

Bulgaria: Anti-Communist hysteria is a threat to democracy

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Every February, the past reemerges out of the everyday worries of Bulgarian society. Emotions run high amidst the Day of Remembrance and Respect to the Victims of the Bulgarian Communist regime, the annual commemoration of Vasil Levski, the national hero hanged by the Ottomans on 18 February 1873, the “Lukovmarsh” and the anti-fascist protests in Sofia. Rhetorical manipulation and misuse of history influence all these events and, in turn, polarise the public sphere in the wake of institutional standoff.

The “Lukovmarsh” – the yearly torchlight rally organized by the Bulgarian National Union in memory of the Bulgarian General Hristo Lukov – has become the most prominent annual manifestation of nationalists. The popularization of this historical figure, who reappeared from the oblivion of the postsocialist predicament, has gone hand in hand with the resurfacing of restyled paraphernalia of Europe’s darker interwar period. Black streetwear, patriotic mottos, and ancient Nordic symbols, are all cunningly refashioned to divert people’s association with the brutal events of that decade. Since the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a ban by the Sofia municipality in 2020, local authorities have timidly followed suit. Hundreds have gathered regardless, honoring the memory of the Bulgarian General while chanting racist slogans. The massive presence of the riot police units has yearly failed to disperse racist sympathisers and stop the event.

Joking aside, it has become crystal clear that the political heirs of General Lukov do not aim to commemorate their hero. Nor do they aspire to untie the “memory knot” around Bulgaria’s complicated figures of the interwar period.

Rather than a contradiction, the “Lukovmarsh” follows a coherent path: organisers rely on anti-Communist rhetoric to grab hold of the common discourse and gain consensus under the guise of patriotism. What they do is what Filip Lyapov refers to as an attempt to set up a “template of possibility.” Within it, they twist the post-1989 anti-Communist rhetoric to support allegations of “communist support” against the Socialist or the de facto Turkish party, as well as the NGO sector and the “Zionist lobbies”, thereby delegitimizing pluralism and multiculturalism.

Here goes the conundrum: banning such manifestation would boost their victimhood strategy. “This is Communism,” someone would say. Allowing it would instead grant political legitimacy to ideas that democracy cannot afford to tolerate. In the meantime, the organizers took the streets by instrumentally commemorating the victims of the Bulgarian National Army to avoid any potential ban. None would do so for an event in memory of those victims: all generals, senior officers, and counselors killed on the night of February 1, 1945, by the People’s Court’s death penalty after the Communist coup d’état of September 9, 1944. While devoting most effort to keeping the memory of Communist atrocities alive, Lukov’s heirs avoid recollecting the Communist violence against Turkish and Muslim citizens during the different stages of the “Revival Process.” They also gloss over the thorny issue of the deportation of Jews from the Bulgarian-occupied lands in Thrace and today’s North Macedonia during the interwar period. While the latter were victims of the genocidal plan of

Bulgaria's interwar allies, the former were persecuted, killed, and expelled from Bulgaria by the Communist regime.

Both have been forgotten along the Lukovmarsh, unsurprisingly.

This camouflage technique resonates with Russia's commemoration of the "Immortal Regiment," the annual march exploiting the memory of the Soviet Army fighting Nazism to legitimate today's neoimperialist ambitions in the formerly Soviet space.

In effect, what the Kremlin says about the history of Ukrainians is not so different from what most Bulgarian far-rightists and conservatives say about Macedonians and North Macedonia.

This year, social media users have also paid attention to the participation of young, head-shaved, probably high-school students holding a torch in memory of Lukov along with the renowned coterie of far-right sympathizers at the place where Lukov was assassinated by Ivan Burudzhiev and Violeta Yakova, two Communist partisans. Imagines that resonate with those capturing pupils who, dressed up in uniform, stood proudly at the monument of Vasil Levski while people left a flower on his place of death. Needless to say, Levski and Lukov have nothing in common. Yet a certain banalisation of the aesthetics in Bulgaria's politics of memory seems to follow a dangerous pattern for the young generations.

February 2024 followed up on the partial demolition of the Monument to the Soviet Army in downtown Sofia. Although the voices demanding a "Bulgarian monument" may remain marginal, a certain degree of conservatism would unlikely wane in new actions of de-commemoration.

It is true that the monument itself is self-referential and almost nullifies the memory and political agency of Bulgaria's antifascists and citizens who fought along. However, it is also true that many reiterate this colonial narrative by erasing that history.

Many did not simply welcome the removal of the Soviet-branded, trio-bronze statues from the monument's pedestal because the latter echoes the legacies of the Russian colonizers over Bulgaria's political history. If anything, they praised the partial dismantlement because the memorial complex celebrates the Communist victory over Nazism after the takeover of Bulgarian communists. This mnemonic recollection is the irrefutable proof that anti-Communist hysteria has little or nothing to do with lifting the burden of the past from the country. In contrast, it fuels the growth of ubiquitous nationalism, one that contradicts history and shapes political identities on the basis of different perceptions and uncritical evaluations of historical events.

Since 1989, this anti-Communist sentiment has been mobilised to unite all Bulgarians against those who sow division and endanger the unity of the nation - be they citizens of minority groups, multiculturalists, leftists, among others. This is the rhetorical linchpin that far-rightists rely on and by which they can easily receive broader support.

It is thus evident that anti-Communist rhetoric is not only exploiting the language of anti-Communist critics and intellectuals who lived under Communism, but it is also misusing the memories of the latter to tone down any critical voice and dismiss any political alternative.

After the Global Sixties, Italy's radical political arena presented a similar scenario. When leftist and progressive intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Leonardo Sciascia began to speak of the "fascism of the antifascists," they did not reject their antifascist values. Rather, they had identified a much subtler political pitfall: a rhetorical form of antifascism that had become the political

instrument for discarding critical opinions and alternatives that had nothing to share with fascism.

Today, Bulgaria's "anticommunism" is similarly put at work: the "anticommunism of the anti-communists" is currently deployed to reject political alternatives and make room for intolerant ideas to influence society. It has also become a normative paradigm everyone must comply with, lest it be accused of supporting "communists," or even being one.

In other words, this anti-Communist hysteria is turning against democracy.

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