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The Social Impact of Informal Economies in Eastern Europe

Edited by

RAINER NEEF

MANUELA STĂNCULESCU

ASHGATE

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Chapter 3

Practices and strategies of managing everyday life in a village in socialist Bulgaria

Klaus Roth*

'Of all the State secrets in the keeping of communist régimes, one of the closest guarded was undoubtedly the nature of everyday life, its practical contexts, its ground rules and its long-term effects' (Bertaux/Malysheva 1994, p. 238).

Culture, to use a broad definition of the word, is a set of shared meanings and orientations, beliefs and knowledge, values and norms, behaviors and artefacts which enable man to make sense of, and to act sensibly in, his natural and socio-cultural environment. For the management of everyday life, man uses as a resource a number of behaviours, strategies, and institutions that have – over time – proven to be effective. Changes in the conditions of the environment, be they caused by nature or technology, by the economy or by politics, must eventually result in the adaptation of these behaviours and institutions to the new conditions, because otherwise life cannot be managed adequately. Rapid changes in the environment usually lead to more or less radical socio-cultural changes.

On the other hand, behaviours and everyday knowledge, once they have become part of the socio-cultural system, of language, and of the collective memory, by their very nature often tend to be tenacious and to persist even if they are no longer functional. It is this complex mixture of adaptation and perseverance, of culture change and continuity that is particularly characteristic of everyday culture.

The *sociology of knowledge* considers culture as a system of shared meanings and common-sense knowledge enabling the individual to organize his daily experiences and to manage everyday life. By doing this, it provides a good approach to the study of everyday culture at the micro-level of concrete individual or collective behaviours. The related school of *ethnometho-*

* Prof. Dr., Full professor, Institut für Volkskunde/European Ethnology Munich University, Ludwigstr. 25 D-80539, Munich, e-mail: k.roth@lrz.uni-muenchen.de.

dology, on the other hand, adds the focus on the recurrent 'patterns of stable action', the basic elements of those practices that are used in the same manner in varying everyday situations. These recurrent practices or *methods* are employed by the individuals of a given social group (*ethnos*) in a regular way, they are supra-individual, and they are deeply ingrained as they are mostly learned in the process of socialization. As 'natural' and taken-for-granted resources, they are fundamental to everyday thinking and acting (Patzelt 1987: 10 f). Attention turns to them only if, for some reason, they are no longer available or if their 'naturalness' is put in question.

Alfred Schütz has observed, that the *life-world* of man consists of multiple realities, among whom the reality of everyday life functions as the paramount reality. It 'presents itself as normal and self-evident, ordered and objective, and taken-for-granted as such' (Wuthnow 1984: 32). It is over-arched by the realities of, in Berger's and Luckmann's terms (1966), the 'symbolic universes' of mythology, philosophy, religion or ideology, all of them powerful systems of affirmation providing legitimacy to the social world. *Ideology*, in particular, as a set of ideas, is used to legitimate the vested interests of parts of the society, but at the same time it also interprets and directs the order of society and of everyday reality.

The social life and the everyday culture under the conditions of the *communist ideology* are a good case in point. The socialist state founded on this ideology legitimates itself through its 'historic task' of striving for the Utopian goal of lasting economic and political equality and justice for everyone. In order to achieve this humanitarian ideal, socialist ideology demands the construction of a new classless society, a new 'socialist personality', and a new 'socialist way of life', in other words: the transformation of most of the basic conditions of the existing life-worlds. Indeed, the political and economic changes brought about by the system implemented in the countries under Soviet rule were so fundamental that one can say that there has probably never before existed an ideology that has affected the everyday life of so many people with such a totality and ruthlessness. Only now, years after the end of the socialist system, the consequences of these changes on the everyday culture of the socialist countries are becoming clearer; and they turn out to be far deeper and more lasting than anybody anticipated in the wake of the events of 1989.

So far, a few ethnologists and sociologists have studied aspects of everyday culture under 'real socialism',¹ but its relevance has not yet been generally acknowledged (cf. Bertaux 1994: 197). Péter Niedermüller has pointed out (1996: 144 f.) that socialism has produced a cultural world, a life-world of its own. 'Er hat Regeln einer kulturellen Welt aufgestellt, hat die Bühnen des gesellschaftlichen Lebens geschaffen, hat die Dramaturgie ... und die verschiedenen Verhaltensrepertoires ausgearbeitet.' Niedermüller insists

that for ordinary people there was no other choice but to accept this world and its rules, and that living in any such life-world means its appropriation by the individual, regardless of his political convictions. The fact is that no one can live in a society and permanently ignore its socio-cultural order. This means that the life-world and the social rules of socialism, the entire order of everyday life became an integral part of the lives and life-histories of millions of individuals.

The focus of this paper will not be on this social order and the rules set by the socialist life-world, but rather on the everyday practices and strategies which people employed to manage their lives. The following analysis departs from data gained through research in the village of Raduil,² located some 80 kms south-east of Sofia, where we gathered large quantities of archive materials and made some 90 life-history interviews. The present analysis is thus a case study, but observations in other Bulgarian villages, my personal experiences in Bulgaria since 1964, research data gained in the Thuringian village of Merxleben in the former GDR, as well as the extant research literature³ indicate that the following practices and strategies were common beyond this village and beyond Bulgaria in most socialist countries.

On the other hand, some limitations have to be acknowledged. Some important differentiations had to be left aside, such as differences in the socialist everyday-life depending on gender, age group, social class, Party membership or the position in the hierarchical structures; there is no doubt that the members of the *nomenklatura*, the powerful and the privileged of the system, also had their own practices and strategies of managing their everyday-life. As a consequence, the findings of this study are of a more general nature, and concern mostly the 'ordinary people'.

The focus is on the daily *practices* and *strategies* as they emerge from the sources. I use the term '*strategy*' quite deliberately, as it denotes a set of practices, procedures or courses of action that are taken to achieve a certain goal; but unlike 'practice' or 'habit', it implies a degree of rational planning and strategic thinking. The sources indicate that, mostly in the initial phase of socialist rule, 'strategy' is indeed the adequate term to describe the everyday actions and interactions people chose quite deliberately in order to react to and counter the new practices and strategies of the socialist Party and the state authorities. As is normal for innovation processes, the strategies were more and more internalized over the years and became unquestioned practices that were mostly applied automatically. After a period of familiarization they became habitual and 'normal' behaviors, and, particularly among the younger generations, the only available resource. It is precisely their high degree of internalization and habitualization that makes these everyday behaviours a burdensome legacy of socialism.

The socialist system of rule and economy is fairly well known, at least at the macro-level. The original 'ideal socialism' with all its promises was soon discredited because of the coercive measures of the state, the malfunctioning of the economy, and the harsh realities of everyday life. As early as in the 1950s, 'ideal socialism' had turned into totalitarian 'real socialism' which shaped an everyday culture that was characterized by an ever growing tension between ideal and reality, between plan and accomplishment, between propaganda and the visible life-world. The discrepancy between the two, the permanent deception and double-talk of all official communication produced a kind of 'everyday schizophrenia' (Wnuk-Lipiski 1982) that permeated virtually all spheres of life and forced people to develop a 'socialist habitus'.

But is it, we must ask critically, correct to speak of a 'socialist habitus'? Are the practices and strategies which will be described below 'typically socialist'? None of them is in any way new or specific, each of them is known from other (political) systems, countries or periods. What entitles us to speak, nevertheless, of a 'socialist habitus', is the very specific *cluster* of such reactive behaviours which resulted from the specific nature and the duration of the socialist system. It appears that there were three fundamental conditions that had the strongest impact on everyday life, namely (1) the *totalitarian system* of rule and control, of social care-taking and tutelage, that entailed the permanent encroachment of the Party or the state bureaucracy into the lives of the people, (2) the *deficit economy* resulting from the blatant malfunctioning of the economic system and the ideologically motivated policies such as the collectivization of agriculture, the liquidation of private property, and the forced industrialization, and (3) the simultaneous process of *socialist modernization* (cf. Srubar 1991) which reached the agrarian countries of East and Southeast Europe in its socialist variety. The specific character of socialist everyday life and of the 'socialist habitus' is probably a result of the unique combination and interplay of these exclusively exogenous factors.

Within a period of only a few years around 1950, many behaviours, practices and attitudes that had weathered decades or even centuries became inadequate and were no longer accepted. They had to be given up or adapted to the changed environment if one wanted to avoid unfavorable living conditions, disadvantages at the workplace or at school, expropriation, displacement, or even imprisonment. Other practices, however, proved useful or had even to be revived from the repertoire of traditional behaviors. Altogether, in this process of societal learning one can note three different courses of adaptation of the people to the new political and economic environment, namely:

- a. the adoption of behaviours and strategies that were *new* to the people,
- b. the continuation of *traditional* practices and strategies, and
- c. the adaptation and even enforcement of *traditional* behaviours and attitudes. The latter course appears to have been the most frequent one which, in turn, led to the traditionalization or even 'archaization' of some sectors of the society or economy described by Benovska-Sabkova (1995) and by other scholars.

In the following, I want to differentiate between three aspects and want to ask questions on three levels: (1) What did ordinary people have to *know* to cope with socialist everyday life? What were the origins and the structures of their knowledge? (2) What were their everyday practices, their typical behaviours and strategies to cope with the impact of totalitarianism, permanent deficit economy and modernization? (3) Did people talk about these practices and strategies and what was their *awareness* of everyday life then, and what is it now in their recollections? How did they talk about it, and what functions did talking about it serve?

Repertoires of knowledge

Let us first look at the *stock of common-sense knowledge* ordinary people had to have to cope with socialist everyday life. What sets of knowledge, what intellectual skills, what orientations were required to manage life in the socialist political, social, and economic system? What knowledge became obsolete and what remained useful and was to be kept, and what knowledge was to be talked about openly and to whom? The data show that people in the socialist village had to acquire a great deal of new knowledge, particularly in the Stalinist era and during the process of collectivization in the 1950s. The villagers had both to learn new, and to unlearn old attitudes and patterns of knowledge, but they soon found out that, in order to survive, they really needed *two* sets of knowledge – and on top of that they needed to know when to apply what set of knowledge. In other words: they needed two *registers* (cf. Trümpy 1991: 216 f.) and in addition to that, a meta-knowledge of when and where and how to use what register.

The one register consisted of the legitimate and *official* knowledge and skills desired and instilled by the Party and the state; this officially acquired knowledge was a predominantly *formal* knowledge transported through the channels of official education and communication. The other register included the *unofficial* knowledge and skills, the 'strategies of the second order' (Bourdieu 1987: 198-203); they were acquired unofficially and were an

exclusively *informal* knowledge passed on by means of oral communication through everyday narrating, gossip, rumors and jokes in small circles of families and kin, of trusted neighbors and colleagues.

Each individual normally has at his disposal several registers or stocks of knowledge and behaviour and usually knows when to apply them. The specificity of the 'socialist habitus' lies in the fact that the duplicity (and rivalry) of two such incongruous registers was so all-embracing and ubiquitous that it permeated and structured the entire thinking, feeling, and acting in everyday life. It concerned not only the cognitive, but also the affective sphere and, very importantly, also the value orientations, the everyday morality. A pervasive double morality guided the actions not only of the Party and the state, but more importantly, of all individuals. They all made a clear distinction between the private sector, respectively private property and the public sector, respectively state property or, as Wnuk-Lipiski (1982: 81-85) said with regard to the Polish society, they had 'two different circulation systems of ... values'. Tzvetan Todorov has characterized this attitude in his book *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exotism in French Thought* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993, p. vii): 'I was never a direct victim of the regime, since my reaction ... was not to protest or challenge it, but to take on two distinct personalities: one public and submissive, the other private and independent.' For both sectors there existed different 'laws' and norms of behaviour which were followed alternatively. 'Doing things the second way (*po vtorija nain*)' is a recurrent phrase in the interviews denoting the practices that were common in the public 'socialist sector'.

The traditional knowledge of the villagers was thus complemented or replaced by a lot of new knowledge: on the one hand, the officially propagated 'progressive' 'socialist' knowledge, and on the other hand, the unofficial knowledge that reached them mostly indirectly through clandestine and oral channels. Compared to what they knew and had to know until around 1950, the structure of their knowledge became more complex and the life-world became more complicated than ever before – and it carried many new risks.

Practices and strategies of socialist everyday life

In order to accommodate to the obvious discrepancies of 'real socialism' and to lead a life that offered at least some degree of security and comfort, the villagers developed new practices and strategies in the 1950s which soon became everyday routines. Which one of the registers of value orientations and behaviours was applied depended mostly on the actual situation, on the actors involved, and on the convictions or interests of the individual. The

data show that the behaviours of individuals were by no means consistent: in the case of conflicting interests and loyalties, and in a given situation, a member of the Communist Party could very well resort to unofficial or even illegal practices, and vice versa, an ordinary villager could willingly act in accordance with official norms. At certain occasions, as for example at 'socialist life-cycle festivals', the villagers could – in a syncretistic manner – even act in accordance with two conflicting sets of norms consecutively or at the same time, playing out two different registers (cf. Roth 1990: 117, Petrov 1998).

The analysis of the interviews and of the protocols of the village council and the agricultural cooperative (TKZS) indicates a number of behaviours and strategies that were very common in the village. It is certainly no coincidence that the same or very similar behaviors also emerge in the sources from the East German village. This set of adaptive behaviors seems to have formed the backbone of the 'socialist habitus' and to have become so deeply engrained that it survived the system that produced it. It goes without saying that all these behaviors and strategies are interrelated and are usually combined with each other in real situations. They are discussed separately here, for analytical purposes.

Cooperation

The active and enthusiastic cooperation was always limited to relatively small numbers of people. They were either true idealists or they were, mostly, members of the Communist Party and/or held high positions in the village. It was far more common, however, for villagers to cooperate for opportunistic reasons, particularly among those who wanted to make their careers in or through the system, or to be a fellow-traveler. The large majority of the villagers made their peace with the system, with the powerful, and the Party hierarchy, and (partly) accommodated to the system. In many cases, cooperation was enforced through direct or indirect, soft or hard pressure: people did 'voluntary work' in the construction of the 'House of Culture' (*italište*) or cleaned the village streets as 'voluntary Saturday labor' (*sbotnik*), in order to avoid disadvantages – or to gain privileges. The same holds true for cooperation with the Communist Party, so that in the 1950s the BKP in Raduil had to be 'cleansed' of opportunistic fellow-travelers. Nevertheless, there was a general adaptation to the system. It occurred mostly through 'structural amnesia', i.e., because the socialist life-world became the 'natural' life-world and people were unaware of their adaptation to it. Very few villagers were able to make other experiences, e.g. through travels abroad.

Opposition

Open opposition or resistance against the socialist regime was a rare exception; it was only in the early 1950s that six villagers were arrested and five of them sentenced and sent to the concentration camp of Belene (on the Danube) and other camps for several years (MVR: investigation file 3983/d.115/1952). Covered and indirect opposition was far more typical. The sources show that most frequently it found expression in passive disobedience and obstinacy, in evasion and dodging. At the workplace it was reflected in indifference, laziness, and absenteeism; these behaviors actually developed into the most serious problem for the economy and the entire socialist system.

In February 1984, the protocol (no. 3) of the village council meeting complains that 'the shopkeepers have not fulfilled their plans, namely Marija K. who fell short of her plan by 5800 leva. Although she was put in another place, it showed again that she does not at all want to work. She does not order products regularly. She is absent from work whenever she wants, and from where she gets her sick-leave certificates we don't know. She does not serve her customers in a civilized manner' (Village archive: mayor's office Raduil).

The villagers displayed a lot of cunning and creativity to oppose the measures of the authorities. When, for example, the authorities (on account of the state's atheist policy) forbade the *public* blessing of the lambs before Easter or other days of offering by the local priest, the farmers opposed this regulation by moving the blessing to their *private* courtyards or folds and inviting the priest there.

Circumvention

A very common behavior was, as the sources show, to circumvent or to disregard official laws, orders, and regulations. In most cases, this happened clandestinely and indirectly, but often it was done quite openly. Inflicting damage to the authorities, the Party or the economy was often done quite provocatively and cunningly, as is demonstrated by farmers who cut wood and either bribed the local policeman or paid the fine with a laugh, or who bought up scarce goods and sold them illegally:

In its 1954 annual report, the village council complains that 'in the shop of the village cooperative, 17 tons of artificial fertilizer were bought up and used by the farmers. The basic mistake we made in the distribution of the fertilizer was that we did not anticipate that it would be sold out so fast and that part of the

farmers would get no fertilizer while some other irresponsible farmers sold it outside the village for grapes, etc.’ (SGODA f. 240, f. 1, ae. 31, l. 2). The shop of the local cooperative illegally sold cigarettes to pupils in order to fulfill its sales plan (village archive: protocol of the village council of July 21, 1986).

‘Organizing’

One of the most frequent stratagems was to do one’s work in the cooperative farm (TKZS), in the state forestry (DGS) or in the shops in such a way that part of the yield went into one’s own pocket. The ‘branching off’ of resources at the workplace was common practice (cf. Srubar 1991: 420 f.) and was legitimated with phrases such as ‘We take from the state because the state is us’.

The ‘Report on the State and Observance of Socialist Laws’ in the village of March 21, 1960, mentions penalties for illegal cutting of wood and reports the theft and illegal sale of construction materials, and other instances of breaking socialist laws (SGODA: f. 892, op. 2, ae. 2, l. 139-156).

The illegal or half-legal procuring of deficit goods and services, as well as getting privileges without being entitled to them or paying for them adequately were very common practices. The informants repeatedly insisted that ‘doing things the second way’ was normal and in many cases was the only possible alternative.

Ivan B. insists in the interview that almost everybody in the village went out by night to cut trees in the forest; some neighbors went to prison for that, but this was the only way to get wood for construction purposes. The women working in the agricultural brigade regularly stole potatoes or other produce, taking it home in bags or even under their skirts. Truck drivers stole cement and sold it to the farmers. Already in 1954 the management of the TKZS (protocol of Oct. 8) complained that the members used the cattle for their private plots, and the protocol of the village council of May 25, 1985 still reports that the saw-mill is used illegally on weekends to cut wood for private purposes.

The socialist deficit economy and the common practice of bartering goods and services made it indispensable for every villager to maintain tight networks of social relations and connections (*vrzki*) which could in case of need (and based on the principle ‘do ut des’) always be activated and utilized (cf. Srubar 1991: 421).

In 1962, the village council complains in a report that 'we must not close our eyes to the fact that there are still salespersons who, after receiving deficit goods store away these goods in secret places and distribute them exclusively to their own kin. This is not adequate for a contemporary socialist salesperson' (SGODA f. 892, op. 2, ae. 17). In an interview (April 28, 1996), a village woman reports that her family had no problems procuring furniture, because the person in charge of the warehouse was a class-mate of hers.

Managing scarcity

The shortage economy necessitated a permanent coping with scarcity and thus produced a 'culture of scarcity management' in all socialist countries (cf. Smollett 1989, Benovska 1995, Schier 1997, Lutz 2000, Dzigiel 1998, Srubar 1991). Accordingly, deficit goods (*deficitni stoki*) are a frequent topic in the interviews and protocols, but also in the media and in literature. The economic situation forced people to maintain and even extend a very intensive and all-encompassing barter economy, an economy in kind based on the everyday exchange of goods and services, and it necessitated various forms of subsistence economy, an 'economy of jars' in the private sector (Smollett 1989).

Ivan B., brigadier of the TKZS, and his wife give several instances of payment in kind in their interview: the construction workers who built his house were paid in wheat. Jordan D., the president of the cooperative, remembers that transportation services of the TKZS were paid in wheat or cement, that wood from Raduil was exchanged for potatoes from plains villages, and that the workers of the TKZS and the MTS (Machine-Tractor-Station) often received their wages in kind.

For their everyday management of shortage, people developed a great amount of inventiveness and improvisation. The gift of combination and the ability to improvise and to react flexibly to changing conditions is certainly one of the behaviours which, as Benovska-Sabkova (1997) and Lutz (2000) have demonstrated, help the people in the post-socialist countries to survive.

'Help yourself and help your kin'

In traditional rural Bulgaria, there existed a complex system of mutual aid. The Party tried to instrumentalize this system for its collectivization campaign, but with little success. It was much more important that for the management of socialist everyday life the traditional system was utilized or even expanded by the villagers for the safeguarding of self-help through mutual

assistance. The deficit economy, financial need, and the lack of craftsmen forced them to do many things themselves or with the help of their family, their kin, their neighbors, friends, or colleagues. The high value placed on the little private plots (of c. 1 ha) and the high significance of the subsistence economy on it has often been stated (cf. Höpken 1985: 624-628, Grosser 1988, Roth 1989). But working for one's own needs went beyond agricultural products. The above mentioned Ivan B. recalled that people produced bricks for private houses and TKZS buildings with their own hands, because construction materials were too costly and very hard to get.

The system of mutual aid, self-help and subsistence made everybody – in a reciprocal relationship – dependent on the help of members of his group and, in turn, made them dependent on his cooperation.

A brigadier reported that for the construction of his private house the women of his work brigade came over to help, and neighbors supplied transportation services. Other informants told us that the workers in the saw-mill worked for a colleague so that he could bring in the harvest from his private plot.

These behaviours and close social ties perpetuated the traditionally strong dependence on, and trust in, intimate social groups, and gave further relevance to familism.

'Grease the system'

Even more destructive for the entire system was the ubiquitous corruption, bribery and nepotism ('*vrzkarstvo*'), a system of connections (*vrzki*), which was based on, and further strengthened, informal personal relationships.

Most informants agree, that bribery and corruption were extremely common. Officials, shopkeepers, presidents of cooperatives, everybody in control of scarce or deficit goods had to be greased, usually with alcohol, money, services or other 'presents'.

Adaptation and exploitation

As I have pointed out before, the villagers adapted themselves to the socialist system to a fairly large extent. But the reverse was also true. It was an important practice of them to make the system fit their own needs, to adapt and to change it in a manipulative manner, and to change its functions in accordance with their own goals. They attempted (and often achieved) the tacit 'correction' of the ideals and goals of the Party and the authorities,

mostly through obstinacy, indifference or cleverness. A great amount of energy went into the active utilization (and steady expansion) of margins and leeway, e.g. with the socialist life-cycle rituals.

The rituals of the official 'system of socialist holidays and rituals' were gradually adapted by the villagers to their own ideas and needs in such a way that their ideological content was gradually removed (cf. Roth 1990, Petrov 1998).

Looking for one's own advantage consisted very much in the exploitation of the social security system and the rights and benefits it granted. Sick-leave certificates were issued almost at will, and benefits were often received without legal basis. In this 'adaptation' and appropriation of the resources of the system, the villagers again displayed a high degree of inventiveness.

'Pretend to work'

The common practice of sham cooperation undermined the economic or political system in a similar way. To fake, to pretend activity, to fulfill the official norms only superficially or formally or, in Bourdieu's words (1987: 200), 'to abide by the official rules only seemingly and thereby to satisfy one's own interests' – all these were strategies that were very common and highly effective. They were applied not only by the villagers vis-à-vis the local elites and authorities, but also by the local functionaries vis-à-vis their superiors in the capital. One of the most popular slurs in Bulgaria was 'The state pretends to pay us, we pretend to work'. Through the strict or exaggerated observance of official orders people often proved the system (or the Party) ridiculous or absurd.

Withdrawal

Resignation and putting up with the system was a wide-spread attitude in Raduil, in Bulgaria and in the other socialist countries. The sources indicate that as early as in the 1950s the rate of alcoholism and absenteeism was notoriously high.

The workers were permanently drunk and the brigadier or the superiors of the cooperatives could not do anything about it, Jordan D. reported. The TKZS protocols of April 1954 complain that the workers do not work their minimal working hours, and the protocol of the village council of Sept. 16, 1959 states that cooperative workers till their private plots while the sheaves of the coopera-

tive rot in the fields. The management of the TKZS reacted either with promises or the distribution of bread or flour, or it denied them their regular bread rations, according to an interview.

In most sectors of the society there was to be observed an escapism and withdrawal that took on many different forms. It was:

- a retreat into social and everyday life *niches* with sharp boundaries drawn between the in-group and the out-group⁴; in Raduil, this found its expression, among others, in the distance between the villagers and the local ‘*viladii*’, the owners of summer cottages, most of whom were members of the Party elite from Sofia (cf. Wolf 1997: 187f.);
- a retreat into the *private* sector, i.e. the family and relatives, the private plot of land and the garden, the cottage in the countryside. In Raduil, a very large amount of energy and money was invested into the private house or plot, usually at the expense of the public sector;
- a retreat into *inner spaces* of (spiritual) freedom, like religion, mythology or the belief in extra-sensual phenomena. The pronounced religiosity of the villagers (Petrov 1998) can be viewed as such a withdrawal; or finally
- a retreat into a ‘*golden past*’. Characteristic of Bulgaria was the strong folklorization of traditional folk culture (which was partly supported and instrumentalized by the Party) and the nostalgia for the ‘unforgotten past’ of the 19th century ‘National Revival’ or for the culture of the pre-war urban bourgeoisie.

As a result, most people lived two very different and separate lives, a public and a private one. This tendency was stronger in the cities than in the villages, though, mainly because of the greater intimacy of social relations in the villages. The ‘everyday schizophrenia’ thus became an almost constitutive element of socialist everyday reality.

Narrative practices and strategies

Everyday oral communication played a tremendous role in socialist Bulgaria (cf. Roth 1992). Due to the fact that Bulgaria already had a strong oral tradition and that unofficial knowledge could only be transmitted in direct oral communication, intimate face-to-face communication with trusted persons acquired a relevance and meaning that has no parallel in modern Western societies. As all the mass media, from book printing, newspapers, journals, and film to radio and television, were controlled by the Party and

the state, everyday narrating became virtually the only uncontrolled means of individual and societal communication. Narrating became an essential part of socialist everyday life in two important ways: talking as *part* of everyday life and talking *about* socialist everyday life. Both aspects are, of course, related to each other in real life.

Narration as part of socialist everyday life

Everyday narration was an important practice to cope with the complexities of the socialist life-world and with the hardships of everyday 'real socialism'. However, particularly in the early years of socialist rule, talking too frankly could be dangerous; being overheard by an informer or even by ill-wishing colleague or neighbor could have very negative consequences. Thus, official or public communication was often quite formulaic and well-guarded in order to avoid disagreement, as one never knew when the other person could be helpful in case of need or in providing useful information (cf. Srubar 1991: 422). The benefits of talking outweighed its dangers, as the spoken word was the only means to give expression to the experiences of socialist life. Nights after nights, families and relatives, friends and neighbors, but also colleagues and class-mates would sit together (usually in the kitchen) and comment on political or other events, discuss their daily experiences, and exchange information: on the lack or availability of goods, on access to deficit goods and services, on measures of the Party or the authorities; they would tell rumors, gossips, and jokes, and they would discuss on end what to do to get this permit or to avoid that penalty, whom to bribe to get construction materials or whom to invite to get access to a much desired color TV set.⁵ To a large extent, this was 'strategic communication', often quite emotional, but mostly in the form of rational discussions to work out plans and to determine the course of action to be taken to achieve a certain goal. An important prerequisite for success was a sound knowledge of the inner workings of the socialist system.

Narrating about the socialist everyday life

Narrating *about* the manifold problems of everyday life, about the contradictions and failures of the socialist system, on the other hand, satisfied important emotional and intellectual needs. By telling stories and jokes, daily experiences and impressions, by complaining about politicians and functionaries, people gained a lot of emotional relief and reflected about their life under the socialist system. Everyday narrating was thus a means of daily survival (Banc/Dundes 1986: 13). Today, years after the collapse of the system,

narrating has become a means of coming to terms with that important part of one's own life-history, as Dobрева⁶ has observed in the same village.

Some results

A comprehensive history of everyday life under the socialist system, of 'its ground rules and its long-term effects' (Bertaux 1994: 238) has not yet been written. What I have tentatively tried to do was to outline some of the 'ground rules' at the micro-level, to throw light on the reservoirs of knowledge people had to acquire and to internalize to master their lives in a new system, what practices and strategies they developed and how they talked and reflected about all this. As they could not escape the normative life-world of 'real socialism', the villagers of Raduil – and with them millions of people in the socialist countries – developed a reservoir of behaviours as part of their 'socialist habitus' to counter the overpowering influence of the totalitarian state.

Almost all of these strategies were, to be sure, defensive strategies of the powerless. But as it turned out, these counter-strategies were very effective in eroding the system from the inside and in contributing to its collapse. Today, the problem is that many of them continue to persist after they have accomplished their goal. Some of them have even deteriorated into outright criminality. It is these inconspicuous everyday behaviours and strategies that today can be a resource (cf. Lutz 2000, Benovska-Sbkova 1997), but more likely they constitute a threat to the development of democracy and a civil society in Bulgaria and in other post-socialist countries.

Notes

- 1 cf. Smollett 1989, Roth 1989, 1990, 1992; Srubar 1991, 1998; Bertaux 1994, Benovska 1995, Verdery 1996, Dzigiel 1998.
- 2 The research project was financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn, and lasted from 1993 to 1999. Apart from myself, Doroteja Dobрева and Petar Petrov (from the Institute of Folklore at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia) and Gabriele Wolf and Barbara Schier (from the Institut für Deutsche und vergleichende Volkskunde at Munich University) worked in this project; the research in Raduil was carried out by D. Dobрева, P. Petrov, and G. Wolf, while B. Schier studied the Thuringian village of Merxleben.
- 3 The findings are corroborated particularly by those of Ilya Srubar (1991, 1998), which are based on materials from several socialist countries.
- 4 The society of the GDR has often been labeled a 'niche society', but this can certainly be said also of the societies of the other socialist countries.

- 5 Eleanor Smollett has described these situations in her article (1989) and I myself have witnessed them many times.
- 6 see her contribution in this volume, and Dobрева 1997.

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Abbreviations

BKP = Blgarska komunistieska partija (Bulgarian Communist Party)

DGS = Dravno gorsko stopanstvo (State Forestry)

MVR = Ministerstvo za vtrešni raboti (Ministry of the Interior, Archive of the Secret Service)
in Sofia

SGODA = Sofijski gradski i okren draven arhiv (State Archive of the City and District of
Sofia) in Sofia

TKZS = Trudovo-kooperativno zemedelsko stopanstvo (Labor-Cooperative Farm)