benefited from a variety of social policies designed to ease their dual responsibilities of productive and reproductive work.

Under communism, women in Bulgaria were guaranteed maternity leave, which began 45 days before delivery with the possibility of continuing until the child reached the age of three. For a woman's first three children, this leave was paid by the state until the child was two. After two years, leave was granted without payment but with the provision that her job would be held through the whole duration of her absence. If the woman returned to work before the child's third birthday, she was entitled to receive 50 % of the national minimum wage for the portion of the leave she did not use. This was in addition to her wages. Alternatively, the woman could grant permission to the father or to his or her parents to take the unused portion of her maternity leave. Employers could not refuse to grant this leave if it was requested, and the three years of leave was recognized as labour service toward her pension.

There were other benefits for mothers as well. Childcare facilities were also guaranteed to working women by the state.¹⁷ In addition to paid maternity and child-care leave,

14 Kollontai, Writings, see note 11, 231.

15 Einhorn, Cinderella, see note 12, 113–147; Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, The Politics of Gender after Socialism. A Comparative Historical Essay, Princeton 2000, 57–58.

16 Women's Alliance for Development, Women in Bulgaria 2000, from WAD website at www.geocities.com/woalde (access date February 16, 2004) or www.women-bg.org (access date February 16th 2004).

17 Raia Staikova-Alexandrova, Bulgaria. The Present Situation of Women, in: The Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe. Proceedings of a United Nations Regional Seminar. New York 1992.

parents received monthly child allowances until a child was 16 years old (or 18 if the child was still at school), the amount of which was determined by the size of the family.¹⁸ There were also laws passed which restricted night work for women and their participation in certain professions that would endanger their reproductive abilities (such as work in nuclear power plants or in certain petro-chemical factories). Although these laws reinforced labour segregation and helped to concentrate women in lower paying jobs, they were meant to protect women from certain kinds of exploitation and could be challenged on an individual level if desired.

In the realm of politics, women were very active during the communist years. In 1983, statistics showed that women made up 50.5 and 50 % of the *Fatherland Front* and the *Young Communist League* respectively.¹⁹ Trade Unions could boast that 46.4 % of their members were women, and the *Bulgarian Communist Party* included 27.6 % women in its constituency.²⁰ There were also quotas imposed by the state, which guaranteed that between 20 and 23 % of the seats in Parliament would be filled by women.²¹ Einhorn argued that few women under communism actually held posts of real political power and that quotas enforced a system of tokenism whereby women politicians had no choice but to follow established Party doctrine.²² However, male politicians were under the same constraints, and the quotas did legally guarantee that women would be part of the political process even if parliament had little direct power.

On a more personal level, the state consistently protected the rights of women in marriage and in the case of divorce. During marriage, men and women were considered equal partners and all loans granted to the couple and sales of family property required the signatures of both husband and wife. At the dissolution of a marriage, all property was divided equally, with the mother most often being awarded custody of the children. Most importantly, the state automatically deducted child support payments from the father's wages and transferred them to the mother. Divorced women with children could rely on this steady income that would always be collected no matter where in Bulgaria the father moved. Widows could rely on the state for their own pensions and additional social supports once their husbands had passed away. For younger girls, they had access to education and many careers opportunities. There were few economic incentives to engage in sex work.

Thus, the communist state did go a long way in *attempting* to create the conditions for women's full emancipation. Communism did displace patriarchy from the household to the state level and committed resources to support women in their dual roles as mothers and workers. Although Bulgarian women's lives were still very much determined by

18 Due to declining birth rates, the Bulgarian state tried to create incentives for women to have two and three children. Despite these efforts, however, women were still overburdened by their dual roles in society which was evidenced by a continually stagnant birth rate.

19 Dobrinka Kostova, *The Transition to Democracy in Bulgaria: Challenges and Risks for Women*, in: Valentine Moghadam ed., *Democratic Reform and the Position of Women in Transitional Economies*, Oxford 1993, 92–109, 106.

20 Kostova, *Transition*, see note 19, 106.

21 Staikova-Alexandrova, *Bulgaria*, see note 17.

22 Einhorn, *Cinderella*, see note 12, 168.

paternalistic control (which, for example, could legislate how many children a married women should have) the socialist system considered the emancipation of women one of its fundamental goals and went a long way in trying to achieve the equality of the sexes. The important point to keep in mind is the relative improvement of women's status under communism compared to its relative deterioration that would accompany the economic transformation, and the very real gains that all Bulgarians enjoyed under the totalitarian system.

The so-called liberation of Bulgarian women happened during a period of radical economic changes in a previously agricultural country. It should not be forgotten that the rapid industrialization of the Bulgarian economy drastically increased the living standard of ordinary men and women in a relatively short period of time. Despite their many shortcomings, the communists in Bulgaria were able to transform Bulgaria into a modernized industrial country and were relatively successful in equally redistributing Bulgaria's new-found wealth to men and women. For instance, between 1961 and 1975, Bulgaria had one of the highest rates of growth in real income per capita of all the former Comecon countries for which there were data. Between 1961 and 1965, real income per capita increased by 4.6 %, between 1966 and 1970 by 6 %, and by another 5.7 % in 1971–1975.²³

In terms of the actual distribution of this wealth, some very rough statistics point to increases in individual well-being. Bulgarians saw their consumption of meat rise from 32.7 kilograms per capita per year in 1960 to 65.4 kilograms in 1979. The average Bulgarian went from eating 84 eggs per year in 1960 to 187 eggs per year in 1979. In fact, Bulgarians saw significant increases in the per capita consumption of all food categories with the exception of potatoes, which actually declined steadily from 1960 to 1979. In 1977, Bulgarians (indeed all of the “non-market industrial economies”) had a higher per capita daily caloric intake than the United States.²⁴ The average Bulgarian ate 143 % of the daily caloric requirement, the highest percentage among both industrialized market economies of the West and the Eastern bloc command economies.

23 The Vienna Institute for Comparative Economic Studies (VICES), COMECON Data 1981, New York 1982, 298.

24 World Bank, World Development Report 1982, Washington D.C. 1982, 153. Of course, caloric intake is not a very good measure of overall nutrition because of the different types of foods from which calories can be derived. In the developing world, the amount of protein available in the diet is a much better indicator of health rather than the total number of calories, because a diet high in calories and low in protein can still lead to protein energy malnutrition. Despite this, the World Bank continues to use total per capita caloric intake as one “health related indicator” in its annual World Development Reports.

Table One: Daily per capita calorie supply as a percentage of total requirements in 1977:²⁵

Country	
West Germany	%127
France	%136
United States	%133
United Kingdom	%133
USSR	%136
Poland	%140
East Germany	%139
Bulgaria	%143

With regard to social services, Bulgarians had 62.5 hospital beds per 10,000 people in 1960 and 90.3 beds per 10,000 people in 1979. Similarly, the number of doctors in Bulgaria increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1977, Bulgaria had one physician for every 440 people while the United States had 580, Western Germany 490, and Norway 540 in the same year.²⁶ Educational enrolment in Bulgaria also increased significantly and the communists almost completely eradicated illiteracy.²⁷

From a material perspective, Bulgarians had increasing access to consumer durable goods. Table Two demonstrates this change from 1965 to 1983.

Table Two: Consumer Durables (per 100 households)²⁸

	1965	1983
Radios	59	92
Television sets	8	87
Electric washing machines	23	81
Refrigerators	5	88
Private cars	2	34

Thus, until the economic slowdown began in Bulgaria in the 1980s, the Bulgarian communists were generally quite successful in "modernizing" the economy (albeit with environmentally disastrous results). Although these gains in the material standard of living of ordinary Bulgarians were not directly targeted at women, they did help to support women in their dual roles as mothers and workers. Increases in per capita food consumption meant healthier families, and increases in health and educational services meant that

²⁵ Source: World Bank 1982, see note 24, 153.

²⁶ World Bank 1982, see note 24, 152–155.

²⁷ VICES, Data, see note 23, 313–316; World Bank 1982, see note 24, 154–155.

²⁸ Source: John R. Lampe, *The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century*, London 1986, 194.

Bulgarian women could rely on the state for help in educating and nursing their children. Furthermore, many consumer durables were manufactured to make housework less onerous for the women (washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and so forth). Furthermore, incorporating women into the paid labour force guaranteed women direct entitlement to these goods and services for themselves (not through their husbands). Many of these gains would be rapidly reversed after the collapse of communism in 1989.

The Gendered Consequences of Emerging Capitalism

Although international agencies and local non-governmental organizations have focused on presenting evidence that Bulgarian women have suffered more than Bulgarian men, in Bulgaria there is little public interest in the so-called “plight” of women. Indeed, there is often resistance to the idea that women even have special needs. This lack of public interest may relate to the fact that Bulgarian women in general have not actively organized any mass resistance to the economic and political forces that seem to be pushing them out of the labour force, or that are decreasing their living standard. Indeed, many women in Bulgaria reject “gender” as a primary organizing principle for political and social action, despite the many funds made available by international organizations to support women’s “grass roots” movements.²⁹ Political affiliation and class status continue to trump gender in the formation of post-socialist identities. Socialist feminism’s emphasis on the primacy of the class struggle still has deep roots in society. As a result, Bulgarian women are more likely to form alliances with men who share their political views than with women on the opposite side of the political spectrum.³⁰

Many Western and Eastern scholars have tried to explain what Einhorn has called the Eastern European woman’s “allergy to feminism” and what Vlasta Jalusic and Milica Antic have called “anti-feminism”.³¹ Bulgarians and Westerners have acknowledged that communist ideology forced women to labour under a notorious double or triple burden. Many Bulgarian women, at that time, perceived the lifting of this triple burden as liberation. They did not view paid employment as a right or a privilege; instead they saw it as an obligation.³² Thus, when the post-communist state held up the possibility for women to shed this dual burden, many women did so happily. They were exhausted by “over-emancipa-

29 Kristen Ghodsee, *Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism and Women’s Nongovernmental Organizations in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe*, in: *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29, 3 (2004), forthcoming.

30 In fact, some female politicians feel that women in Bulgaria do not vote along gender lines at all – women will not vote for a female candidate simply because she is a woman. Author’s interview with Ms. Tatyana Doncheva, Member of Parliament for the Bulgarian Socialist Party on December 23, 2003.

31 Einhorn, *Cinderella*, see note 12, 182; Vlasta Jalusic and Milica Antic, *Prospects for Gender Equality Policies in Central and Eastern Europe*, SOCO Project Paper no. 70, Vienna 2000, 3.

32 Maria Todorova, *The Bulgarian Case: Women’s Issues or Feminist Issues?*, in: Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller eds., *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, New York/London 1993, 30–38.

tion".³³ The choice to stay at home was a kind of freedom that women did not have under communism when housewives were ostracized by the state. As a result, Bulgarian women consistently made up the majority of the registered unemployed throughout the 1990s.³⁴

To complicate matters, the "emancipation" of women and the explicit concern with men's and women's equality is still very much viewed as an anachronistic communist ideology. Current popular discourse blames women, in league with the communist state, for being collectively responsible for the demise of the ethno-nation.³⁵ This was especially true in Bulgaria where ethnic Bulgarian women have one of the lowest birth rates in Europe and a very high rate of abortion. In 2000, there were 73,679 live births in Bulgaria and 61,378 abortions.³⁶ At the same time, the higher birth rates and lower abortion rates of ethnic Turk and Roma women have become explosive political issues for the Bulgarian state.

In 2000, Bulgaria had a negative natural growth rate of -0.7 %³⁷ and a total fertility rate of 1.1 children per woman.³⁸ With replacement fertility being 2.1 children per woman, Bulgaria is characterized by what demographers call "lowest low fertility" and had the lowest fertility rate of all the European countries between 1995 and 1997.³⁹ Bulgaria's population stood at 7.9 million in 2001,⁴⁰ and United Nations projections state that by 2050 this figure will shrink by 31 % – the second steepest decline in all of Europe.⁴¹ Although birth rates had already started to fall during communism, the economic hardship, due to the transition from communism, and new cultural influences from the West have exacerbated the problem.

At the same time, there are alarming trends that indicate that many Bulgarian women are being negatively affected by the economic transition. The dismantling of the welfare state also means that divorcees can no longer rely on the state to collect child support payments. Increasingly, men simply refuse to pay, and the courts are too inefficient and costly for ordinary Bulgarian women to pursue claims. Widows have seen a drastic deterioration in their standard of living as pensions continue to shrink and social services evaporate. As a result of these and other factors, the majority of poor households in Bulgaria are headed by women.⁴² Furthermore, Bulgaria has a severe problem with youth

33 Indeed, recent research by American feminist scholars has hinted that American women, too, may prefer to spend time with their children at home rather than engage in paid employment. See Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood*, New York 2002.

34 National Statistical Institute (NSI), *Statistical Yearbook 2000*, Sofia 2001, 90.

35 Verdery, *Socialism*, see note 13, 68–69.

36 NSI 2003a.

37 World Bank 2002, see note 24.

38 NSI 2001, see note 33.

39 Ron Lesthaeghe and Johan Surkyn, *New Forms of Household Formation in Central and Eastern Europe: Are They Related to Newly Emerging Value Orientations?*, Working Paper: Interuniversity Papers in Demography, Interface Demography, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, (January 17, 2001), 2.

40 NSI 2001, see note 33, 45.

41 United Nations, Population Division. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Replacement Migration: Is it a Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations?*, (March 21, 2000).

42 UNDP, *Women in Poverty*, Sofia 1997.

unemployment, and more and more women are being pulled into sex work. A 1997 study on the demography of prostitution in Bulgaria found that a prostitute could earn more money from only one contact with a customer than both her parents received from their monthly pensions. Additionally, 42 % of the women interviewed wanted to travel abroad. The study concluded that Bulgaria is rapidly becoming a prime country where prostitutes can be easily recruited for international work.⁴³

The *International Organization for Migration* estimated that over 10,000 Bulgarian women, many of them minors, were working as what they define as “sex slaves” in Western Europe.⁴⁴ These numbers are questionable, however, because the movement of these women and children is illegal and difficult to trace. What is sure is that young Bulgarian women are so eager to go abroad that they are often the victims of international crime syndicates that traffic in women. In some cases, young women apply to employment “agencies” which promise to arrange legal work in Western European countries as an *au pair*, nanny or nurse. In other cases, “talent scouts” approach teenage women and recruit them to become fashion models in Western Europe. The agencies or “talent scouts” arrange the visas and pay for the transportation and the women agree to pay the money back from their future salaries. The women’s money and passports are then confiscated on arrival and they are forced to work as illegal prostitutes in order to pay back their debts. Few try to escape for fear of their own lives or the lives of their families back in Bulgaria. Because the girls leave the country of their own “free will,” with valid visas and the appropriate documentation, it is very difficult to control this kind of activity.⁴⁵ Thus, the sudden collapse of communism has meant that many Bulgarian women are at risk of falling into poverty and sexual exploitation.

The economic transition, however, has not been able to completely wipe out the gains made by Bulgarian women under communism. On some measurements of women’s “empowerment”, Bulgarian women still outperform women in advanced capitalist countries. For example, in 1999, Bulgaria’s adult literacy rate for women was 97.7 %, higher than that of Greece, Spain, and Portugal – all current members of the European Union.⁴⁶ Women in Bulgaria in 1998 also made 41 % of the earned income in their country – a figure higher than in the United States (40 %), Canada (38 %), France (39 %), and the Netherlands (34 %). 28.9 % of administrators and managers in Bulgaria were women (compared to only 9.4 % in France), as were an impressive 57 % of professional and

43 Krasimira Tchoudomirova et al., Demographic Data on Prostitutes from Bulgaria – a Recruitment Country for International (Migratory) Prostitutes, in: *International Journal of STD and AIDS*, 8, 3 (1997), 187–191.

44 International Organization for Migration, News Release: IOM Launches Information Campaigns to Raise Awareness about Trafficking in Women in Bulgaria and Hungary, 842 (November 12, 1999).

45 For an interesting and thorough examination of the problem of Trafficking in other Eastern European contexts, see: Foundation of Women’s Forum, *Trafficking in Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation: Mapping the Situation and Existing Organizations Working in Belarus, Russia, the Baltic and Nordic States*, Stockholm, 1998. Available online at: <http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/papers/traffickingreport.html>. In Bulgaria, the NGO Animus Association (<http://www.animusassociation.org/>) works to prevent the trafficking of women and children.

46 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2001*, New York 2001, 218–221.

technical workers in 1998 (compared to 52.6 % in the United States).⁴⁷ Bulgaria's female economic activity rate, at 56.8 % in 2000, was still higher than that of Germany (47.9), Austria (43.9), and the Netherlands (45.4).⁴⁸ In 1999, the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary enrolment ratio was 76 % for women compared to only 69 % for men, indicating that women in Bulgaria take more advantage of educational programmes. Female reproductive rights have not been threatened in Bulgaria as they have in other post-socialist countries despite the very low birth rate.⁴⁹ Women have retained free access to abortion, and alternative methods of birth control are increasingly being made available.

In 1994, Bulgaria briefly had a woman for Prime Minister, Reneta Indjova. Several women have held high ministerial positions in various Bulgarian governments, most notably Nadezhda Mihailova, Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Union of Democratic Forces, and Lydia Shuleva, Minister of Economy and Deputy Prime Minister under the *National Movement Simeon the Second* (NDSV). Under the NDSV, Bulgaria also earned the distinction of being the Central and Eastern European country with the greatest number of women elected to Parliament (26.2%). Most significant, however, is that by the end of 2001 Bulgarian men made up the majority of the registered unemployed. In December 2001, men in Bulgaria had an unemployment rate of 20.4 % compared to an 18.5 % unemployment rate for women.⁵⁰ One year later, in December 2002, women still had a lower unemployment rate than men – 15.8 % compared to 17.6 %.⁵¹ This demonstrates that some women have been able to adapt to the new system quite successfully despite discredited communist ideologies about the equality of the sexes. Bulgarian women's relatively favourable position may be the result of successful policies during the communist years, the effects of which were still felt in the post-1989 period. Certainly, Bulgarian women's attitude toward their own abilities and their place in society is still very much defined by socialist ideas about the equality of the sexes.

Conclusion

Bulgarian women's mixed experiences under both the communist and the post-communist periods illustrates that there is no perfect political or economic system for women. Instead, the "old system" had benefits and drawbacks just as the new system of free-markets and liberal democracy has its own set of pluses and minuses. Too often, however, politicians want to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath-water – in the 1990s the policies that supported "women's emancipation" were conflated with the evils of the command economy and the centralized state. They ultimately had to be dismantled in order for Bulgaria to "prove" its new democratic credentials to international financial institutions involved in restructuring the Bulgarian economy.

47 UNDP, Human Development Report 2000, New York 2000, 165–168.

48 UNDP 2002, see note 7, 234–237.

49 Gal/Kligman, Politics, see note 15, 16.

50 NSI 2003a, Statistical Yearbook 2002, Sofia 2003, 98.

51 NSI 2003b, Employment and Unemployment, 4/2002, Sofia 2003, 29.

In many ways, Bulgarian women have been unable to resist the erosion in the social safety net that once supported their dual roles as workers and mothers. Politically, however, many Bulgarian women remain committed to a more socially oriented state akin to the Scandinavian welfare states – states that combine democracy with social security. In 2001, the demographic breakdown of support for Bulgaria’s two opposing political parties was striking for its gender differences. The *Union of Democratic Forces*, a coalition of free market parties had a constituency that was 53.6 % male and 46.4 % female. In the *Bulgarian Socialist Party* (BSP), on the other hand, 63.3 % or almost two-thirds of all members were women. The BSP’s large female constituency was partially responsible for the election of a socialist president in 2001. According to UNDP research, it also seems likely that the BSP will win a majority of seats in the next parliamentary elections.⁵² I believe that this bias toward social democratic parties is at least partially a result of the real gains made by Bulgarian women under the communist system.

The situation in Bulgaria matches similar trends in other Central and Eastern European countries. Vlasta Jalusic and Milica Antic found that women in five post-socialist countries were more likely to be represented in centrist and leftist parties (i.e. Green, liberal, socialist, and communist) than in “right-wing parties (people’s parties, Christian parties, and parties of free enterprise, etc.)”.⁵³ Overall, this trend could point to a desire on the part of post-socialist women to combine the best parts of the “old system” with the new rather than embrace the overly-individualistic, savage capitalism of the United States and the United Kingdom. The very real gains that Bulgarian women experienced under communism may have given Bulgarian women certain advantages in the post-socialist period, and may be important factors in determining the social, political and economic future of the Bulgarian nation in years to come. Most importantly, scholars and women’s activists should realize that women raised under socialist systems benefited from a wide variety of state-designed and implemented policies to support women’s emancipation. It should not be surprising then that Bulgarian women may continue to look toward the state for solutions to their social ills and that socialist programs to support gender equality may, in the end, be more successful than free-market driven ones.

⁵² UNDP, Early Warning Report: Bulgaria, April 2003, Sofia 2003.

⁵³ Jalusic/Antic, *Prospects*, see note 30, 10.