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BULGARIANNESS ACCORDING TO SONGS DEDICATED TO THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM³

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Abstract: *The paper examines the self-presentation of national characteristics and symbolism according to songs dedicated to the Bulgarian men's national football team. To date, four songs created in the period 1986–1998 gained popularity in the country. The analyzed texts are undoubtedly transferring rhetorical strategies of songwriters and producers, and due to the participation in the World Cup tournaments in Mexico (1986), USA (1994) and France (1998) they reflect the feelings of unity, satisfaction and hopes of the public, perceived as a collective, people or nation. The Bulgarian football team is revealed either as an emanation of the community, its spirit and qualities (on the basis of sameness between the nation and its sports team), or as the consolation of the nation (on the basis of the opposition 'poor people – exceptional team'). The most significant model of Bulgarian communal valuing turns out to be the maintenance of the National Revival symbolic system with an emphasis on sacrifice and the figure of the hajduk. The research clearly shows that by the end of the 20th century Bulgarians continue to present themselves as yunaks (folk heroes), while the nation is thought of in the categories of common people.*

Keywords: *football song, Bulgarian national team, bulgarianness, national self-presentation, World Cup songs.*

Football Songs as a Research Source

The aim of this article is to extract and elaborate on information about the Bulgarian people, ethnic auto-stereotypes, symbols and identity, revealed in songs dedicated to the Bulgarian men's national football team. The global significance of football, its potential as an entertainment industry and a social unifier is beyond doubt. Along with that, football can be regarded as a cultural phenomenon. In contemporary Bulgarian history the 1994 World Cup in the USA was frequently characterized by the media as *the American epic* (*американската епопея*)⁴, as well as *(our) American summer*, while the players themselves were popularly labelled *the heroes from the USA* (*зепове от САЩ*) and *the fourth in the world* with the latter definition charged with strictly positive connotations (vide Nikolov, E., 2004). Such facts allow the assumption that song lyrics dedicated to the national football team may contain important features of the national character and autostereotypes. This assumption can be tested, especially considering the fact that songs may reflect messages about:

- the national football team itself without its identification with the people and national spirit;
- the national team as a reflection of national aspirations or a bearer of national characterology;
- the national community represented by the supporters as exponents of the collective expectations towards the sports team.

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⁴ Such sports-related statements, however, are grounded in Roland Barthes's essay from 1957 *The Tour de France as Epic* (Barthes, R., 1970). The text of the French structuralist legitimizes the interpretation of major sporting events as potential national unifying phenomena, replacing classical art in the creation of epic plots in modern mythology.

Fourthly, regardless of the fulfillment of the above conditions, the songs may contain persistent cultural models for self-presentation of Bulgarians, testifying to how national representatives (regardless of the specific football topic) prefer to think of themselves as a community.

Bulgarian Songs Dedicated to the National Football Team

Popular chants, such as *Bulgarians Yunaks*⁵ (*Българи юнаци*), should be excluded from this research, insofar as they do not qualify as artifacts with complex messages. Also omitted are songs that refer to separate clubs and are directed against representatives of other Bulgarian teams, as well as songs about individual players (e.g. Georgi Asparuhov, Nikola Kotkov, Hristo Stoichkov) or referring to the failures of the Bulgarian Football Union (e.g. the 1998 song *Bateto and Zuma* / *Батето и Зума* by chalga performers Bratya Kulinovi).

Within the framework of the conducted research, I am able to single out only four songs with the national football team of Bulgaria as their primary subject. All four are author's compositions dedicated to the participation of the country's team in world championships. All of them were created a few months before the corresponding tournament they address and therefore reflect the optimism for a valiant team performance. I strongly emphasize that aesthetic values, genre specifics of the works (e.g. socialist *123aesare*, chalga, pop music) and the personal motivation of the composers and lyricists are not taken into consideration for the study, as the leading theme in the following works is undoubtedly the national football team:

– Blagovest and Svetoslav Argirovi. *Mexico '86* (*Мексико '86*). Music by Nayden Andreev; lyrics by Damyan Damyanov. BALKANTON AD: 1986;

– Zheni Nikolova and Salko Pisin. *Penev's Cheta*⁶ (*Пеневата чета*, 1994) [no officially released single or album];

– Kamen Vodenicharov, Slavi Trifonov, Toncho Tokmakchiev. *France, Hello!* (*Франция, здравей!*). Music by Toshko Todorov, Georgi Milchev-Goji; lyrics by Ivaylo Valchev. Album: Ku-Ku Band, *France, Hello!*. BMK: 1998;

– Kali and the Ku-Ku Band. *4-4-2: System for Ever*. Music by Toshko Todorov, Georgi Milchev-Goji; lyrics by Ivaylo Valchev, Ivan Angelov. Album: Ku-Ku Band, *France, Hello!*. BMK: 1998.

These four songs, therefore, originated within 12 years and are dedicated to three World Cup appearances: in Mexico (1986), in the USA (1994) and in France (1998 – two songs from Ku-Ku Band's football-themed album *France, Hello!*). From here an important conclusion considering the song creation on the topic can be drawn: even with the extraordinary success of 1994, no songs appeared in the country evaluating the performance of the team *after* the tournament and, accordingly, glorifying / criticizing the sportsmen. On the contrary: all four songs reflect an emotional upswing and wishes for high achievements. If subsequently the *American summer of 1994* is looked at as a *modern epic* (regardless of whether pompously, or seriously), then this epic was written *before* the event and accordingly *imagined* it. The consequences and the public reactions after the tournament, it seems, do not appear to be suitable for artistic recreation.

In connection with the above, a second conclusion is also valid: the popularity of a song is not directly dependent on the actual decent or disappointing performance of the national team. The 1998 album *France, Hello!* Was a commercial success, and the title track and *4-4-2: System for ever* not only continue to be popular, but also quoted to-date with their catchphrases, such as *our system 4-4-2* (*нашата система 4-4-2*) and *We will tear you apart!* (*Ще ви скъсаме!*).

⁵ *yunak* (or *junak*; *юнак*) is the traditional name for Bulgarian folk heroes with connotations for young, strong, nearly invincible defenders of local communities.

⁶ *cheta* (*чета*) is the traditional name for armed bands in the Balkans, most often fighting Ottoman power.

What in particular, however, is claimed about the national team, the national community and the relationship between them in the studied four songs?

Mexico '86 (1986)

The song by the Argirovi Brothers represents a breakthrough in Bulgarian popular music from the socialist period with the very fact that it imposes the football topic as permissible by censorship, including a chorus in which the name of a distant and non-socialist country stands out. The time of composition of the work is also important in view of stylistics, which must accommodate both an inevitable dose of football passion along with clichéd perceptions of the homeland sustaining ideologically acceptable messages.⁷

From its very first verses, the song leaves no doubt as to the identification of the sports team with the nation: *the whole world is watching us today. / It looks at our flag, it looks at our honor*. Such statements, even though metaphorically, imply that it is not a mere football team, but the whole nation that is to perform at the Mexico tournament. One should not look for stronger arguments in favor of the assumption that the song reflects imaginative features of the national character and values.

While patriotism is unquestionably the leading collective quality, it should be noted that the text also develops the motif of *us facing the big boys: everyone is at the game, everyone sings in chorus, everyone sends their team to Mexico*, and this time the Bulgarians will also participate (their first major football forum in 12 years). The main dimension of patriotism, however, clearly possesses defensive implications as the world is actually keeping an eye on *our flag and our honor*. What is significant here is not the defensive attitude itself, but the placement of the theme in the classical pattern of Ivan Vazov's ode *The Volunteers at Shipka*. The poem's motif *The whole of Bulgaria watches, supports us, / The peak is a high one: if we run away, / She'll see us*⁸ here is extended to planetary proportions. At the world championships, you cannot hide, so the defense of *flag and honor* is transformed from an inner national issue into a literally global problem.

Along with the commented aspects, Argirovi's song still pays tribute to the typical socialist rhetoric. Patriotism, for example, is fixed precisely in the anthem *Dear Motherland* (whispered by *hearts and lips*), while the clichéd peaceful metaphor that *the world is like a ball – not a ball, but a globe*, culminates in the incompletely clarified statement that the athletes *are flying after it – after their love*, without clarifying what, indeed, is the object of the players' love: is it the ball, or the homeland, or rather the globe (as disguised rhetoric of aggression)?

Regardless of the question concerning their actual love, the sportsmen are characterized by the epithets *wonderful* and *winged (boys)*. They *are flying* (repeated twice) as their bodies and souls whisper the republic's anthem. It is also emphasized that the song is apparently spoken by a man of the people, unreservedly supporting the athletes with whom he identifies as part of the national community. The team is clearly thought of as representative not simply of the sporting glory of the fatherland, but of national honor and pride.

Penev's Cheta (1994)

The song of the Nikolova – Pisin duet grew in popularity before, during and after the World Cup in the USA. It is safe to claim that to-date it remains the most popular musical piece dedicated to the Bulgarian team due to the lack of competition in the genre and, of course, due to the unexpectedly high achievement of the team. The irony here is that as far as I could establish, the song never had an official release. It was recorded in the National Television *in an*

⁷ It should be remembered that in this historical period (the 1980s) the most imposing sports-related (and de facto political) slogan, also displayed above the stands of the Vasil Levski National Stadium, was *Sports for a Peaceful World* (*Спортът за един мирен свят*).

⁸ According to the translation of Peter Tempest:
<https://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=283&WorkID=10654&Level=2> (accessed 20.10.2022).

hour, long before the World Cup began⁹ and was distributed unofficially only on cassette. The singers never received any royalties from the television. The song was broadcast on TV without a contract with Pisin, who was only called by phone to state what title he would choose for it¹⁰. After all, according to Pisin himself, the song became popular because once Hristo Stoichkov played it on the street while promenading in a horse carriage¹¹.

Although the main motif in the song is again patriotism, here the emphasis is not on the defense of honor, but on sacrificiality (*Because of you, Bulgaria, / we gave strength and youth*). In the new conditions of the Transition to democracy, the goal of the athletes corresponds to the economic situation in which the country has found itself: *to bring cheer to our poor people*.

In contrast to *Mexico '86*, here the Bulgarians' success in the qualifiers is pointed out with undisguised pride. The very act of qualifying for the USA tournament brings a sense of satisfied honor: the footballers *did what / other nations dreamed of*. The dream turns out to be entering the finals, apparently regardless of the performance there. The eliminated opponents in the qualifiers are categorized as *a small obstacle*, including an ironic-rhetorical mention of the Rooster (the French team) in the animal opposition couple (Gallic) *Rooster* – (Bulgarian) *Lion*.

Similar to Argirovi's song, the identification of the sports team with the national community is again present, but with an expressive separation of roles. The team sacrifices itself for the people, while the people unreservedly support *their boys*, some of whom are even distinguished by name together with their coach.

The epithet *glorious (boys)* here grows into the metaphors *proud Bulgarian lion* and the especially popular formula *Penev's cheta*. In accordance with the imposed stylistics, *ours will fight valiantly* (literally: in the manner of *yunaks*). Thus, the transition from former glory (they have *already done what others have only dreamed of*) to confidence in a future worthy performance is complete. Between the past and the future of sports success, the present is apparently left for songwriting by the grateful compatriots.

The piece by Nikolova – Pisin is unique with its multiple song speaker. The first stanza contains the voice of the athletes themselves, while the remaining two and the chorus express the sententious evaluation by the community.

A dominant feature of *Penev's Cheta* is the utilization of the National Revival context with an unequivocal hajduk and fighting focus (*proud Bulgarian lion, cheta, yunak-like fight of glorious boys*). To these facts should be added the typical Bulgarian interchangeability between the concepts of *people* (as an ethnic community) and *nation* – an inadmissible phenomenon in other European, even Slavic languages. According to the analyzed text, the national team is actually the people's team. The term *people* here functions distinctly both as a name for the non-elite community (*the poor people*) and as a synonym for *nation*, insofar as other nations only dreamed of the success achieved by the Bulgarians. This interchangeability should be strongly highlighted because it reveals the permissible valence of the terms '*narod*' ('*naroden*') and '*natsia*' ('*natsionalen*'). For example, in the Bulgarian language until 2022, the statement that the national team has made the whole nation / the whole people / all Bulgarians proud is completely acceptable. However, it is categorically impossible for the concept of *national team* to be synonymously replaced by *people's football team* (*народен отбор*).

To summarize, *Penev's Cheta* maintains the spirit of popular gaiety and pride in the years of corruption, organized crime¹² and the directly mentioned *poverty*.

⁹ Blitz, 2015. Information about this song today can only be extracted from a couple of interviews given by Pisin years after his musical success.

¹⁰ Blitz, 2015. Among Bulgarian fans, the song is known both as *Penev's Cheta* and as *Bulgaria in America*.

¹¹ Bulgaria Today, 2014.

¹² The euphoria of the 1994 World Cup could not hide the fact that in the mid-1990s members of the national team appeared in a number of advertisements of criminal organizations, the most notorious example being Lyuboslav Penev and Hristo Stoichkov advertising the insurance company VIS-2 on TV. According to Stoichkov, by 1996–97 *SIK held the Football Union, and VIS-2 wanted to take their place* (Stoichkov, H. & Pamukov, V., 2018: 265).

4-4-2: System for ever (1998)

Four years after *the American summer*, it was not only the fate of the national team and the state economy that went through transition. Musical aesthetics fell under the dominance of pop-folk, which affected the football-themed production, as well. Ku-Ku Band's album *France, Hello!* Featured two songs dedicated to the 1998 World Cup, whose popularity far outweighed the disappointing performance of the players.

Kali's song introduces deliberate naivety and frankly meaningless lines, such as *ours is the transfer fee*, or *our system 4-4-2*. At the same time, the song further develops the Revival hajduk-fighting symbolism with a stylization of a folk song model: *Bulgarian yunaks have gone / to wave tricolor flags*. Here, however, the team will not defend national honor, or sacrifice itself for an ideal. The clearly stated final goal (*to become champions of the world*) can be interpreted as a parody of the folklore motif of unequal struggle against oppression. However, it is even more important to register undisputed braggartism – a testimony of sports self-confidence and uncritical intoxication of the whole community: *under the Eiffel Tower* the Bulgarians will no longer *beat* their rivals (in the future tense) – they are already doing it, although *only three-nil* (perhaps out of mercy to the opponents). Braggartism escalates to extremely I rhyming constructions, containing the popular phrase *Who will blow the soup*¹³ *in this group?* The song's heavy beat is in unison with the coarse language. The heroic, but almost caressing definition *Penev's cheta* is replaced by a statement containing the name of the new head coach: *Zuma has the heavy word*. The national upsurge captured in the 1994 piece here comes down to brutal delight. It is not an exaggeration to say that the song was created for the commercial purpose of exploiting the nation's emotions before the tournament, because the outcome of the competition did not look optimistically. In addition, the idea of consolation to *the poor people (Penev's Cheta)* has been diametrically rethought by 1998.

France, Hello! (1998)

The song from the album of the same name displays the already analyzed motifs of braggartism, however on a worldwide pop hit (The Police's *Every Breath You Take* from 1983). Another novelty is the recitative, that allows the inclusion of incomparably more text than the rest of the examined works.

A unique feature of *France, Hello!* Is its consistent ambiguity due to the sharp irony embedded in almost all the lines along with an ostentatiously soft pronunciation (a sign of provincialism in Bulgaria). Respect must be given to the authors for the lyrics' duality: in case of possible success in the tournament, the song could be interpreted as a light-hearted joke, and in the case of the more likely failure – with the activation of the ironic layer.

The parodic and arrogant nature of the song categorically excludes the Revival context present in the previous three texts. The speaker here is exclusively the national team as a whole and Hristo Stoichkov in particular (the last stanza is constructed as a monologue mentioning his left foot – *levachkata*). In such circumstances, the people-nation has not even raised the flag, because the speaker himself demands this (*raise the flag [...] raise it strongly*) without explaining the reasons behind this act – whether it would signify community pride, or would be performed for the pleasure of the players themselves.

Apart from its braggartism, *France, Hello!* Clearly testifies that the times of collective euphoria are irretrievably past. The same team from 1994 is now under criticism for the lack of quality and dedication, which is why the song develops the *old dogs* metaphor. The recitative is actually a (self) defense of America's heroes turned veterans. The rhetorical tricks of this defense rely on two weapons: the clichéd verbal expressions, a trademark of the recent greats

¹³ The footballing application of this expression includes gross disregard for public opinion and critical evaluations. The phrase originates from a 1996 TV interview by Lyuboslav Penev after his own goal against France on 18 June: *Whoever respects me, respects me; whoever does not – let him blow the soup*. It is indicative that the expression is present in two of the four analyzed songs and is aimed at the rivals.

(Stoichkov's *left foot*, the notorious *soup*), and calls for physical aggression, which – it must be strongly emphasized – evokes parallels with the fictional character of Bulgarian anti-hero Bay Ganyo: *we will crush them; Shhh, hello FIFA, give us the medals, / for you don't know what's going to happen...* The final verse of the recitative (*See what the old dogs can do!*) inevitably points to Aleko Konstantinov's classic story *Bay Ganyo at the Baths*, in which the ignorant and arrogant Ganyo boast his physical abilities in a highly similar manner.

Despite its undeniable verbal aggression, *France, Hello!*'s main message is a reflection of traditional Bulgarian attitudes: *in spite of the world / we are here again*. In that context, the refrain's final line (*We will tear you apart!*) reveals a declaration of typical Balkan overconfidence, which neither the speaker, nor his listeners necessarily believe.

Conclusion: Football Songs on Bulgarianness

The presented analysis leads to the conclusion that when Bulgarian songs reveal sports emotions and expectations in regard to the national football team, even by the end of the 20th century rhetorical strategies remain deeply rooted in the hajduk-yunak symbolism and values of the Revival period. The most enduring symbol of collective dignity and unity turns out to be the flag, named variously. The unity between the team, its head coach and supporters places an unquestionable emphasis on collectivism as a key Bulgarian characteristic. According to the four studied songs, the common Bulgarian continues to experience and present himself as a *yunak*, while the nation is permanently perceived as a *people* (Bulg. *Hapod*). The eventual absence of connotations pointing to the National Revival instantly evokes references to Bay Ganyo, the epitome of the Balkan anti-hero in modern Bulgarian culture.

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