

# The growing Russophilia of post-communist Bulgarian nationalism: between entanglements and paradoxes

## La creciente rusofilia del nacionalismo búlgaro poscomunista: entre enredos y paradojas

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### Abstract

The essay examines the various manifestations of Russian influence on present-day Bulgarian nationalism. Although this phenomenon dates back to the early days of Bulgarian nationalist thought in the 19th century, it gained particular prominence in recent years, especially in the context of Russian hybrid warfare. After outlining the political landscape of Bulgarian nationalism in the post-communist period, the article offers an in-depth analysis of the dominant pro-Russian narratives that are vociferously reproduced by the country's major

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“From ‘Brotherhood and unity’ to ethnonational segregation: dynamics of identity in post-Yugoslav Mostar” [in R. Preshlenova, ed., *Cities in the Balkans: Spaces, Faces, Memories*, Sofia: IBCT–BAN, 2021, pp. 603–638]. [in Bulgarian]

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nationalist actors. While some of these messages have been firmly adapted in the collective memory of generations of Bulgarians due to various historical reasons (e.g., the narrative of the “Russian liberators”), others are a direct product of today’s Kremlin propaganda (the notions of the alleged “decadence” of the West). Furthermore, the growing divisions within Bulgarian society that took shape against the background of this prolonged Russian influence have also been thoroughly addressed. The paper argues that Kremlin-backed actors are trying to monopolize and privatize the patriotic discourse in Bulgaria, thereby disrupting the country’s pro-Western orientation.

In terms of its methodology, the research adheres to an elastic interdisciplinary approach that takes into consideration some of the major theoretical achievements in the fields of nationalism studies and memory studies.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, nationalism, populism, Russophilia, post-communism, transition to democracy

## Resumen

El ensayo examina las diversas manifestaciones de la influencia rusa en el nacionalismo búlgaro actual. Aunque este fenómeno se remonta a los primeros días del pensamiento nacionalista búlgaro en el siglo XIX, ganó particular importancia en los últimos años, especialmente en el contexto de la guerra híbrida rusa. Luego de delinear el panorama político del nacionalismo búlgaro en el período poscomunista, el artículo ofrece un análisis en profundidad de las narrativas prorrusas dominantes que son reproducidas a gritos por los principales actores nacionalistas del país. Aunque algunos de estos mensajes se han adaptado firmemente a la memoria colectiva de generaciones de búlgaros debido a diversas razones históricas (por ejemplo, la narrativa de los "libertadores rusos"), otros son un producto directo de la propaganda actual del Kremlin (las nociones sobre la supuesta “decadencia” de Occidente). Asimismo, se han abordado a fondo las crecientes divisiones dentro de la sociedad búlgara que se formaron en el contexto de esta prolongada influencia rusa. El documento argumenta que los actores respaldados por el Kremlin están tratando de monopolizar y privatizar el discurso patriótico en Bulgaria, alterando así la orientación pro-occidental del país.

En cuanto a su metodología, la investigación se adhiere a un enfoque interdisciplinario elástico que toma en consideración algunos de los principales logros teóricos en los campos de los estudios del nacionalismo y los estudios de la memoria.

**Palabras-clave:** Bulgaria, nacionalismo, populismo, rusofilia, poscomunismo, transición a la democracia

## **Introduction: mapping the context of Russian influence in Bulgaria**

Russophilia has long-lasting historical expressions of different scopes, covering many countries, including the Western democratic world (e.g., see Soboleva and Wrenn 2017). However, the phenomenon became increasingly controversial in recent years. After the annexation of Crimea (2014), it was largely associated with Russian hybrid warfare and its “nests” of influence in the West. Evidence that present-day Western Russophilia is a direct product of Kremlin propaganda is its explicitly geopolitical content – it represents, above all, a Russian-backed public reaction against the alleged “weaknesses” of democracy and certainly not any admiration of Russian culture. This serves as an explanation for why the majority of today’s exponents of pro-Russian sentiments in Western societies are people and platforms coming from the far-right and far-left ends of the political spectrum.

In Bulgaria, a country in Southeast Europe, the phenomenon of Russophilia has considerable presence in local public discourse since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pro-Russian sentiments peaked during and after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, which resulted in the foundation of the modern Bulgarian state. Eventually, the narrative of the “Russian liberators” was incorporated into education, literature, monumental art, etc., which ensured its continuous reproduction in the collective memory of generations of Bulgarians. After the 1944 communist coup d’état and the transformation of Bulgaria into a Soviet satellite, Russophilia was forcefully imposed by the new regime, now in the ideological framework of the secular doctrine of “Bulgarian-Soviet friendship.” In this period, every visible expression of anti-Russian or anti-Soviet sentiments in local society was sanctioned by the totalitarian state. Subsequently, despite the collapse of communism in 1989, pro-Russian sentiments remained a relatively popular phenomenon in Bulgarian society and were largely equated with socialist nostalgia. Due to its predominantly political nature and association with the former communist regime, during this period, Russophilia became subject to various contestations. Nevertheless, pro-Russian sympathies remained widespread even after Bulgaria’s accession to NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007 (Seroka 2021: 13–22). More recently, against the background of the ongoing Russian hybrid warfare, Russophilia in Bulgaria was nurtured by some general propaganda narratives used in other countries, as well as by messages that were specifically addressed to the Bulgarian public.

Of particular interest in this regard is the specific symbiosis between Russophilia and Bulgarian nationalism, a process that gained significant prominence in recent years. Although paradoxical at first glance – as nationalism prioritizes one’s own nation – the proliferation of pro-Russian narratives within the symbolic realms of Bulgarian nationalism has various historical, cultural and

political reasons. Thereby, a question that deserves a more detailed comment is whether such interpretations constitute an essential part of modern Bulgarian nationalism since its gradual emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or whether they are a more recent phenomenon, a product of the Kremlin propaganda. While there are already attempts to study the role of Russia in the formation of Bulgarian nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Wenshuang 2014), the blend between Russophilia and nationalism in present-day Bulgaria has not been the subject of more coherent academic research. Hence, this essay will seek to address this gap in the field and contribute to our knowledge of Russian influences on the social and political landscape in Bulgaria.

In terms of its methodology, this essay will rely on an elastic, interdisciplinary approach. By applying discourse analysis, the research will focus on the messages and appeals articulated by various Bulgarian nationalist actors that are covertly or openly pro-Russian. Special emphasis shall be put on different narratives and symbols within Bulgarian national identity and historical memory that were eventually “hijacked” and instrumentalized by these Russian-backed politicians to serve the geopolitical agenda of the Kremlin. Accordingly, some of the major theoretical achievements in the fields of both nationalism studies and memory studies will be taken into account in the course of the research. In this regard, particularly useful for this analysis is Pierre Nora’s breakthrough paradigm of the “realms of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*). It offers a critical reassessment of various “realms” (both material and non-material) that produce specific national meanings: these are crucial for the consolidation and maintenance of national identity (Nora 1996). As this text will show, these “realms” can also be the “meeting point” of clashing, competing narratives about the past. Michael Billig’s seminal notion of “banal nationalism” – which provides an alternative to the “major” theoretical approaches of studying nationalism – is also relevant for this study; it denotes some non-official, everyday practices and representations that ensure the coherence of a nation over time (Billig 1995). Furthermore, the framework presented here also relies on Craig Calhoun’s understanding of nationalism as a “discursive formation” (Calhoun 1997).

## **Populism, anti-Westernism, anti-liberalism: the political landscape of Bulgarian nationalism after 1989**

To understand why pro-Russian narratives have such a powerful resonance in present-day Bulgarian nationalism, this essay should first discuss several relevant historical conditions that made Bulgarian society susceptible to such external influences. For decades, Bulgarians were exposed to Soviet-styled

state-led propaganda, which ultimately resulted in the firm adaptation of anti-Western sentiments in everyday life. Eventually, this enabled various populist actors – mostly from the far-right but also from the opposite end of the political spectrum – to instrumentalize this rhetoric for political gains, representing its messages in patriotic and sovereignist terms. Therefore, after briefly outlining the contradictory places of Bulgarian nationalism during the communist era (1944–1989), this section will show how it was articulated in an anti-Western and pro-Russian framework in the years after 1989.

During communism, nationalism, at least in theory, was abolished as a legitimate principle in society and was replaced by the internationalist doctrines of Marxism-Leninism. The new regime officially designated nationalism as a “bourgeois-capitalistic ideology,” embodying the previous “monarcho-fascist” power in the country and violating the principles of class society. However, after an initial period of dismantling the dominant narratives of the Bulgarian nation – including a proposal for future inclusion of the region of Pirin Macedonia into socialist Yugoslavia – the one-party state gradually embraced a Soviet-styled patriotism based on the presumption that national identity should be inextricably linked with loyalty to the communist party and the new “socialist fatherland” (Savova-Mahon Borden 2001). The coherent reproduction of this narrative was guaranteed by its infiltration into every aspect of people’s life – education, culture, social relations, etc. (Kurtev 1985). For the aims of this essay, it is worth mentioning that this “socialist patriotism” was bound to the concept of “Bulgarian-Soviet friendship” based on the essentialist notion of an organic, “eternal” bond of the Bulgarian and Soviet (Russian) peoples. The idea was easily adapted, given the already relatively large spread of Russophile sentiments among Bulgarians. In the latter days of Bulgarian communism, the definitions of “socialist patriotism” found their ultimate expression in the concept of the “unitary socialist nation” (*edinna sotsialisticheska natsiya*), which envisaged the cultural homogenization of all ethnic groups in society. Eventually, these ideological trends culminated in the so-called “Revival process” (1984–1989), a state-led campaign of renaming Muslim communities and denial of their identity (Gruev and Kalionski 2008).

The collapse of the communist regime in 1989 formally provided an opportunity for hitherto forbidden political stances to gain public visibility. This meant a possibility to redefine the contents of Bulgarian nationalism, this time without its former state-imposed ideological facade. Although nationalist-styled rhetoric represented a significant resource, which at various times tempted most of the political forces in the country – including the pro-democratic ones – in the 1990s, the main nationalist voices came from neo-communist and anti-reformist platforms. Thus, paradoxically, nationalist sentiments remained almost entirely monopolized by circles around the former

Communist Party, rebranded as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (hereafter, the BSP) in 1990. Moreover, several new, although marginal neo-communist nationalist formations emerged – with the so-called Patriotic Party of Labor being among the most representative – that reacted aggressively against the restoration of names and collective rights of Bulgaria’s Muslim communities (Ragaru 2001: 301–302). In practice, this unequivocally showed that in the 1990s, the narratives of Bulgarian nationalism continued to be reproduced on the basis of the aforementioned concept of the “unitary socialist nation,” albeit without its former ideological content.

During this period, the nationalist messages and, in particular, the xenophobic rhetoric in Bulgarian society were constantly fueled by the continuous political presence of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (hereafter, the MRF), a party created in 1990 and widely perceived as representing Bulgarian Turks and other Muslims in the country. Hereof, the popular concept of the so-called “Bulgarian Ethnic Model,” which aimed at presenting the country as a place of inter-ethnic consensus (Rechel 2007) and was particularly advocated by the MRF, was perceived by local nationalists as a sign of the imminent “de-Bulgarization” of the country. In this regard, the newly-emerged political pluralism, which provided political and social legitimacy to until recently “invisible” minority groups, provoked strong anti-democratic sentiments among many grassroots Bulgarians. However, it should be explicitly noted that in the 1990s, no political actor managed to capitalize exclusively on these nationalist feelings; thus, people with such views voted for different parties or preferred to abstain from voting.

Since Bulgaria’s democratization was inextricably related to the country’s integration process into foreign blocs (EU and NATO), public grievances about the transition often found expression in strong anti-Western sentiments. In fact, post-communist Bulgaria offers fertile ground for the proliferation of such narratives, given their long-term dissemination by state propaganda during the Cold War. What is even more indicative in this respect, anti-Westernism is additionally nurtured by another remnant of the communist mentality – the conspiratorial thinking and its rich corpus of “theories,” almost exclusively oriented against “America,” “Israel,” the “Zionists,” the “free-masons” or simply the “West.” In the specific case of Bulgaria in the 1990s, of particular prominence was a national strategy drafted in 1990 by a team of American economists to assist the country’s transition to a market economy. However, according to local conspiracy producers, the “Rahn-Utt plan” (named after its two main authors, Richard W. Rahn and Ronald D. Utt) actually did not aim at supporting Bulgarian economic prosperity but rather, at the “destruction” of the country, its people and economics and, ultimately, at imposing American colonial-like presence. Against the backdrop of such anti-Western notions, the

most popular fear in Bulgarian society during this period was that the then-still upcoming European integration would result in the “prohibition” of various traditionally Bulgarian cultural features, a trend which, in the long term, would lead to the ultimate “de-nationalization” of Bulgaria.

While these sentiments had a constant presence in Bulgarian society, there was no political formation that openly identified with them in the years after 1989. It was not until 2005 that voters with such attitudes found their political representation with the emergence of the nationalist formation Attack (*Ataka*), headed by its inflammatory leader Volen Siderov. Like other populist formations in Europe during the period, this coalition (later transformed into a unitary party) managed to mobilize various public fears (phobias) – widely distributed within societies in post-communist transition – for political usage (Sygkelos 2018). Although not explicitly pro-Russian in its beginning, Attack offered a strong anti-Western populism, combined with radical nationalist and even xenophobic messages. As a result, the party managed to win the majority of nationalist-minded people in the country as well as to partially break BSP’s “monopoly” on Russophile votes. However, Siderov’s project should not be approached as a “classic” case of the European far-right. Its political agenda represents an amalgam of extreme right views on culture and demography with openly far-left appeals on economics and social issues (Ghodsee 2008). All this is “supplemented” by an anti-elitist, anti-Western rhetoric, which “unites” voters from both extremes of the political spectrum, who feel they are being “robbed” by the “failed” and “corrupted” transition in Bulgaria in the 1990s and early 2000s. Eventually, this ideological mixture proved quite successful for Siderov – his party was constantly represented in the country’s National Assembly from 2005 to 2019.

Despite its significant initial electoral success, Attack gradually began to lose its harsh “anti-establishment” profile, especially after the party briefly tacitly supported the government of the center-right pro-European Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party in 2009. Moreover, during this period, Attack started reducing its xenophobic rhetoric – although it never fully disappeared from the party’s agenda – replacing it with much more pronounced far-left appeals on economics. This change became apparent in the 2012 document “The Siderov Plan against colonial slavery,” eventually representing the party’s pre-election program for the early parliamentary elections in 2013. After the vote, Siderov offered its outside support to the new BSP–MRF coalition government, which had a devastating effect on the party’s popularity. As a result, many nationalist-minded voters designated Attack as “traitors” and changed their electoral preferences to other parties with nationalistic or populist agendas. Furthermore, although anti-Western messages were an inherent part of the party’s political identity since its beginning, this was also the period when

Attack began to openly express its pro-Russian stance concerning Bulgaria's geopolitical orientation. After Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, Siderov's team immediately recognized the self-styled "referendum," called for lifting sanctions against the Russian Federation and deepened its Eurosceptic and anti-NATO rhetoric. What is even more relevant for this discussion, it is obvious that the political "Russification" of Attack coincided chronologically with the activation of Kremlin propaganda against the background of the 2011–2013 Russian protests.

The 2013–2014 period was characterized by dynamic political events, both at domestic and global levels, which had long-term social implications for Bulgarian society. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian hybrid intervention (see Wither 2016) created "nests" of anti-Western and anti-democratic propaganda in various states, which gained considerable support among far-right but also far-left populists. In Bulgaria, this period witnessed a drastic increase in such propaganda, as shown by large-scale domestic sociological research (Yakimova and Vatsov 2017). Unambiguously linked to Russian influence, such anti-Western narratives were (and still are) disseminated by a plethora of local politicians, public and media figures and even academics. Specifically, these processes left a significant imprint on the agenda of local nationalist actors. While some openly expressed their anti-Western stances, strictly adhering to the Kremlin line (e.g., calling for withdrawal from NATO and the EU), others preferred a more situational approach. For instance, two nationalist formations that were eventually part of government coalitions (the IMRO–BNM and NFSB) were more cautious when positioning themselves concerning Russia-related issues during this period; some of their leaders even expressed solidarity with Ukraine in the face of the Russian aggression (Zankina 2023: 57). However, it should be explicitly noted that no matter their allegedly pro-European orientation, some of these politicians do not hesitate to capitalize on Kremlin-styled anti-democratic and anti-liberal rhetoric (Yakimova 2022: 51–53).

The progressive decline in Attack's popularity after 2013–2014 did not mean that anti-Western and pro-Russian messages were losing resonance in Bulgaria; they were just deprived of centralized articulation for a while. Gradually, the main political exponent of these sentiments in Bulgarian society became Revival (*Vazrazhdane*), a nationalist project founded in 2014 that largely followed the example of Siderov's party. In ideological terms, Revival represents itself as an "authentic" nationalist formation, claiming to have been created by grassroots Bulgarian nationalists who do not share ties with the hitherto mainstream nationalist formations, with the latter being accused of deviation from the "true interests" of the Bulgarian nation. However, this "authenticity" was questioned on numerous occasions, as the



party's leader Kostadin Kostadinov was formerly part of various political parties from the entire spectrum of anti-Western, anti-democratic and populist platforms. Although quite marginal in its early days, Revival gradually gained considerable following, filling the political vacuum that emerged after Attack's demise. In the November 2021 parliamentary election, the party crossed the 4% threshold entering the country's National Assembly. Since then, electoral support for Revival has kept growing with each subsequent parliamentary election; it ranked third in the April 2023 elections (the country's latest at the time of writing this paper).

The party is continuously denying public accusations of pro-Russian orientation, hiding its agenda completely behind "pro-Bulgarian" nationalist positions. Nevertheless, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine unequivocally showed the geopolitical orientation of the country's major political parties, including Revival. Kostadinov adhered strictly to the Kremlin narratives – Russia was not an aggressor, but the blame for this war lies entirely on the West (Bedrov and Dimitrova 2022). Also, in the course of 2022, Revival was behind several anti-Ukrainian acts – the party's activists took down the flag of Ukraine from Sofia City Hall (Todorov 2022) and organized provocative counter-protests against local public events in support of Ukraine (Yordanov 2022). Furthermore, Revival was vehemently opposed to the possibility of Bulgaria sending any kind of aid to Ukraine, maintaining the view that such an act will "throw the country into a war" (Bedrov and Dimitrova 2022). It should be noted that this constitutes a widely shared propaganda thesis among pro-Kremlin political actors in the country, including President Rumen Radev.

Concerning the rise in Revival's popularity, the trend should not be perceived as a symptom of allegedly growing pro-Russian sentiments in Bulgarian society. In fact, public attitudes showed that the party was "launched" into the political orbit due to its fierce anti-COVID stances and not because of its virulent Russophilia (Simeonova and Wesolowsky 2022). This is visible from the fact that the most attended event of the party was a January 2022 protest against coronavirus restrictions and not the subsequent attempts to stir anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Furthermore, among the reasons for the growth in Revival's rating is the country's ongoing political crisis that began in 2021 and the ensuing inability to produce a stable government. Another explanation – largely neglected so far – is the potential of online propaganda, especially via social media. Also, Revival's leader is much more moderate in his public appearances; he does not have the scandalous behavior of Volen Siderov, which was one of the reasons for the latter's downfall.

All in all, Revival is currently the main political voice representing those segments of Bulgarian society who are against further integration of the country into Euro-Atlantic structures and are in favor of closer ties with Russia.

## Constructing and reproducing “eternal brotherhood”: pro-Russian narratives within Bulgarian nationalism

The pro-Russian orientation of the nationalist platforms discussed so far rests on specific narratives with historical, cultural, or geopolitical content. Some of these narratives became deeply entrenched in Bulgarian identity – they were produced and maintained throughout the country’s history after 1878, while others emerged much later and were directly influenced by today’s Russian propaganda. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that these narratives became the subject of coherent political instrumentalization, especially in the context of the ongoing geopolitical divisions. What is even more significant, the uncritical adherence to these messages is in line with the geopolitical agenda of the Kremlin; hence, it may pose an open risk for Bulgaria’s pro-Western orientation. Based on in-depth observations of the public attitudes of various political and social actors in the country, the following paragraphs will discuss some major ideas and concepts widely perceived as being an expression of “mainstream” Bulgarian nationalism but which are, in fact, strongly linked to the image of Russia. However, only those narratives that the author considers the most representative will be considered here; it is possible to outline some additional minor “nationalist” messages that go beyond the scope of this paper.

### *The “(double) liberation”*

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 constitutes a fundamental part of the Bulgarian national narrative, as it provided the political conditions for the foundation of the modern Bulgarian state after five centuries of Ottoman domination. As a result, the outcomes of the war were publically stylized in Bulgarian society as “Liberation” and the Russians – as “liberators” and “brothers-liberators.” In the decades after 1878, the young Balkan state reproduced this romanticized image through a series of official practices with a significant public resonance – e.g., cultural policy, education and historiography (Pashova et al. 2013). Of special prominence for the endurance of the “liberation” narrative within Bulgarian national identity is the construction and functioning of specific realms of memory – both physical (e.g., monuments, museums, fine art) and non-physical objects (the national calendar, literature, folklore, etc.). In this regard, the “banal” commemoration of these events through monumental art (monuments, sculptures, churches, etc.) is particularly relevant for this research, as it manifests Russia’s symbolic domination over the urban landscape of the country’s major cities. The case of Sofia – Bulgaria’s capital – should be discussed separately in this aspect; in addition to a plethora of Russia-related memorials, objects and names in the

city center, the monument to Tsar Alexander II “the Liberator” erected in 1907, directly in front of the National Assembly deserves special attention. However, outside this romanticized stylization, the centrality of these monuments can also be considered a conscious policy to maintain Russian imperial influence in Bulgaria. This gives enough reason to some analysts to talk about a “symbolic Russian occupation” when commenting on Sofia’s historical landscape (Yanakiev 2023).

An immanent feature of the “liberation” narrative is the concept of “Bulgaria of San Stefano.” It represents the symbolism and legacies of the Treaty of San Stefano signed on 3 March 1878 at the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War. Although preliminary, and therefore without any official international relevance, the treaty entailed the creation of a large Bulgarian principality, which had to include most of the Ottoman territories with a significant Bulgarian population. Therefore, to this day, 3 March is annually observed as the Day of Liberation of Bulgaria and is the country’s national holiday. Nevertheless, the provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano were never implemented, as it was revised at the Congress of Berlin (1878). The ensuing Treaty of Berlin established a much smaller Bulgarian state and the autonomous Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia. Subsequently, the territorial scope of Bulgaria of San Stefano served as a national ideal for generations of Bulgarians and was the backbone of the country’s foreign policy until the communist coup in 1944.

Through this politicized articulation of the symbolism of “Bulgaria of San Stefano,” the pro-Russian historical interpretation tries to monopolize the notion of “united Bulgaria,” presenting the latter as a product exclusively of Russian policy in the Balkans. This aims at elaborating an inextricable link between Russia and Bulgarian nationalism. However, such a historical reading is incorrect since the idea of the “Bulgarian ethnic territories” began to crystallize earlier and was influenced by events such as the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870. Moreover, today’s Russian propaganda supports the notion that it was precisely Russia that outlined a “greater” and “united Bulgaria” (at San Stefano), but the West tore it apart (at Berlin), thus, preventing it from achieving its national unification. This manipulative claim aims to provoke powerful anti-Western sentiments, especially among the patriotic segments of Bulgarian society, to be used for geopolitical purposes. The symbolic connection between Russia and the traditional irredentist interpretation of Bulgarian nationalism for this period is even more paradoxical, given the role of the Russian Empire against the Bulgarian attempts to annex territories with Bulgarian population – e.g., during the Bulgarian Unification in 1885.

After the pro-Soviet coup in 1944, the “liberation” narrative went through a new political instrumentalization, this time with an ideological sanction. The new communist regime propagated that the Soviet army “liberated” Bulgaria

from “monarcho-fascism” and “capitalism” in World War II. Relying on the traditionally widespread pro-Russian sentiments among a large part of Bulgarian society, Sofia even made a symbolic connection between the events of 1878 and 1944, no matter the Bolsheviks’ highly problematic relations with the legacies of Tsarist Russia. Gradually, the concept of the “second liberation” was officialized through the state’s centralized monopoly on mnemonic practices. In the following decades, a new wave of monumental art followed, containing the imperative of “gratitude” to the Soviet “liberators.” Furthermore, this rhetoric was reproduced, of course, with a political sanction, in important spheres of public and academic life – mass culture, media and historiography. As correctly noted by Kamen Rikev, the persistence of the concept of the “double liberation,” even after the end of the communist regime, unequivocally reveals that for a part of local society, Bulgaria would not have been able to exist without its Russian/Soviet patron (Rikev 2022: 70).

Of utmost significance for the endurance of the “double liberation” concept was the large-scale Sovietization/Russification process that took place in Bulgarian society during this period. A particular reflection was the emergence of an all-encompassing Soviet-modelled socialist everyday life with its various artifacts and narratives (Elenkov 2018). More importantly, the “symbiosis” between love for the “socialist fatherland” and loyalty to the Soviet Union – via the aforementioned doctrine of the “Bulgarian-Soviet friendship” – created an illusion among generations of Bulgarians that this “Sovietized” identity actually reflects “traditional” Bulgarian reality. Therefore, all public changes and innovations after 1989 were often perceived as an attempt at “de-Bulgarization” – a notion that eventually became part of the agenda of some of the already discussed populist parties. An indicative case of the Soviet contents within the identity of some Bulgarian citizens concerns the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia and the ongoing dispute on whether it should be dismantled. Paradoxically, people with pro-Russian and/or pro-socialist sentiments advocate for the monument’s preservation as, in their view, it reflects an important episode of modern “Bulgarian” history.

Whereas the “second liberation” provoked intense debates and differing narratives in Bulgarian society due to the ongoing lack of a consensus on the communist past (see Znepolski 2004), the Russian role in the “first liberation” of Bulgaria in 1878 was unequivocally recognized as positive. As a result, for decades, a romanticized, generalized and largely simplistic notion of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) has been reproduced within Bulgarian public discourse. Usually, this narrative acknowledges only the Russian participation in these events while at the same time “silencing” the significant role of other communities in the Tsarist army (Finns, Ukrainians, Poles) or of

the Romanian army. It should be noted that the endurance of this one-sided view is largely due to its official sanction by generations of politicians and public figures, as well as the traditional historiography. Thereby, for most of modern Bulgarian history, this heroic stylization of the “first liberation” was not subject to any contestations – such a step was not undertaken even by most of the pro-European and anti-communist political actors in the years after 1989. Every attempt at critical revision and contextualization of these events was usually labeled by the pro-socialist historiography as an expression of “Russophobia” (Baeva 2019: 220). Therefore, the “liberation” narrative and the ensuing syndrome of “eternal gratitude” should be recognized as the fundamental *topos* of Bulgarian-Russian entanglements and, thus, the main source of pro-Russian influence in present-day Bulgarian society. It was only in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that more consistent public voices began to appear, calling for a critical reassessment of Russia’s role in Bulgarian history.

***Maintaining “eternal brotherhood”: Eastern Orthodoxy, Slavic identity and the “common cultural code”***

The Bulgarian-Russian historical entanglements are not based solely on specific events. Of particular importance for the producing and reproducing of these relations is the alleged cultural similarity between the two communities. Focusing on largely essentialist assumptions, the advocates of this scheme forged a nearly transcendental notion of the “historical ties” between Bulgarians and Russians based on common religion and culture. Although initiated as a specific intellectual tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of Bulgarian-Russian cultural relatedness eventually went through a political sanction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – mostly as an outcome of the aforementioned pro-Russian orientation of communist Bulgaria. It was against this political background that these historical ties were officially stylized as a “brotherhood.” Even though such kinship-based rhetoric usually implies principles of equality, a specific feature of most Bulgarian Russophiles (especially today) is the illustration of Bulgarian-Russian relations as between an “older” and a “younger brother.” What is more striking, while neglecting some objective historical processes and facts, some of these voices in local society represent the cultural ties between these two countries as always unidirectional – from Russia to its “younger brother” in the Balkans. This paradox is largely an expression of the “eternal gratitude” syndrome, which was a product of the maintenance and institutionalization of the aforementioned “(double) liberation” narrative.

Within the notion of shared cultural features, the common affiliation to Eastern Orthodoxy takes a predominant share. The traditionalist approach in Bulgarian historiography focuses precisely on “common religion” as the main driver behind Russian intervention in the Ottoman Balkans to “liberate” Orthodox Bulgarians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For decades, this nearly teleological notion was coherently reproduced by intellectuals and cultural activists, thus, becoming a core symbol of Bulgarian nationalistic discourse. Eventually, the idea of a religiously-instigated closeness between Bulgarians and Russians was further reaffirmed after 1878 with the construction of the main cathedral of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Sofia – it was named after medieval Russian prince and saint Alexander Nevsky. However, this aspect of Bulgarian-Russian relatedness was violently eradicated after the communist coup in 1944 and the ensuing Soviet-modelled atheistic reconstruction of Bulgarian public space. Hereof, the later doctrine of the “Bulgarian-Soviet friendship” had an entirely secular content.

Concerning the present-day processes in Bulgarian society, Russophiles’ vocal advocacy on religious identity reveals some contradictions. Given the lack of religious commitment among the majority of Bulgarians in the last decades – largely an outcome of communism – the recently increased emphasis on Orthodoxy seems mostly politically motivated. What is even more paradoxical, some local Russophile activists combine Orthodox with communist symbolism (see Picture 1). This clearly shows that, against the background of loyalty to Russia, specific cultural and historical features blur and even merge, regardless of their fundamental incompatibility. Furthermore, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, pro-Russian nationalists in Bulgaria, although loudly advocating for Eastern Orthodoxy, unequivocally neglected the Orthodox background of Ukraine.



Picture 1. Russian and Bulgarian flags displayed on the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, 9 May 2014. A banner with a cross that merges both flags is visible above. It bears the inscription: “Brotherly victory.” (© Copyrights by Ladislav Tsvetkov / bTV News. Source: <https://btvnovinite.bg/galeria/bulgaria/obshtestvo/dobrovoltsi-ohranyava-ha-pametnika-na-savetskata-armiya-v-sofiya.html?image=17>)

The other fundamental component of cultural identity that serves as a backbone of the allegedly “immemorial” Bulgarian-Russian ties is the notion of “Slavic unity” between these two nations. The idea is based on some obvious cultural similarities, mainly in terms of linguistics. Whereas the topic was thoroughly examined back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by various intellectuals (e.g., see Tsanov 2016), it was after 1944 that the notion of Slavic unity was officially recognized in the context of Bulgarian-Soviet relations. Of particular importance in this regard was a collection of articles called *Tribal and cultural ties between the Bulgarian and Russian peoples* (1945) by Soviet linguist and historian Nikolay Derzhavin. Largely influenced by the then officially imposed Japhetic theory of Soviet linguist Nikolay Marr, Derzhavin offered a primordialist-styled notion of the “common tribal origin of these two fraternal Slavic peoples” (Derzhavin 1945: 70). Eventually, what was outlined by Derzhavin served as a methodological direction of Bulgarian historiography for the next several decades (Pashova et al. 2013: 41). Thereby, it should come as no surprise that this politically-instigated Slavic narrative in communist Bulgaria was exclusively Russian-centered, while notions of cultural relatedness with other

Slavic communities in Europe were left in the background if at all mentioned.

Nevertheless, after the fall of communism in Bulgaria, the “Slavic unity” framework was abandoned, at least on an official level. Within the field of international relations, the Kremlin also largely revised its “fraternal” rhetoric concerning Sofia in the context of the growing geopolitical divisions between the Russian Federation and Bulgaria. Against this background, it was paradoxical that the pro-Russian segment of Bulgarian nationalists, no matter its vociferous nationalist claims, was passive concerning the latest cases of historical disputes between the two countries. For instance, the main pro-Russian parties in Bulgaria remained silent after a controversial exhibition organized by the Russian cultural and information center in Sofia in May 2020 presented Saints Cyril and Methodius as “Russian teachers” (Seroka 2021: 26–27).

### *The image of “Gayropa” and the “civilizational decline” of the West*

A much more recent but no less vocal pro-Russian narrative propagates the alleged gradual moral decline of the “Western civilization” (which usually designates the member states of the EU and NATO). Within this paradigm, the Kremlin propaganda is trying to forge an image of present-day “Western culture” as dominated by neo-liberalism and globalization with their inevitably “erosive” implications for national cultures and identities. This is usually juxtaposed with the moral superiority of Russia, which is presented as the “guardian” of what is designated as Orthodox-led “traditional family values.” Advocates of this narrative unequivocally relate the principles of liberal democracy to “gender ideology,” although the latter term has no sociological relevance but is rather of propagandistic nature. Therefore, Russian propaganda depicts Western liberalism in a simplistic light; it was stripped of its popular connotations in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when liberal political platforms contained the idea of national self-determination against the background of an imperial supranational context (with Central Europe being a “classic” example of this political thought in the period). Accordingly, present-day Europe is “de-historicized” and deprived of its spiritual, cultural and national heritage. Hence, today’s “European idea” is constrained only to being an arena of “American colonialism.” By doing this, Russian propaganda exploits the inner-European debates on politics and identity, on the contents of the “European idea,” and intervenes directly in European political matters.

While the aforementioned notions about the “Russian liberators” and the “cultural closeness” found a relatively wide scope in Bulgarian society due to their historical depth, the idea of Western decadence was constructed entirely within the context of the current geopolitical agenda of the Kremlin. However, for reasons already outlined, the case of Bulgaria provides fertile ground



for the dissemination of such anti-Western propaganda. Many Bulgarians became quite responsive to such narratives because they associated their social grievances with the alleged “lack of state” and the “corrupted pro-Western elites.” For years, local pro-Kremlin voices have portrayed Western influence as unequivocally “erosive,” not only for Bulgaria’s economy and politics but also for its culture and values. Hereof, this propagandistic schema designated the main advocates of the country’s pro-European orientation as “liberals,” “genders,” “Sorosoids,” etc., which eventually gained considerable popularity in local political jargon. Moreover, this anti-Western narrative gradually became an integral part of most of the nationalist platforms in present-day Bulgaria, no matter their stance towards Russia-related issues.

### ***The appeals for “new conservatism” and “national sovereignty”***

The coherent Russian demonization of the West and its “liberal values” is immanently related to the promotion of a political and social alternative based on allegedly “conservative” notions of culture. In this line of thought, Kremlin’s propaganda aims at depicting contemporary Russia as the main political voice of all critics of Western liberalism, no matter where they position themselves on the political spectrum. Of particular significance in this regard are the close links that Moscow established with what gained popularity as the “new European conservatism.” As a result, in many European states, including Bulgaria, most conservative political actors are often accused of being “agents” of the Kremlin. Furthermore, this process largely reduces the possibilities for the development of a pro-European conservative thought that is immune from Russian influence; concerning the specific Bulgarian context, such attempts proved to be marginal. This gives enough reason to treat the Kremlin’s “annexation” of Europe’s “new conservatism” as a major victory of Vladimir Putin.

Moreover, this ideological and geopolitical emphasis on conservatism, largely as a denial of the West *per se*, often contains an appeal for preserving “national sovereignty.” This implies the refusal of a country to fully integrate its economy, politics and security in supranational alliances such as the EU and NATO. Hence, along this propagandistic line, the full participation in such international organizations is presented as a “relinquishment of sovereignty,” allegedly dictated by “globalist elites.” In Bulgaria in the last two decades, sovereignist claims have a nearly uninterrupted history of political representation. After Attack’s long-term presence in parliament, two new formations that embraced this rhetoric recently entered the National Assembly – the aforementioned Revival (in parliament since 2021) and the so-called Bulgarian Rise (*Balgarski vazhod*), led by former caretaker government Prime Minister Stefan Yanev (in parliament 2022–2023). In the context of today’s

growing geopolitical confrontation in Bulgarian society, calls for national sovereignty resonate primarily among Eurosceptic and pro-Russian voters.

### ***The “Bulgarian national interest”***

A brief look at the political and public landscape over the last decade shows a particular flirtation between pro-Russian agents in Bulgaria and the concept of the country’s “national interest.” Although the trend can be traced back to the early years of Bulgaria’s post-communist transition, linking the “national interest” with Russia’s geopolitical trajectory received growing public attention against the background of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In this regard, pro-Kremlin voices seek to instrumentalize the patriotic sentiments of many Bulgarians, presenting Bulgaria’s inclusion in the EU-led package of sanctions against the Russian Federation as harmful to its “national interests.” Hence, the assumption that Bulgaria’s “national interests” are incompatible with the concept of a “united Europe.” An indicative – although quite a marginal one – example for the expression of this narrative is the relatively new “patriotic” formation Russophiles for the Revival of the Fatherland, led by Nikolay Malinov, a former publisher of BSP’s newspaper, who was accused by Bulgaria’s Prosecutor’s Office of “espionage” in favor of Russia. In addition to the plethora of “classic” pro-Kremlin propaganda clichés, this party’s program includes the clear warning that “any attempts to involve Bulgaria in any forms of hostility toward Russia are detrimental to our national interests” (Bedrov and Dimitrova 2022).

More recently, in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, pro-Russian actors set an inextricable link between the “Bulgarian national interest” and the imperative to preserve the country’s “neutrality” (i.e., refusal to provide any type of aid to Ukraine). It is obvious that the calls for “neutrality” provide an opportunity for the social and political legitimization of those who support Russian aggression. For instance, the former major pro-Russian player in Bulgarian politics, Attack, recently joined Malinov’s party as well as two “communist parties” in a coalition called Neutral Bulgaria.

### **Pro et contra: Russia as a dividing line in Bulgarian society**

These remarks unequivocally show that various narratives, which are more or less Russia-oriented, found a strong resonance within contemporary Bulgarian society and nationalism in particular. The analysis so far leads us to several questions that are of primary importance concerning the public landscape in Bulgaria. Is it possible that the image of Russia – with its

multifaceted meanings – can be recognized as a leading, even the main dividing line for the majority of Bulgarians today? Hence, is it possible that the Russian influence in the country contains such a strong divisive potential that can eventually lead to the segregation of segments of local society? In this regard, when commenting on local perceptions of Russia, can we outline the features of “parallel” societies in Bulgarian public space? More specifically, can we assume that the already outlined adaptation and proliferation of unambiguously pro-Russian narratives in the rhetoric of the country’s major nationalist actors show the growing distancing of Bulgarian nationalism from its “classic” tenets? Or rather, it shows that within the Bulgarian nationalist discourse, there are different, sometimes opposing views. While examining the specific image of Russia as a *topos* in local public discourse, the last section of this paper will seek to critically address these questions.

### ***Russia and the production of “parallel” societies***

The “pro” and “anti” Russia stances constitute a long-standing opposition in Bulgarian politics and society, dating back to the early days of modern Bulgaria. We already outlined the popular and widely distributed image of Russia as “the liberator” among significant parts of local society in the decades following 1878. However, even in this early period, some prominent politicians and public figures posed the question of whether Russian influence in the newly-created state should be regarded as solely positive and selfless or, rather, it actually reflected the geopolitical ambitions of Saint Petersburg. Eventually, this dilemma and the ensuing debate resulted in the well-known differentiation of “Russophiles” and “Russophobes” within the Bulgarian elite and intelligentsia, a division that continued throughout the entire history of Bulgaria until 1944. This opposition – or at least its publicly visible expressions – was almost entirely eradicated by force during the communist period and the transformation of the Bulgarian state into a loyal Soviet satellite. Subsequently, these divisions “reemerged” after the democratic changes in 1989 and the political re-pluralization of Bulgarian society. During this period, the “pro” or “anti” Russia conversation largely echoed the contours of the political rivalry between the pro-democratic Union of Democratic Forces and the pro-socialist BSP. In these conditions, the attitudes towards Russia were influenced not only by specific political and public interests but were implicitly related to the differing memories of communism. This explains one of the specific (and in some cases paradoxical) features of contemporary Bulgarian Russophilia – its strong connection with nostalgia for the communist past.

While the discussions on Russia and its influences continued with varying intensity in the following years – they were not interrupted even with

Bulgaria's accession into NATO (2004) and the EU (2007) – the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the following large-scale geopolitical repercussions significantly exacerbated these divisions in society. In addition to highlighting old and creating new oppositions, the Ukrainian crisis and its different outcomes eventually occupied a significant part of Bulgarian political life. Furthermore, this was the period when various local political and social actors officially embraced the geopolitical agenda of the Russian Federation. For instance, in the context of the controversial Crimean status “referendum” in March 2014, MPs, journalists and public figures associated with the pro-Russian “Attack” and the BSP publicly supported the official position of the Kremlin, with some of them even attending the “referendum” (Cholakov 2021: 57). More recently, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 intensified these divisions to the limit, transforming them into the main dichotomy in present-day Bulgarian society (Bedrov 2023). The aggression of the Kremlin also unleashed an unprecedented process of revision of Bulgaria's relations with Russia, including on various historical issues (Nikolov 2022).

These processes clearly reflect the growing irreconciliation and impossibility of compromise between supporters and critics of Russia, its policies and its influences in Bulgaria. What is more relevant for this discussion, against the background of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, these divisions in Bulgarian society went beyond the strictly political sphere. Depending on their positioning on the “pro” or “anti” Russia scale, Bulgarian citizens began to express increasingly different notions on what constitutes “truth,” “human values,” etc. (for a local pro-Russian propaganda interpretation of these notions, see Kodzhabasheva 2022). Even more striking in this regard, those that are vulnerable to the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation campaign deny any accusation against Russia, regardless of current technologies offering the opportunity to watch the events of the war in real-time via social networks and other applications. The denial or justification of events such as the Bucha massacre or the exhumation of mass graves in Izium unequivocally shows that pro-Russian Bulgarian citizens are gradually segregating themselves from the rest of society, delineating their own “regimes of truth”, to use Michel Foucault's influential term (see Fileva 2022).

In this line of thought, to acknowledge the unequivocally divisive impact that Russia has on Bulgarian politics and society is to tell just half the story. It is obvious that the intensified confrontations on the aforementioned subjects result in a growing lack of public consensus on some fundamental issues. If we go one step further, can we recognize in these processes the symptoms of the gradual deconsolidation of Bulgarian society? According to

most definitions in sociology (e.g., see Copp 1992), a group of people forms a “society” only if its members share some fundamental commonalities and are in constant or at least partial interaction with each other. Moreover, of particular importance for the maintenance of social cohesion is the existence of loyalty to a common political structure, usually its own state. If we take these criteria into account, it becomes clear that these Bulgarian citizens who embraced some of the already outlined pro-Russian narratives deliberately distanced themselves from the rest of society. This is supported by their growing lack of loyalty to the country’s political structure (which is allegedly dominated and dictated by American “puppeteers”). These suggestions give us reason to assume that these Bulgarian citizens actually constitute a “parallel society,” producing its notions on the past, present and future of Bulgaria, which are more or less oriented towards Russia.

However, it is not argued here that irreversible processes of disintegration have taken place in Bulgarian society. The tensions and confrontations over Russian influence in Bulgaria are still largely in the realm of political rhetoric. Rather, what is meant here is that these divisions indicate the emergence of some “hot spots,” which eventually may result in more serious friction in society if certain conditions are met.

### ***The communist past and its conflicting memories***

It is well-established that among the fundamental criteria for the emergence of a new (sub)community is the articulation of a distinct group memory. Thus, a particular illustration of the aforementioned divisions in Bulgarian society is the presence of different, often opposing attitudes towards the common past, i.e., different notions of *what* should be remembered and *how*. Accordingly, this results in the simultaneous production of memories and counter-memories, each possessing its own specific “realms,” where particular meaning for the respective group is generated. In the particularity of the Bulgarian context, this symbolic contestation between distinct memories is strongly expressed in the differing attitudes towards the communist past and, accordingly, the place of the Soviet Union in Bulgarian history. Thereby, the glorification of the former regime is usually followed by counter-narratives that focus on the repressions and the victims of communism.



Picture 2. The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia (built in 1954).  
 (© Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mbell1975/9224114133>)

It is probably not an exaggeration if the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia (see Picture 2) is considered the most indicative example of the “collision” of different political memories in Bulgaria. Located in the center of the country’s capital, the monument is unequivocally perceived as a symbol of “oppression” by a considerable part of Bulgarian society. According to this rhetorical line, it is regarded as the most prominent visual expression of the notion that the Soviet Red Army actually occupied Bulgaria at the end of World War II and imposed a totalitarian regime that effectively deprived the country of its political independence for the next 45 years. Conversely, for pro-socialist and/or pro-Russian Bulgarian citizens, the Monument evokes a completely different story – it commemorates the “liberation from fascism” and symbolizes the deep historical ties between the Bulgarian and Russian peoples. For this (sub)group the Monument represents an essential *topos* of its political memory – it is an arena of the annual celebrations of 9 May (Victory Day) and a meeting point for Sofia’s Immortal Regiment, the latter being a local imitation of an eponymous Russian event initiated as a grassroots attempt at preserving civil memory of World War II (Koleva 2022). Therefore, over the past decade or so, the Monument gained prominence as a place where these opposing memories and narratives clashed by various means and expressions – protests, political

art, graffiti, etc. Particularly intensive was the “narrative war” fought within the space of the Monument in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, these heterogeneous political meanings provoked Kamen Rikev to conclude that the Monument (as well as other similar objects in the country) does not function as a realm of memory (in the classic sense offered by Nora) due to its divisive nature (Rikev 2022: 68). While acknowledging the relevance of Rikev’s arguments, we can add some further remarks. It is obvious that this and other Soviet-era communist monuments cannot produce features of national identity as proposed in Nora’s original definition of the concept of *lieux de mémoire*. Nevertheless, these monuments can generate – and here, Sofia’s Monument is particularly indicative – other types of memory that are crucial for maintaining communal identity. Hence, the possibility to designate the Monument to the Soviet Army as a realm of multiple and/or conflicting memories – “communist” versus “anti-communist,” “pro-Russian” versus “anti-Russian,” “heroic” versus “traumatic,” etc.

### ***Russia and the debate on Bulgarian nationalism***

How to explain the apparent obsession of some major Bulgarian nationalist actors with various pro-Russian narratives? Does Russophilia constitute an immanent part of the “traditions” of modern Bulgarian nationalism since its emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Or the flirtation of Bulgarian nationalists with messages that are more or less Russia-oriented, is mostly a product of the contemporary geopolitical context and the propaganda line of the Kremlin? A partial answer to this lies within the broader conversation on the scope and contents of Bulgarian nationalism itself. Without renouncing the notion of “Liberation,” which significantly affected the perceptions of many Bulgarians on their national identity, a closer look at the historical development of Bulgarian nationalism shows that it lacked a “primordial” attachment to the ideas of Bulgarian-Russian closeness. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, local nationalist thinkers and politicians focused above all on romantic notions such as the “glorious” Bulgarian history, its medieval heritage and cultural achievements, and – especially after the Congress of Berlin and the defeat in World War I – the “lost” territories of Macedonia and Thrace. During this period, relations with Russia were mostly situational; while acknowledging Russia’s positive role in the “Liberation War” and as a place of refuge for Bulgarian intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on many occasions, Bulgarian patriots were “disappointed” by Russia’s “passiveness” during Bulgaria’s struggles for national unification. There were even instances of open animosity, e.g., during World War I, when the armies of both countries had to fight each other. This was changed dramatically during the communist period

and the aforementioned forcible imposition of the doctrine of “Bulgarian-Soviet friendship.” As a result, the notions of Bulgarian patriotism have been completely reconstituted, infiltrated with various ideological and geopolitical clichés and deprived of their original contents.

It is this legacy that largely shaped the profile of the newly-emerged nationalist voices after 1989. Their agenda was divided between fierce rhetoric against the “internal other,” mostly Bulgarian Turks (an echo from the communists’ “Revival Process”), the danger from the West and its “denationalizing” influence, and a focus on the social injustices of the transitional period. This picture clearly shows a considerable distance between most of these new platforms and the ideas of pre-communist Bulgarian nationalism. However, as a major outcome of this development, in this period, nationalism became subject to stigmatization within wider Bulgarian society. The association of nationalism primarily with ethnic hatred and/or an attempt to restore totalitarianism resulted in its ultimate unattractiveness to pro-democratic segments of society, hence its divisive nature. Furthermore, after 1989, there was no public debate on nationalism and patriotism in Bulgarian society. The absence of such wider discussion allows various actors, usually of a populist nature, to privatize nationalist narratives for their own political benefits and attempt to present their definitions of nationalism as universal and imperative.

It is against this background that many representatives of Bulgarian nationalism after 1989 became particularly vulnerable to Russian influence. The Kremlin, especially in recent years, has begun to exploit various problems of democratic societies, thus creating a narrative resource for a plethora of populist (including nationalist) actors. Here lies the explanation why many critics of Western democracy usually find an “intellectual refuge” in Russian propaganda. Of course, the financial incentives offered by the Kremlin should not be underestimated either. However, the nationalist criticism of liberalism and democracy should not be considered exclusively pro-Russian, although this forms the majority of cases. As a major exception, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some harsh anti-EU and anti-liberal nationalist voices in Bulgaria actually supported Ukraine, with the far-right Bulgarian National Union – New Democracy being most notorious in this regard.

Nevertheless, the pro-Russian reading of Bulgarian nationalism has one fundamental feature – it seeks a monopoly on the whole patriotic discourse in the country. In this framework, Bulgarian-Russian cultural relatedness is presented as an essential feature of Bulgaria’s past and present. Hence, the argument that it is “natural” for Bulgarian nationalism to maintain a romanticized image of Russia and its positive role in Bulgaria. What is more, Kremlin propaganda, via its proxies, promotes the thesis that the “decadent” influence of the West is essentially “denationalizing” Bulgaria, its culture and



history. These propagandistic claims aim at the deliberate instrumentalization of Bulgarian nationalism and its eventual “incorporation” into the agenda of the Kremlin. However, observations of present-day Bulgarian politics and society show that Moscow’s intentions were largely successful. As a result, what can be designated as mainstream Bulgarian nationalism largely abandoned its rhetoric from the 1990s and early 2000s, rather adopting an increasingly anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-LGBT, and ultimately pro-Russian orientation.

### **Concluding remarks: Evaluating risks for Bulgaria’s pro-Western orientation**

Although some Russian-oriented narratives were implicitly related to the Bulgarian national narrative since its institutional codification after 1878, Russophilia should not be regarded as an immanent nor a fundamental feature of Bulgarian nationalism. In different periods and political contexts, advocates of Bulgarian nationalism focused on various issues, on many occasions opposing Russian geopolitical interests. Furthermore, following some recent theoretical assumptions on the nature of nations and nationalism, it becomes clear that there are usually multiple narratives that compete for hegemony within the Bulgarian nationalist discourse. However, after several decades of imposition of state-sponsored ideological clichés, Russophilia (which is often locally experienced as socialist nostalgia) was established as a lasting legacy in the identity of generations of Bulgarians. Hereof, the long-term exploitation of the “liberation” narrative and the imperative of “eternal gratitude” provides a seemingly inexhaustible source of Russian influence in Bulgaria. This explains why, until recently, Bulgarian society seemed unable to reassess the Russian geopolitical intervention – in some cases being explicitly violent (as after 1944) – in the realms of its national identity and historical memory. Neither were Bulgarians ready to reduce their “gratitude” and, thus, reexamine their attitudes towards the Russian/Soviet role in Bulgaria’s past in a more critical and objective manner. It is against this background that recent decades witnessed the gradual proliferation of various Kremlin-backed narratives that aimed at privatizing the contents and orientation of Bulgarian nationalism, thus strengthening anti-Western sentiments among grassroots Bulgarians.

The imposition of pro-Russian clichés effectively deprives Bulgarian nationalism of its “civic option,” which is based on political consensus and respect for all citizens of the nation. Thereby, moderate nationalism largely loses its “inclusive” potential, i.e., its social-cohesive functions. In Bulgarian public discourse, nationalism increasingly bears the image of an undemocratic, anti-Western and Kremlin-oriented ideology. In this regard, the continuous

public accusations that every patriotic voice is related to the Russian hybrid intervention will eventually lead to further marginalization of Bulgarian nationalist narratives and their ultimate “annexation” by the Kremlin. To counter these trends, a broad public debate is needed that should outline the contours of an inclusive, civic and pro-European Bulgarian nationalism. Imposing such a widely shared definition will isolate local patriots from Russia’s geopolitical ambitions.

If we take a broader look, beyond the specifics of the conversation on nationalism, it becomes clear that the Bulgarian social landscape still offers a fertile ground for multifaceted Russian influence. This situation poses an open risk for the country’s pro-European orientation. In this regard, various comments and policy papers pointed at Bulgaria as a particular case where Russian influence did not diminish even since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Havrylyuk and Tsvetanov 2023). However, an in-depth look at the processes in Bulgarian society shows that such a claim is largely exaggerated. The new phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War actually witnessed a considerable decline in Russian political, economic and social influence in Bulgaria (e.g., see Samorukov 2022). The period after February 2022 saw a peak in the attitudes in favor of reexamining Bulgarian-Russian relations, especially in the energy sector. Some more radical voices also emerged, calling for a total “de-Russification” of Bulgarian politics and historical past. It also appears that Russian influence in Bulgaria will continue to decline if the current geopolitical animosity continues.

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