

From Palermo to Penang

A Journey
into Political Anthropology

De Palerme à Penang

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Between the Ottoman Legacy and the European Union: On the Utilisation of Historical Myths in Bulgaria

Klaus Roth

I

One of the characteristic features, and at the same time a heavy burden, of the southeast European peoples is, as many observers have noticed, their strong tendency to hold on to historical myths. Their large number and above all their social and political impact has been noted and discussed again and again. For the historian Holm Sundhaussen, for example, there is no doubt, "that the Balkans have more political myths, more heroes and martyrs than they can digest" (Sundhaussen 1999: 649ff). Apart from the myth of the 'golden' pre-Ottoman times, the 'Kosovo myth', the myth of the 'Turkish yoke', the 'Haidouk myth' and the myth of the 'purity of the nation', it is above all the 'victim myth' that has 'unfolded an immensely destructive power' and has strengthened and preserved a mythical mindset.

As a matter of fact, large parts of the southeast European population foster an ahistorical way of thinking, a mindset in which time is perceived not so much as linear but rather as liminal. In this concept, time is structured by major historic events (such as the Battle of Kosovo in 1389), while the concrete sequence of historical events plays a less important role (cf. Roth 1999: 33). In the transmission of historical myths during the centuries of Ottoman rule and after it, folk tradition, particularly the heroic epic songs and legends played a crucial role in the preservation of this mythic-subjective worldview (cf. Skendi 1971). And it was precisely this mythic world-view and the folk tradition functioning as a cultural memory which led the Croatian ethnologist Vera Erlich to remark about the former Yugoslavia, that "historical memories are nearly an obsession" (Erlich 1984: 105).

Vera Erlich's statement is valid also for other Balkan countries, particularly in relation to the processes of nation building in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when in all the young nations of Southeast Europe folk tradition as the 'voice of the people' was integrated into the official politics of history. Based on these traditions and utilising them, the national policies aimed at legitimizing the new nations that had emerged from the multiethnic empires as *imagined communities* and to develop national identities in their societies. The close link between state politics and folk tradition continues, as for example the folklorists Ivan Čolović (1994) and Mirjana Prošić -Dvornić (2000) have shown for the Serbia of the Milošević era, well into the present. It causes tensions both inside the societies as well as between neighbouring states. Thus, in the Balkan countries the collective memory of the folk turned into 'national narratives' always has the potential to ignite or to escalate conflicts. In Serbia, the collective memory that constitutes the national identity invariably focuses on the Kosovo myth

and thus on the myth of being the eternal victim (cf. Čolović 1994, Lauer 1993, 1994, Richter 1999); in Albania it is the Skanderbeg myth (Schmitt 2005, 2009); Greece and Macedonia compete – until today with serious consequences for international politics – about the legacy of Philip of Macedonia and Alexander the Great; in Hungary, in turn, contradictory historical myths divide both the society and the political class (Hofer 1991, cf. Swartz 2009); and in the Romanian society competing historical myths fight for supremacy (Ursprung 2005). In the Bulgarian case – as in other Balkan countries – the ‘Turkish yoke’, the role of victim, and the ‘heroic resistance against the Ottomans’ played a decisive role in the construction of the nation and national identity.

In view of the constitutive and identity-shaping relevance of historical myths and the long tradition of their political utilisation it has always been a necessary, but difficult task for historiography to take a distanced look at their national histories and to critically review the historical myths. Objective analyses of the Ottoman rule based on reliable sources as they are, for example, presented in the volume *The Southeast European States and the Ottomans* edited by H. G. Majer (1989) or in some publications of the 1990s, were mostly received with reservations in the countries concerned. All attempts to critically review the historical myths, particularly when they came from foreigners, provoked strong reactions both in the general public and among many historians. This becomes particularly clear in the example on which I will focus in this paper, the political scandal caused in April 2007 by the thesis of a Bulgarian PhD student at the Berlin Free University about the ‘Massacre of Batak’. It demonstrates in a particularly drastic form the problems of political, social, and scholarly use of historical myth in Southeast Europe.

II

The scandal, which for some weeks took on national and international dimensions, began on 23 April 2007, a Monday, with some ‘sensational news’ on Bulgarian television and in many daily newspapers. A German foundation – this referred to the well-known Robert Bosch Foundation – financed a research project at the Berlin Free University which, the media proclaimed, intended to declare the ‘Massacre of Batak’ of 1876 a myth, that is a lie, and thus wanted to put in question the sorrowful history of the Bulgarians. “The Germans want to steal our history,” the headlines ran. “The Germans” – this was the Austrian historian Ulf Brunnbauer, who then taught at the Osteuropa Institute in Berlin, and his Bulgarian PhD student and art historian Martina Baleva, on whose idea and initiative the project was based. The waves of outrage about the research project and about a conference and exhibition planned for the middle of May at the Ethnographic Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in Sofia went so high that the Bulgarian President Georgi Pärvanov, the Prime Minister Sergej Stanishev, the president of the National Assembly, and later on also the Academy of Sciences and Sofia University issued official statements to the Bulgarian and the international public. The president, himself a historian, called the research project a “sharp provocation by the German university through which one of the most tragic sides of the April uprising was falsified” and the “sacrifice of the inhabitants of

Batak”, which at that time had shaken up the world [and had in 1877 led to the intervention of Russia], was mocked¹; such a ‘re-writing of history’ was rejected by the whole Bulgarian society. He announced that he planned to participate in an “open history lesson” in the small town of Batak in the Rhodope Mountains.² On 16th May he took part in the traditional celebration of the anniversary of the April uprising in Batak in a demonstrative and highly symbolic manner; the event was broadcasted in full detail nation-wide.

The immediate consequences of the media scandal and the official statements were less symbolic, but very real. Martina Baleva, who was in Sofia at the time for the preparation of the conference and the exhibition, received many death threats, was publicly branded as a ‘traitor’ and had to hastily leave her home country. She and her project partner were harassed by the media, particularly by the right-wing party *Ataka*³ and the TV channel Skat, even in Berlin, and had to be protected by the police for some time. Rewards were offered for Baleva’s home address in Berlin and for a photograph of the ‘traitor’, and in her parents’ apartment house and in the nearby vicinity in Sofia hateful graffiti were sprayed. The Bulgarian Foreign Department and the Bulgarian ambassador to Berlin harshly attacked Ulf Brunnbauer and the Robert-Bosch Foundation in newspaper articles and put pressure on them.⁴ In the media there were even calls to boycott Bosch products, due to the false assumption that the company was closely related with the Foundation. The president of the Academy of Sciences, which had earlier allowed the planned exhibition and conference in the Ethnographic Institute, ordered to cancel both events immediately. The bilingual catalogue for the exhibition (Baleva, Brunnbauer 2007) only came out months later, and still there were angry reactions to it: “As a sign of protest a Bulgarian citizen publicly burnt the book on a square in the centre of Ruse” (Vezenkov 2009: 133). The campaign against the scholars involved continued for several months, although with decreasing intensity, but nevertheless “each new attempt at a debate about the project leads to the reactivation of the scandal” (ibid., 132).

III

What had really happened and what were the deeper causes for this campaign that was extreme also by the standards of Bulgarian media and politics? The research project directed by Ulf Brunnbauer under the title *The bogeyman image of Islam* –

¹ See the report in www.gbg.bg of 25/4/2007 “It is a provocation to alter the history of the massacre of Batak”. In the news report the president stressed the “self-sacrifice of the inhabitants of Batak”.

² See the report of the Bulgarian News Agency BTA of 26/4/2007.

³ The party leader demanded the modification of article 108 of the penal code, so that such denials could be punished with high fines, and he demanded that “this crazy attempt to falsify Bulgarian history” be brought before the EU parliament (http://international.ibox.bg/news/id_1414239125).

⁴ See the interview in the daily 24 časa [24 hours] of 27/4/2007, p. 35, with the title “The [Robert Bosch] Foundation promised me to stop the money”.

history and present of anti-Islamic stereotypes in Bulgaria on the example of the myth of the massacre of Batak was financed by the fond “Remembrance and Future” of the foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility, and Future”, the Robert-Bosch Foundation, the Goethe Institute Bulgaria and other institutions; its goal was to throw light on “Batak as a Bulgarian *lieu de mémoire*”. In the cultural memory of the nation, Batak was indissolubly tied to the ‘Turkish yoke’ and to the Bulgarians’ heroic struggle for freedom. By applying an analytical approach the project wanted to lay open the “mechanisms of construction of the collective memory of the massacre of Batak” and thereby to open “further levels of meaning”. The introductory text to the planned conference⁵ and the catalogue (Baleva, Brunnbauer 2007: 11f.) point out the main thesis of the project: that in the construction of Batak as the most prominent political myth *visual images* played an eminent role, particularly the painting *The Massacre of Batak* by the Polish artist Antoni Piotrowski from the year 1892 and photographs that he had taken of the massacre. “The photographic models arranged by him,” the text says, “mould the visual image of the massacre and of the brutality of the ‘Turks’ to the present day. The special political dimension of this *lieu de mémoire* results from the complex relations between Christians and Muslims not only in the region of Batak, but in the whole country.” Therefore it was important to lay open the “political utilisation of this memory”. Out of the ten paper presenters at the planned conference, eight were from Bulgaria. The exhibition under the title “Batak as a Bulgarian *lieu de mémoire*” was to be opened together with the conference.

For those who were directly involved in the two events the media scandal on 23 April and the ensuing nationwide protest campaign came as a surprise. Already one year earlier, in May 2006, Martina Baleva had published a long article in the intellectual weekly *Kultura* under the title *Who has told (proven) the truth about Batak?* In it she had elaborated her main thesis that Piotrowski’s oil painting produced sixteen years after the massacre was actually based on photographs which he himself had arranged more than a decade after the massacre with the local population and with Muslims from neighbouring villages (Baleva 2006). These photographs had then been reproduced in mass numbers and had been distributed as authentic photographs of the massacre; in addition, Piotrowski’s painting had been published in many textbooks. Only as late as in 1892 Batak had been constructed as the most eminent *lieu de mémoire* and political myth, and this at the instigation and with the help of renowned Bulgarian intellectuals and politicians. After the publication of this article Baleva’s theses remained – apart from an objective scholarly critique by the historian Naum Kajčev (2006) – unnoticed both in Bulgarian historiography and in the general public. Baleva’s ideas became fundamental for the Berlin research project.

It is obvious that the argumentation of the project – quite in the vein of deconstructivist approaches – aimed at the critical rational questioning and putting into perspective of the central national myth and at a new definition of the relationship

⁵ See http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/termine/2007_05_17_batak.html of the Free University at Berlin.

with the Muslims in the country. As this intention had been known before the two events, one can assume that the scholars invited to the conference and represented with their papers in the catalogue shared this intention, probably including also the responsible persons in the Academy of Sciences who had granted permission for both events. The proposal and application had also been sent to the responsible ministry. After the media scandal had broken out, both the president of the Academy and the director of the Ethnographic Institute were forced to distance themselves from the events.

How could such a national scandal develop, a scandal that for weeks dominated most media, among them very prominently the Internet in numerous discussion forums, and which, apart from the political reactions even led to diplomatic tensions between Sofia and Berlin? The reasons are, as could be expected, numerous and complex, and they result both from individual and societal or structural factors. The public scandal and campaign were most probably triggered by a sequence of the popular TV series *Pamet bălgarska* [Bulgarian Memory] of the politically influential and charismatic historian and director of the National Historical Museums, Božidar Dimitrov. In his broadcast of Saturday 21 April 2007 he maintained in a “short manipulative commentary ... that the project denied the massacre of Batak” (Vezenkov 2009: 135), and he strongly spoke against the project, the conference and the exhibition. In addition, he suspected that the project was financed by the Turkish side – an absurd but deadly suspicion for Bulgaria. A decisive point was, however, that he as a historian certainly knew the scientific meaning of the term ‘political myth’, but in his public statements made use of the popular equation myth = lie. This was a very consequential play with meanings, because no one in the project had ever claimed that the massacre had never happened.

Thus, Božidar Dimitrov “ascribed something additional to the project” (Vezenkov 2009: 134), and it was precisely this ‘addition’, the alleged denial of the massacre, which triggered the scandal. At the beginning of the following week, the media, the politicians and very soon after also the general public reacted to this. The largest daily newspapers in the country pilloried the project as a “denial of the massacre of Batak”, as a “scandalous correction” or “falsification of our history” which aimed at the “revision of the national historical myths” and at “re-writing the history of the country in the European context.” Pathetic images, emotions, and reactions of high-ranking politicians and diplomats dominated the media, and words such as ‘sanctuary’, ‘contamination’ or ‘lie’ were very common. The Internet forums were full of critical and often radical comments – and it took a few days until critical intellectuals went public with their views (see Ditchchev 2007, Vezenkov 2007) and tried to counter the campaign with factual arguments. Many of them formulated their protest in the Internet in a petition⁶ in which they spoke up against all kinds of political censorship and ma-

⁶ See http://www.bgpetition.com/apel_na_bg_istorici/index.html and the report in the daily Dnevnik of 2/5/2007 “For the defence of academic freedom”. (<http://www.dnevnik.bg/show/?storyid=335640>).

nipulation and insisted on the freedom of research – including research into the sore questions of national history.⁷ A hastily arranged ‘Round Table’ brought no tangible results, and even months later, in December 2007, police protection was required during a public discussion of the topic.⁸

The historian Božidar Dimitrov⁹ is well known for his nationalist and populist views; in the petition he is labelled ‘pseudo historian’ and ‘professional manipulator’, and some historians even call him a ‘Čalga historian’¹⁰ (Vezenkov 2009: 136). However, his defamatory initiative would probably not have sufficed to start such a national campaign if it had not touched a feeling of unease in the Bulgarian population. After almost 18 years of transformation crisis which had produced only few winners and many losers, and in view of the fact that the DPS¹¹, the party of the Turkish minority, had for years played a disproportionately important role in Bulgarian politics, there was a heightened sensitivity in the population towards the Muslims in the country, a fact that had already led to an increase in nationalist and radical right-wing tendencies (cf. Ditchev 2007). These tendencies were given a loud voice by right-wing parties and their media and they had direct political consequences in the elections of those years.

But the public response was even broader, though. For the identity of the Bulgarians, the “memory of Batak” is not a random or exchangeable memory, but it is – besides the ‘Turkish yoke’ – the central political myth for the national self-definition. In the collective memory ‘Batak’ stands not only for the bloody quelling of the uprising against Ottoman rule in April 1876, but constitutes a key event for the national identity. The massacre symbolises, on the one hand, the historical fact of five centuries of foreign domination and suffering; on the other hand – but here the historians disagreed on whether the massacre was really part of the April uprising – the massacre is interpreted as a ‘heroic’ event or as an event epitomising the Bulgarians’ role as

⁷ “We declare ourselves for the defence of the autonomy of the sciences, of academic freedom, of equal rights in the expression of differing opinions, including painful historical questions for the national memory, and for the presentation of different scientific approaches to historical phenomena.”

⁸ See <http://www.segabg.com/online/article.asp?issueid=2843§ionid=2&id=0000504>.

⁹ In 2007 and 2008 I watched some issues of his TV series “*Pamet bālgarska*” and was shocked by the deeply nationalist tendency. Dimitrov repeated his position and his accusations – in a partly insulting phrasing – in an added chapter to his popular book “12 Myths of Bulgarian History” (Dimitrov 2007: 147-151).

¹⁰ The word ‘čalga’ denotes a pop-folk music that became extremely popular in the 1990s, a music style combining folk music with oriental and Western elements. It is considered symptomatic of the transformation period and also of the new political and economic elites (see Ivanova 2004). ‘Čalga historian’ is used for “those authors of nationalistic books and TV programmes that provide disinformation under the guise of ‘revealing secrets about Bulgaria’s past’” (Trankova 2009: 34). This qualification aims directly at Dimitrov’s book of 2007 (Dimitrov 2007).

¹¹ Dviženie za prava i svobodi (Movement for Rights and Freedom), a de facto *ethnic* party which, according to the Constitution, is not really legal.

'victims'. While "the public consciousness remembers the massacre of Batak, historians and local patriots try to move the uprising and the heroic defence of the town into the foreground" (Vezenkov 2009: 158). Both interpretations, the heroism of badly equipped freedom fighters against the hated Turkish rule and the sacrifice of the innocent¹² which is heightened into a "conscious self-sacrifice for the freedom of the fatherland" (Vezenkov 2009: 160), have their fixed place in the official and popular historical memory. All history books tell of 'Batak' and all governments of the 20th century have utilised this event in one way or another. This is particularly true for the government that was in power 2005–2009 in which the party of the former communists played a decisive role. The government enacted a very aggressive politics of history in which the older history – from the ancient Thracians, the medieval Bulgarian empires and the Ottoman domination up to the uprising of 1876 – were centre-stage, while the likewise painful decades of communist rule were suppressed in the public discourse and in politics (Gazdov 2007). The outcry against the Batak project which started from the political elite can probably also be interpreted in this wider context, that is, as a diversionary *manoeuvre* of the political elite. "It is symptomatic," writes Vezenkov (2009: 141), "that several ... historians participated in the 'unmasking' of the project whose names were among the officially published collaborators of the former state security service (Božidar Dimitrov, Georgi Pärvanov, ... etc.)."

IV

The Historical Museum and the low church in Batak, in which the bones of the slain are heaped and visible to the visitor, both buildings bedded into a well-kept park, evoke the impression of a national sanctuary. The 'sanctity' of Batak, of the massacre and of the memory of it was emphasised several times in the public debate. The historian Ilija Todev declared that the public outrage about the project was "understandable, perhaps even necessary, when careless hands touch our national sanctuaries" (Vezenkov 2009: 138). Ivan Ilčev, dean of the History Department of Sofia University, warned "that the wounds should not be touched which still bleed, down to the bare, hurting nerves", and the "'academic assembly' of Sofia University of 27 April explicated that in scientific research 'the dignity and the historical memory of the Bulgarian people should not be touched'" (ibid, 137). The authors and the undersigned of the petition¹³ argued against this sacralisation and tabooing¹⁴, but the ex-

¹² The exact number of the victims of the massacre carried out by irregular soldiers (*bašibozuci*) is unknown: the figures in historical sources range between 1500 and 5000 victims, among them many women and children.

¹³ "We declare ourselves against sacred 'taboo themes' and against the coercion of having to think uniformly. We will fight for the right to argue out our differences in an open and civilised dialogue."

¹⁴ Similar tendencies of tabooing history are visible in the Russian Federation where the president introduced a bill on 15 May 2009 which made punishable all attempts at "falsifying history to the detriment of Russian interests" (<http://www.rg.ru/2009/05/20/komissia-dok.html>).

trème political and emotional charging of this *lieu de mémoire* in Bulgarian society remains a fact. Before this background, it was probably insensitive on the organisers' behalf to have the conference and exhibition, which were to discuss the genesis of this 'national sanctuary', coincide with the anniversary of the massacre. A more neutral date would have far better served coming to terms with this highly charged *lieu de mémoire*.

There can be no doubt that coming to terms with this historical event and with its elevation into a political myth is necessary. Vezenkov (2009: 138) notes, however, that "Bulgarian historiography has not yet seriously discussed the contents of the project and the papers in the catalogue, but only the 'scandal Batak'". His own extensive article is certainly a very laudable contribution, as he also discusses the central question of the project, when and why the 'massacre of Batak' became the most important national myth and why it was Batak, although in 1876 there were massacres in some twenty towns and villages in the country. The massacre was, as he can show on the basis of historical sources, indeed the largest one and as such it soon entered the collective and cultural memory – and that independently of the pictorial sources that take a central position in Baleva's thesis. Vezenkov thus corrects the main thesis of the project, and he also criticises another thesis: that the massacre was only a local dispute between Christian and Pomak¹⁵ villages.

In view of the fact that in the emotional 'household' of the (ethnic) Bulgarians 'Batak' is a resource that can at any time be activated for resentments against the Turkish or Pomak minorities in the country and against Turks in general, a well-founded and objective treatment of the events of 1876 by Bulgarian historians is indeed indispensable. The fact, however, that the provocative theses of the art historian Martina Baleva remained unnoticed in Bulgaria for a whole year leads to the conclusion that the media scandal still had other, more topical causes. In some of the very aggressive and hateful newspaper reports and Internet forums there are indications that the timing of the scandal was indeed deliberate and meaningful. In April 2007 Bulgaria had only been a new full member of the European Union for a few months. The rapid – against some opposition in the EU – accession of the country was an event for which the political and economic elites which had negotiated in Brussels had not prepared their society. The accession on the first of January 2007 hit the population of Bulgaria (and that of neighbouring Romania), which had so far perceived 'Europe' only as a distant place of longing (cf. Roth 2008), almost like a shock. The many European laws and regulations that went into force as well as the high standards and requirements in many areas of the economy caused quite a stir amongst the population. The angry nationwide protests of the rural population in January 2007 against the new and relatively high excise tax on alcohol are a case in point; the important thing was that the tax was also to be levied on home-made brandy, which not only had an economic importance for the population but was also

¹⁵ Pomaks are Islamized ethnic Bulgarians; they live predominantly in southern Bulgaria and northern Greece.

an integral part of their way of life. “Those in Brussels want to destroy our culture and identity” was, as the ethnologist Radost Ivanova (2008) found out in her empirical study, the core issue of these anti-EU protests. That this aspect was relevant for the media scandal and the reactions in the population is indicated, for example, by a critical article of the famous literary historian Nikola Georgiev in the daily *Monitor* (of 26/4/2007) with the title *These are the first fruits of our EU accession*. Another important and topical reason were the elections for the EU parliament on 20 May, which were the first ones for Bulgaria. They were “used by all parties for presenting themselves as the defenders of national interests against ‘Europe’” (Ditchev 2007).

The conference and the exhibition of 2007 thus met a population that was highly sensitised and felt unsure of ‘Europe’. The ‘German’ project – and for Bulgaria, Germany is the most important country of reference in Europe – was interpreted as an impertinent attempt of ‘Europe’ to deprive ‘us’ of the most important symbol of our centuries of suffering and of our heroic struggle against Ottoman oppression. This seems to be the most likely explanation for the sharp reactions in the media and in Bulgarian politics as well as for the continuing debate in the public sphere, particularly in the Internet forums, about the dissertation project of an art historian. By being part of a ‘German’ project she had become a betrayer of her own country, a person that deserved to be impaled (see Mappes-Niediek 2007, Zekri 2007) and to be deprived of her citizenship or even her Bulgarian name. In the media the whole project was presented as a “well-considered anti-Bulgarian initiative” and conspiracy of ‘Europe’ and Turkey (Vezenkov 2009: 135). But the reactions to the media campaign transcended “not only the relevance of the project, but most probably also the expectations of the initiators of the media campaign” (ibid); they themselves were particularly surprised by the very negative reactions from abroad, above all from Germany, which harmed the reputation of their country.

V

The analysis of the rich data about the Batak scandal comes to make three things very clear, namely that (1) in the public discourse in Bulgaria about the German project there surfaced not only anti-Turkish, but also anti-EU attitudes, that (2) the way this discourse developed indicates that the overcoming of the socialist legacy and the practising of civil forms of discourse and behaviour continues to be a basic problem of Bulgarian society, and that (3) the reactions and opinions in the public debate lay open socio-cultural dichotomies within society as well as tensions and contradictions with regard to the construction of national identity. Bulgaria as one of the youngest EU members has, as these discussions, the reactions to the measures of the EU, and other recent developments indicate, almost immediately after its accession entered that period of crisis for which the term “post-accession syndrome” has been coined in

the political discourse.¹⁶ The extreme reactions to the attempt at a critical assessment of a historical myth are fully understandable only in this context, as they give expression to the fear of losing one's national identity, an identity that is already damaged by the society's historical legacy.

Apart from this, the scandal shows very clearly that in the transmission of the images of one's own history and of 'Europe' – besides schoolbooks – the media play an eminent role. Many of the large print media and television channels in Southeast Europe tend to voice populist opinions and to utilise anti-Turkish and anti-European sentiments. But it is here that the story takes an almost ironic turn, as the belated report of the *Spiegel* (Kraske/Schmitter 2007) makes alarmingly clear. The largest, loudest, and in their coverage of the 'Batak' scandal most hateful daily newspapers, *Dneven trud* and *24 časa*, are exactly those that are owned by the German WAZ Group. It was only the critical *Spiegel* report that forced its CEO Bodo Hombach to travel to Sofia and to put things in order – more than half a year too late.

The sensitivities in Bulgarian society towards the EU respectively 'Europe' are still there and they will, as the experience of the other new EU members shows, continue for some time due to the difficulties of EU integration. A large part of the impact of the media scandal derived from such sentiments as well as from a politics of history of a political elite which is deeply entangled in its own communist past. In spite of all this, the scandal also had its positive effects. Among those intellectuals in the country who undauntedly went public with their Internet petition it has triggered a critical discussion about the national identity and about the freedom and responsibility of research and has sensitised them for the political instrumentalisation of the national history. Furthermore, the scandal had some effects on the development of civil society in Bulgaria, because it has made clear, "that in a pluralistic society cultural policy is not a monologue of the state administration and of those working in it – the initiative of private persons and NGOs has a legitimate place in its formation" (Vezenkov 2009: 148). This claim is stressed by the many undersigned of the petition as well as by critical publications of younger historians and other scholars. But whether the scandal can contribute to changing the attitudes of the majority of the population to 'Europe', to the Turks, and to the Turkish minority in the country and thus to their own historical myths (cf. Roth 1999), this must be doubted, at least for the foreseeable future, in view of the general rise of populist and nationalist tendencies in Southeast Europe.

As regards the place of the scandal in the larger context of historical myths in Southeast Europe, the scandal has made evident yet another, very important point. It has shown that (as a result of the specific historical experience and the strong folk tradition) the inclination to an ahistorical way of thinking and thus to the formation and preservation of myths is indeed a legacy. It is a resource that can be tapped, but it always needs someone to wilfully manipulate it and to unleash its potential. In a simi-

¹⁶ On the 'post-accession-syndrom' and populism after EU accession see the contributions by Heinz-Jürgen Axt (on Greece), Anneli-Ute Gabanyi (on Romania), Attila Ágh (on Hungary) and Sonja Schüler (on Bulgaria) in *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 48,2 (2008) 38-98.

lar way as in the Serbia of the 1990s or in the quarrel about names between Greece and Macedonia, parts of the Bulgarian 'political' elite have indeed used their power in a such a manipulative manner. But the even more disturbing fact is that also members of the 'academic' elite, who should know about the power of myths and who should contribute to their critical assessment and control, did not act as enlightened educators but rather as arsonists. It was not so much the general inclination to mythmaking nor the concrete myth of Batak, but rather their conscious utilisation in order to inflame a "chauvinistic hysteria" (Mappes-Niediek 2007) by parts of the elite that were able to unfold that "immensely destructive effect" which Holm Sundhaussen spoke about ten years ago.

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