

Bulgaria: Nostalgia on the Rise

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Partner organisation: Sofia Platform, established in 2013, www.sofiaplatform.org

“In transition, we focused on institutions, but neglected the political culture. As Václav Havel once said, economic empowerment is a must, but if we do not look into the general culture of our societies, more money will not make a nurse treat their patients better. The legacies of a regime that lasted more than five decades in some of our countries cannot be overturned from authoritarian into liberal only through free market and regular elections. There is much more to be done and more than 25 years after the end of communism, it is time to do it. Education about the communist past is a cornerstone. Knowledge prevents us from making the same mistakes over and over again.”

Louisa Slavkova, Executive Director

Introduction

More than quarter of a century after the end of the communist rule in Bulgaria, the country has largely overcome the struggle with the direct consequences of the transition towards democracy. There has been undeniable progress on many fronts. Despite all of the legitimate criticism that can be directed towards the justice system, corruption levels, media freedom, and many other areas, overall, Bulgaria has

a functioning market economy and democratic institutions. As a member of the EU and NATO, we are also well integrated with Euro-Atlantic international structures. Against this backdrop, one question looms large: why are young Bulgarians so ignorant of the country's communist past?

Explaining the Knowledge Gap

“ A representative national study in 2014 showed that 94% of Bulgarians aged 16-30 know very little about the recent past and the communist regime and 69% do not associate the period before 1989 with any particular event¹⁸.

A lack of knowledge about the communist past has very tangible consequences. 43% of all respondents in the 2014 study positively rated the development of the country in the period from 1944-1989, as opposed to 33% in 1992. In addition, approval of Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian authoritarian leader during most of the communist era, has jumped from 16% in 1991 to 55% in 2014. When speaking about the communist era, one Bulgarian interviewee said *“There was discipline, respect, people did more sport. Education was solid. This has largely disappeared today”* (interview excerpt). Another person pointed out *“There was social security and tranquillity. There was also less crime”* (interview excerpt). According to another study, conducted by the National Centre for Public Opinion Studies in 2013, a whopping 18% of people under 35 would prefer to live in the period before 1989¹⁹.

These findings suggest that the educational needs of the generation or even generations marked by the period of transition in Bulgaria have not been met adequately.

¹⁸ Sofia Platform, Transition: Myths and Memory after 25 Years, (October 2014), <http://25freebg.com/25-%d0%b3%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b8-%d0%bf%d0%be-%d0%ba%d1%8a%d1%81%d0%bd%d0%be/>

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt Centre in Sofia, To Teach the History of Communism, (2013), http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_10764-1442-11-30.pdf?130927085054

“ A lack of knowledge about the past allows the propagation of myths and nostalgic sentiments that replace factual evidence about the repressive nature of the communist regime.

Instead of learning about the recent history at school, from books or at museums, young people today predominantly rely on the (not necessarily objective) stories of their parents and grandparents.

The different perceptions of this era can be illustrated with the answers we received to the question: Was there trust in society before 1989? One interviewee is convinced there was, stating *“Yes, people trusted each other more and also helped each other more”* (interview excerpt). However, another person argued *“Trust existed only between close friends. You never knew who might be listening”* (interview excerpt). These accounts appear to contradict each other, but in fact, they present reality as perceived through personal experiences. Incorporating them into a larger, fact-based discussion about communism and transition is paramount in teaching young people a nuanced understanding of history and discourse.

As older generations from different backgrounds may have strong pro- or anti-communist sentiments, objectively examining the subject of the recent past could cause controversy in the classroom. Combined with the chronic insufficiency of hours dedicated to history in school, the fact that the period is generally placed at the end of the history curriculum, and the exclusion of the period from university entry exams, teachers are almost forced to cover the subject superficially, if at all.

In this way, idealised narratives about zero unemployment, free healthcare and education and affordable vacations for everyone overshadow the fact that there was a lack of basic freedoms in the period before 1989. Young people are not taught the way the authoritarian regime operated or dealt with dissent, and they know very little about the repressions of the State Security Agency or the scarcity of rudimentary products in shops.

The lack of knowledge about the recent past is not just dangerous due to it compromising society's appreciation of democracy and freedom. The forced homogeneity of the communist societies, where everyone is supposed to be equal (to be read "the same"), also perpetuates a closed-off mindset that is harmful to an open democratic society.

“Before I met any foreigners, I thought that Bulgarians were the best. After I got to know some people from foreign countries, I realised that these are normal folks who are a lot freer than we are. During my trip to Turkey I was amazed at how welcoming, open and warm the Turkish people are”, a former sportsperson and current entrepreneur told us during an interview.

This kind of narrative busts a lot of the stereotypes, created by Bulgarian literature at the time. The 'us versus them' mentality that is applied to 'the other', which stems from this notion of homogeneity, is especially explosive in the context of increased migration rates and the European refugee crisis.

It is, therefore, imperative to address the lack of knowledge about the recent past in a quick and effective manner. Sofia Platform's efforts are directed in precisely this direction.

Tackling the Knowledge Gap

Civic education is an ideal tool to link knowledge of communist era to relevant current issues. Sofia Platform uses numerous civic education approaches to tackle knowledge gaps about the recent past.

First, we bring experts on the topic of communism and transition, including historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists and even artists to the classroom, predominantly to small town schools. This allows students to have access to speakers with varied

perspectives and access to information that would be unavailable to them in the context of the curriculum. These lessons are accompanied by supplementary materials. A book on the communist past, authored by renowned experts and edited by Sofia Platform, addresses knowledge gaps about communism in general and specifically targets the topics that are not sufficiently covered in the curriculum. In addition, we have produced short educational videos that discuss the communist past in an accessible and interesting way and are particularly suitable for classroom use.

Second, we target history teachers with a “train the trainers” approach, in order to equip them with the tools necessary to address the admittedly complicated topic of the communist past. Here, we do not discuss particularities from the history of the communist regime, which the teachers are presumably familiar with. Instead, we focus on innovative and interactive methods that can be applied in the classroom in order to spark the interest of the students and underline the link between the recent past and the present. In addition, as most teachers are living witnesses of this period, these methods are designed to address any personal biases the teacher may have about the topic. Finally, specific challenges related to a lack of time and polarisation in the classroom are also addressed during the training sessions. A book, which briefly outlines the methods that are discussed during the training sessions is also made available for the teachers.

Third, we actively engage the academic community and university students in discussions about the recent past. We have organised a series of lectures in five universities, dedicated to Bulgarian writer, dissident and journalist Georgi Markov, that also touched on the questions of free speech, democracy and liberty. As part of the project “25 Years Free Bulgaria”, we organised international conferences, public discussion forums and roundtables on transition, to engage not only academia but also intellectuals, NGO representatives and policymakers on the topic.



*Inauguration of the monument of Georgi Markov in 2014 by the Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev, Sofia, Bulgaria
Source: BGNES*

Finally, we also organise events for the wider public, tackling the issue of transition from different angles. These include public art exhibitions, movie screenings, and even rock concerts.

We are constantly working on improving our approach in tackling ignorance by gathering feedback from all participants in our projects, including teachers and students.

“ Based on what we have learnt, addressing the recent past by comparing it to the present is a great way of engaging young people in a conversation, as it makes the topic relatable and understandable.

Keeping this in mind, for the next steps of our work, we are planning to work on “myth-busting” by debunking popular myths about communism in a series of short videos, accompanied by a publication. Myths about communism are often the source of nostalgia for a time that never really existed in the way it is described. It is, therefore, important to address these misconceptions and to start a fact-based, rather than an emotion-based conversation about communism, its effect and its consequences. These materials will then be used in classrooms and in town-hall meetings as a starting point for a conversation about the recent past.

We are also actively cooperating with our international partners in order to improve our understanding of transition and civic education in Europe and beyond. Our participation in the Transition Dialogue Network is an ideal tool to exchange knowledge with a number of organisations that specialise in transition. As part of this network, we participated at Networking European Citizenship Education (NECE) Thessaloniki in 2015, where we organised a workshop on “Otherness through the eyes of the generation of transition” and talked in detail about the attitude towards the other and refugees in particular when it comes to post-socialist countries. We also presented our research on the topic (in cooperation with Stiftung Wissen am Werk) at the University of Vienna during the conference “Children of transition. Children of war” in November 2016. In the same month, we were part of the NGO marketplace at NECE Zagreb where we promoted the Transition Dialogue Network and our own civic education activities.

Our partners extend to other regions of transformation beyond Europe. We cooperate with UNDP Iraq in sharing our knowledge and experience in transitioning towards democracy with public officials, members of Parliament and NGO representatives from Iraq and finding common transformation patterns beyond the post-socialist space. In the past, we have also cooperated with partners from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Lessons for Civic Education

Turning once again to the topic of knowledge gaps, one of the best ways to solve the issue on a large scale is to revise the student curriculum in a way that presents facts that are not only more detailed, but also contextualised in a way that makes them both comprehensive and understandable.

In addition, Bulgarian communism should be thought of in a comparative way, with other totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and fascism. There is already an attempt to do this in the Bulgarian history textbooks, but the content inevitably focuses on the USSR. In addition, lessons on the communist regime in Bulgaria are taught in a different school year to the USSR, and are placed at the end of the curriculum. This has made it difficult for teachers to comprehensively cover the topic while giving students an understanding of the wider context of totalitarianism.

The period of 1944 – 1989 should be a part of the university entry exams. In this way, students who are interested in studying history or related disciplines at the university level will be actively encouraged to learn about the recent past. Excluding the period from the exams means that even students who are most interested in the subject matter may lack knowledge about this particular period. In an attempt to ensure the best exam results for their students, teachers are also likely to focus more on the topics that are required for the exams, as opposed to the rest of the study material.

More needs to be done in the classroom and beyond to spark interest and conversation among young people. The societal conversation between the generations about communism should be revived. This means not only engaging students, but also their parents and grandparents. This can be achieved through organising public events like discussions and town-hall meetings but also can be achieved at home by, for example, giving students an assignment to interview their parents.

Finally, content related to the communist era and transition should be created with new types of media, including infographics and other visual content for social networks and video material for YouTube and other video platforms. In this way, factual information can be easily accessed and shared by many young people.

Conclusion

Sofia Platform's experience with civic education activities has so far been focused on Bulgaria and the issues that we have identified as most relevant in the Bulgarian context. However, it is worth noting that our research with partners from Eastern Europe and beyond has revealed that many of the problems and challenges we face in Bulgaria are similar in other countries as well. This means that, subject to further analysis and evaluation, our activities and recommendations could be used to develop a comprehensive approach towards civic education on totalitarianism, communism and transition for the whole post-communist space.

About the author

Iva Kopraveva is Project Coordinator at Sofia Platform. Previously, she was Associate Editor at E-International Relations (2013-2014), Editor-in-chief of the international politics blog of the International Association for Political Science Students "*A Different View*" (2014-2015), and Research Assistant at Sciences Po Grenoble (2014). She has a Bachelor's in International Relations from the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, Bulgaria and a Research Master's degree in European Studies from Maastricht University, the Netherlands.