Chapter 1

The Contradictions of Developed Socialism

In his address to the Bulgarian people delivered on 20 October 1981, the general secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) and chairman of the State Council of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria (NRB), Todor Zhivkov, reminded his listeners: “We are on the threshold of a major national celebration—the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state, one of the oldest states of Europe, which emerged on the ground . . . of the ancient civilizations in our lands, covered a long distance in its development, and has now reached the highest peak in contemporary progress—the triumph of the socialist social order.” The speech skillfully outlined an appealing national narrative, charting in significant detail the history of the Bulgarian people, “situated in one of the most neuralgic [sic] regions of the planet . . . at a crossroads between East and West, North and South.” The rhetoric then moved to ideological ground, emphasizing that “the victory of the socialist revolution . . . marked the greatest ever radical breakthrough in our 13-century-long history” because it “unfettered the powerful forces of the nation, provided an irresistible impetus to our country’s all-round progress, and marked the beginning of the implementation of the goals and tasks of centuries-long struggles and aspirations.” Zhivkov finally proposed visions for Bulgaria’s future development under developed socialism (razvit sotsializâm), linking the historical jubilee to domestic reforms and international initiatives already underway.¹
While the Bulgarian communist leader’s self-congratulatory view is hardly surprising, international observers confirmed the invigorating power of the 1300-year jubilee, which made evident, both domestically and internationally, the Bulgarian people’s “pride in their cultural and historical heritage . . . and in current achievements in having raised the standard of living.” British reports from Sofia on the eve of the anniversary described, rather surprisingly, “a stable country with a growing sense of national identity, ruled by a self-confident and competent regime. Its people are better fed and better clothed than they used to be and have more opportunities for self-expression.” Following the 1300-year celebrations, another report concluded: “Bulgaria’s reputation as the Soviet Union’s closest and most willing client state has become such a cliché that the search for evidence to the contrary is irresistible. The staging of the 1300th anniversary was . . . a clear demonstration of national pride well removed from the professions of solidarity towards the Soviet Union to which we have become accustomed.”

Integrating Bulgarian and foreign perspectives, this chapter provides background information on the internal situation in Bulgaria during the long 1970s and engages long-lasting stereotypes associated with the country throughout the Cold War, while explaining the role of culture and the celebration of the 1300-year jubilee during late socialism. Both in historical scholarship and in contemporaneous Western diplomatic and media sources, Bulgaria is frequently presented as a ruthless dictatorship completely subservient to the Soviet Union. The country is usually described as the Soviet Union’s most loyal ally, implying a strong degree of political dependence. Bulgaria also attracts attention because of its lack of a dissident movement during a time of heightened dissent in Eastern Europe, which is explained either through the regime’s brutal repression or the ingrained passivity of the population. These assumptions, even though often based on insufficient information or a simplistic reading of the facts, made the country seem unworthy of attention. Here, I take a closer look at the situation in Bulgaria to complicate both opinions. What if the “eternal Bulgarian-Soviet friendship” served the country well? Or the lack of dissent meant popular acceptance of the regime’s policies? This chapter adds much-needed nuance to the history of late socialism in Eastern Europe by analyzing the role of official culture in sustaining state socialist regimes. I demonstrate that Bulgarian cultural policies of the 1970s served the purpose of domestic legitimization as they reinvigorated Bulgarian “patriotism,” rejuvenated the social contract between the regime and its citizens, and undercut dissent by recruiting potential critics into the cultural projects sponsored by the state.
Western observers typically defaulted to clichés in their descriptions of Bulgaria. In the standard view, because the country was dependent on Soviet economic assistance for raw materials, training, and markets, it “ha[d] surrendered much of its sovereignty” to the Soviet Union, both militarily and in foreign policy.\textsuperscript{5} British diplomatic reports from the early 1970s spoke about its “docility” and concluded that the situation in Bulgaria served to illustrate “what Moscow would do, if it could, with the other members [of the Soviet bloc].” Because Bulgarian loyalty to the Soviet Union remained “unquestioned,” one reason to study Bulgaria was to “provide insight into the Soviet system.”\textsuperscript{6} Sofia’s reputation as “Moscow’s loyal flag-bearer” persisted into the 1970s.\textsuperscript{7} Western dispatches consistently spoke about “obedient Bulgaria” and “the master satellite.”\textsuperscript{8}

Throughout the 1970s, as they learned more about the country—including from its cultural programs—diplomats began refining their assumptions. Bulgarian leader Zhivkov was sensitive to accusations of Bulgarian loyalty to the Soviet Union and its satellite role because it made “his country that much less interesting to the west.”\textsuperscript{9} Thus, the regime sought to proactively correct this view. In 1979, Zhivkov joked that “the Soviet Union was really a Bulgarian colony” since Bulgaria received its raw materials from Russia and sold its finished ones there, in “the classic colonial relationship.”\textsuperscript{10} That year, the British ambassador in Sofia observed: “If they can find a way to satisfy Moscow by form and themselves by substance, [the Bulgarians] will choose it. If they can get their own way by shouting ‘Eternal Friendship’ a bit louder they will do so.”\textsuperscript{11} By the late 1970s, the Soviet proxy stereotype had been subjected to fine-tuning: now, diplomats saw the internal situation in Bulgaria as “not bad” while they detected “no specific obstacles to normalization, such as the human rights problems in Czechoslovakia.”\textsuperscript{12} In 1981, the \textit{Economist} called Bulgaria “Un-Polish.”\textsuperscript{13} One might argue that, in the midst of turmoil elsewhere in Eastern Europe, “un-Polish” and “not bad” meant good.

At the same time, Western media covering Bulgaria usually described a climate of merciless domestic repression that allegedly eradicated all opposition. In 1975, Radio Free Europe (RFE) concluded: “apparently the intercession-intimidation mechanism is extremely intricate and always effective. The regime’s elaborate bureaucratic apparatus seems to have perfected it to the point where almost nothing can be done to counteract it.”\textsuperscript{14} But this rigid view did not withstand scrutiny. British diplomats, while describing “widespread, underlying political apathy” and “lack of enthusiasm in communism, particularly amongst young people and intelligentsia,” pointed out that in Bulgaria, “there was no obvious discontent.”\textsuperscript{15} The “youth problem”
manifested itself in work-shyness, antipathy to public service, and craving for all things Western. Yet, while young Bulgarians wanted more consumer goods, travel, cultural choices, and a better standard of living, what they did not want was political change.\(^{16}\)

Unable to offer a satisfactory explanation for the fact that discontent had not become dissent, Western diplomats spoke of Zhivkov’s “benevolent dictatorship,” a phrase that captures well the contradictions of late socialism.\(^{17}\) Official policies benefited ordinary people: in 1981, the year of the 1300th anniversary, the economy “performed well . . . and real incomes increased,” the availability of consumer goods “continued to improve,” the political system was “stable,” and there was “no audible discontent,” while in foreign affairs the country saw the “ceaseless coming and going of delegations from overseas.”\(^{18}\) Thus, observers remained skeptical of the potential for radical change: “it is tempting to believe that the apathy and the social malaise . . . will lead to significant changes in the political order. This would be wishful thinking.”\(^{19}\)

Cultural policies provide a window into the “benevolent dictatorship” of Todor Zhivkov, as they allow us to engage the shifting political and social order of the 1970s and explain the normalization of late socialism.\(^{20}\) In the 1970s, but especially after Zhivkov’s daughter, Liudmila Zhivkova, took charge of culture in 1975, new ideas of aesthetic education and beauty replaced the worn-out Marxist vocabulary of domestic cultural programs. Concurrently, Bulgarian elites launched a massive campaign of cultural diplomacy to create a new image for the country. The national and international aspects of these cultural policies were closely intertwined: on the global scene as well as at home, Bulgaria was showcasing not only its communist credentials, but also its national uniqueness and broader contributions to humanity. The 1300th anniversary celebrations, in particular, had “two beneficial side-effects . . . first in helping to publicise Bulgaria and its achievements abroad, and second in encouraging a sense of national pride and self-confidence [at home].”\(^{21}\) In my analysis, I show that official culture, vacillating between creative expression, national campaign, public relations plan, and propaganda, fulfilled both international prestige-making aspirations and domestic morale-building goals.

Before I examine Bulgaria’s ambitious international cultural policies, it is important to outline the domestic conditions that made this new course possible. For Bulgaria, the period of late socialism was characterized by relative economic security and reform, the political solidification of the regime, an active foreign policy agenda, and attempted projects of social rejuvenation. The country also saw the revival and active promotion of “patriotism,”
which was at the core of cultural events embracing historical topics. In this context, the “cultural front” acquired new prominence as it actively served ideological, national, and morale-building functions, and culture became a visible priority of state policy, both financially and administratively. These processes were accompanied by the entry of a new generation into the state and party apparatuses; many members of this third generation of communist elites made their careers in the cultural sphere. Further, the new cultural policies undermined the formation of a dissident movement, as they coopted and disarmed potential detractors of the regime. An accommodation emerged between the regime and its citizens, leading to the acceptance of developed socialism by many Bulgarian citizens.

Building Developed Socialism: Bulgaria in the Long 1970s

Bulgaria’s reputation as a loyal Soviet ally is connected to the origins of the communist regime. In 1946, Georgi Dimitrov, the longtime Comintern leader and close associate of Joseph Stalin, returned to Bulgaria, assumed BKP leadership, and became the prime minister, helping consolidate communist control (he passed away in 1949 and was replaced by Vasil Kolarov and then Vâlko Chervenkov). Following Stalin’s death in 1953, a mid-level apparatchik, Todor Zhivkov, astutely used Soviet power struggles to undermine the Stalinist Chervenkov. Zhivkov became a secretary of the BKP in 1954, but following the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 (which famously featured Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech), he orchestrated Chervenkov’s removal during the April Plenum of the BKP (in the spirit of eliminating the Stalinist cult of personality). From that point on, Zhivkov pursued a two-pronged strategy for maintaining power: first, he ingratiated himself with the Soviet leader (by providing support during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and suggesting even closer relations and an eventual “merging” between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union in 1962) and second, he proactively removed internal challengers and promoted loyal followers (with the creation of the Committee of Active Fighters against Fascism and Capitalism in 1959 and the appointment of trusted cadres to the Politburo in 1962). When Leonid Brezhnev came to power in 1964, Zhivkov followed the same policies of reaping political and economic benefits from a close relationship with the new Soviet leader: with the slowdown of the economy in the early 1960s, Soviet financial support was critical. In 1968, Bulgaria sent troops during the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and later unconditionally supported the Brezhnev
doctrine. At the same time, Zhivkov continued his skillful political maneuvering at home, implementing additional purges of internal opponents in 1968 and 1972 in the wake of the Prague Spring and shoring up the security services to better detect political opposition and monitor social discontent. Yet, Zhivkov treated his opponents with moderation. He did not imprison or strip them of privileges but offered them retirement or appointed them to honorary positions, successfully undercutting the development of intra-party opposition and preventing broader social repercussions.  

From the mid-1960s on, the regime also started to pay closer attention to the everyday needs of the population, using social policies to expand its base and create a broader consensus. Political scientist Ivailo Znepolski describes Bulgaria during this period as a “consensual dictatorship,” a concept that aligns with contemporary characterizations of Zhivkov’s rule as a “benevolent dictatorship.” The period of the long 1970s was in many ways the “golden age” of the Zhivkov regime, which saw the perfection of his “benevolent,” “consensual” authoritarian rule. While periodically the general secretary had to address economic, foreign policy, political, and social challenges, he did this confidently and calmly, assuring both the political elites and the “masses” that developed socialism was a success.

What were the main developments in Bulgaria during the long 1970s? The global economic crisis of 1973 caused ripple effects in Bulgarian society, because Western countries ceased importing Bulgarian goods, which constituted its main source of hard currency. The regime continued to receive oil supplies from the Soviet Union with prices much below their international market value. However, the negative export balance pushed Bulgaria’s ruling elites toward borrowing from Western banks, quickly inflating its foreign debt. As it had in the 1960s, in 1979 Bulgaria received Soviet financial assistance to cover its debt obligations, and by the early 1980s the debt problem was under control. The close relationship with the Soviet Union benefitted the Bulgarian regime economically during this precarious period of global economic turmoil, and compared to the other Eastern European countries, the Bulgarian government did not perceive its economic problems as acute during this time (that would change in the 1980s). Consistent with the initiation of economic reforms elsewhere in Eastern Europe, in 1979 the Bulgarian leadership began to discuss a new economic mechanism that included decentralization, limited private property in agriculture and the service sector, and some price corrections to align with international markets. Once the positive effects of the Soviet debt financing became clear, however, elites lost interest in applying the new economic mechanism and in effect the phrase became an empty propaganda slogan that was extensively discussed in the press and
workplace, but never given real substance. Still, as Martin Ivanov argues, the public debates on the new economic mechanism throughout 1979 and 1980 created social expectations that the regime would introduce reforms when necessary and led to an “atmosphere of greater tolerance to reforms” in general.24

The 1970s also saw the continued political consolidation of Zhivkov’s regime. The Tenth Congress of the BKP in spring 1971 officially proclaimed that the NRB had entered the period of “developed socialist society” (razvito sotsialistichesko obshtestvo), or “real socialism” (realen sotsializám). Zhivkov pushed for a revised constitution to reflect the new times. In May 1971, the Zhivkov constitution enshrined his leading role by creating a new state council under his leadership while the functions of the prime minister became mostly representative. Zhivkov also secured the appointment of trusted new cadres in key political posts. Zhivkov’s cult was further built through the anniversary celebrations of his birthdays in 1971, 1976, and 1981, accompanied by the rewriting of the history of anti-fascist resistance in Bulgaria to glorify the current leader. Other aspects of his growing power were the formation of his “hunting crew,” which functioned as an informal headquarters for coordinating important state decisions; the appointment of family members, such as his daughter and son-in-law, to important state posts; and the further removal of political opponents.25

In terms of foreign policy, Bulgaria followed the main tenets of Soviet foreign policy with a degree of overzealousness that has caused much discussion in the literature, but is best explained through the longer history of Bulgarian Russophilism. Zhivkov diligently cultivated Bulgaria’s reputation as a reliable Soviet partner: in the 1970s, he dutifully attended the ritual summer Yalta meetings of Warsaw Pact members with Brezhnev and loyally supported Soviet policies, notably vis-à-vis the West and China.26 Zhivkov’s so-called “sixteenth republic” proposition, which was a suggestion to implement the merging (slivane) of Bulgaria and the Soviet Union first made to Khrushchev in 1963, is a hotly debated question. In 1973, Zhivkov pitched the same idea to Brezhnev, the new Soviet leader. It is still debated whether Zhivkov wanted to literally merge Bulgaria with the Soviet Union, or rather wished to benefit economically from the Soviet “big brother” by pledging unyielding support during times of political challenges elsewhere in the Soviet bloc—the explanation advanced in his memoirs. As seen previously, the Soviet Union did treat Bulgaria preferentially in terms of economic aid and crude oil supplies: in the 1970s, Bulgaria received the second largest amount of Soviet financial assistance after the GDR. The “special relationship” between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union was steadily reinforced during
this time, including through the 1978 centennial celebrations of Bulgaria’s liberation by the Russian army during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, at the end of which modern Bulgaria was created.27

However, this special relationship became more complicated when Bulgarian leaders began to reinvigorate nationalism. Following the internationalist stage of the BKP after 1944, the rehabilitation of national ideas began in the late 1950s, with the eventual embrace of both socialist internationalism and what the regime called “patriotism” in the mid- to late 1960s. As envisioned by Zhivkov, the goal of the “patriotic turn” was to instill national pride in the history and traditions of the Bulgarian people while also proclaiming commitment to socialist solidarity. The 1960s and 1970s thus saw a significant shift in official master narratives along national lines. In the late 1960s, the regime started promoting “grandiose . . . spectacles” on national themes, such as the celebrations of 24th May as the Day of the Slavic Alphabet and Bulgarian Culture, focused on the allegedly Bulgarian scholars Cyril and Methodius who compiled the first Slavic alphabet in the ninth century.28 “Patriotic education” programs at school ensured that the new generation of socialist Bulgarians would be exposed to literary and historical narratives focused on national topics, while film sagas and monuments filled the country with the images of khans, tsars, patriarchs, national awakens, and revolutionaries. Cultural nationalism was thus well enshrined in Bulgarian society by the 1970s. Yet, there was a darker aspect of this embrace of nationalism, which relied on the notion of a unitary socialist nation and did not leave much room for minorities in the NRB: notably, the 1971 constitution did not include provisions on minority autonomy or protection. In the mid-1970s there were name-changing campaigns against the Pomaks and the Roma to bring them into the national fold (the regime treaded carefully vis-à-vis the Turks until 1984 when a new assimilation campaign began).29

The revival of nationalism doubtless served the purpose of internal political consolidation—in RFE’s assessment, the resurrected nationalist sentiment “provided the Zhivkov regime with an element of legitimacy” and “served as a safety valve.”30 Yet, the patriotic turn also created international complications, particularly with Bulgaria’s neighbors. It also put the Soviet Union on alert in relation to its most loyal ally: as Bulgarian politicians and historians reembraced the national rhetoric, the Soviets cautiously watched to see whether “aspects of Bulgarian nationalism . . . could be divisive in the future.”31

In addition to this clear patriotic turn, the 1970s were also a period of social reconfiguration, when a new generation that had known nothing but socialism entered the public arena. Znepolski dates to the mid-1960s the
formation of a “social consensus” within Bulgaria, which he attributes to the
generous social policies that the regime used as a strategy for “buying politi-
cal loyalty” and “corrupting the masses.” In his interpretation, which follows
a totalitarian model, ordinary people were willing to accept the measures of
the regime in return for modest yet stable improvements in their daily lives.32
In contrast, Ulf Brunnbauer offers a revisionist analysis that aptly reconciles
the “totalizing aspirations” of the state and the appeal of a “socialist way of
life” among the masses.33 During late socialism, “society grew ever more
complex, which made it more difficult to police the behavior of individu-
als.”34 While the state attempted to create a top-down “socialist everyday
culture” (bit), it did so through “flexible strategies.” Brunnbauer convinc-
ingly shows that many Bulgarians accepted the ideology of real socialism
promoted by the state, and the socialist system in Bulgaria enjoyed a “rela-
tively high level of legitimacy” until the early 1980s.35 In the end, the 1970s
were not simply a period of resignation and apathy, as Western observers
saw it, but also of normalization and acceptance of developed socialism as
ideology and practice.

The accommodation between state and society, however, did not mean
that the regime considered the situation in Bulgaria perfect; striving to build
a better socialist system remained a preoccupation to the end. In a famous
speech from 1966, Zhivkov spoke about the “two truths” (dvete pravdi) in the
process of building socialism: “Our socialist reality contains ever more traits
of a developed socialist society. But at the same time, we meet not a few
negative phenomena. . . . There exist two realities in our life . . . [that] strug-
gle against each other.”36 The contradiction of proclaiming the victory of
developed socialism while continuously trying to improve it was at the heart
of late socialism. What was different in the 1970s as compared to the 1960s
was the creation of a “normalized society”—a society in which “the expecta-
tion for a stable system” and a “firm institutional hierarchy” coexisted with
the “expression of intentions for change” and “social compromise.”37 This
more consensual aspect of late socialism—and the accommodation between
the regime and society—provided the backdrop for far-reaching cultural
changes during the 1970s.

What’s New on the Cultural Front?

Throughout the socialist period, the cultural front (kulturen front) maintained
its important role in promoting the ideological goals of the regime. The relation-
ship between culture, ideology, and propaganda was at the core of the
state socialist understandings of official culture, and intellectuals played an
important role in the Bulgarian power structures after 1944. Zhivkov, who came to power in 1956, liked to be seen as invested in culture and socialized with intellectuals to demonstrate his commitment to cultural liberalization in the post-Stalinist period. The period of the thaw in the 1950s, however, ended with limited results: cultural producers remained dependent on the benevolence of political functionaries and carefully straddled the needs of the party and the people, on the one hand, and their own intellectual aspirations, on the other.

The Bulgarian cultural scene was often subjected to top-down reforms whose goal was to articulate its exact functions in socialist society. In the 1960s, according to Evgeniia Kalinova, those reforms came in fits and starts, reflecting the primacy of political imperatives over cultural priorities. In 1963, the Committee for Arts and Culture (KIK) was separated from the Ministry of Education and Culture and given an independent role; this change promoted the role of experts in the administration of culture. In 1965, to purge Stalinist remnants after a coup attempt against him, Zhivkov launched policies of “socialist democratization,” which relaxed ideological expectations of cultural production, softened criticism of Western influences, and allowed freer cultural expression. Yet, the state continued to carefully monitor the cultural sphere. The First Congress of Culture, held in 1967, promoted “social participation” in culture, but ultimately served to better align the cultural front with state priorities. With the help of loyal cultural bureaucrats (the newly elevated experts), the state controlled intellectuals in subtler yet more effective ways, without the appearance of direct orders from above. That same year, the Committee for State Security formed its Sixth Division, which focused on rooting out “ideological sabotage” in culture and the arts. In July 1968, in the midst of the Prague Spring, Bulgaria hosted the Ninth World Festival of Youth and Students, under the vigilant eye of the Sixth Division. Following the Warsaw Pact invasion in August, Bulgarian intellectuals remained conspicuously silent. Soon afterward, the state used the occasion to remove inconvenient personalities from the cultural scene (such as artist Dechko Uzunov). In the late 1960s, Bulgarian cultural producers became overwhelmingly disillusioned with the prospect of cultural liberalization and silent resignation dominated cultural circles; as a sign of the new mood, the writer Georgi Markov, an active participant in Zhivkov’s “socialist democratization” in the 1960s, decided to remain in Italy during a trip abroad in 1969.

The far-reaching cultural reforms of the 1970s thus followed an earlier template, yet by contrast to the tense 1960s, relative tranquility characterized the late socialist cultural sphere when political functionaries and cultural
producers reached a mutually beneficial accommodation. Concurrently, official culture acquired more pronounced international aspects, which provided new opportunities for advancement. In substance and in form, cultural policies became an unquestionable and visible state priority.

Emulating Brezhnev’s strategy of recruiting intellectuals through encouragement and rewards, Zhivkov initiated dialogue with cultural producers and expanded state investment in culture. The new constitution of 1971 defined the role of culture as being “in service of the people” and its main goal as “develop[ing] the communist spirit.” Throughout the 1970s, state investment in culture grew: according to Kalinova, from 2.4 percent of GDP in the 1960s to 3.4 percent in the 1970s. A number of state and party institutions provided expertise in cultural matters. While the apparatchiks at the Central Committee of the BKP’s Art, Culture, and Propaganda Department continued to vet the overall direction of cultural policy, the experts at the KIK implemented specific policies with the help of the creative unions, educational institutions, and other cultural establishments. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MVnR) assisted in international events, while State Security’s Sixth Division kept an eye on individual cultural and artistic figures. These institutions were often in competition, but their extensive involvement in cultural matters signified the new attention to culture during real socialism.

At the same time, new ideas, phraseology, and technologies entered the cultural scene. The early 1970s saw efforts to revise the state’s rigidly ideological use of culture, replacing orthodox Marxist-Leninist analysis and slogan-like propaganda with subtler interpretations of the role of culture in developed socialist society. According to cultural studies scholar Ivan Elenkov, “directing culture [wa]s no longer conceived as the organization of politico-educational propaganda-ideological campaigns, but as the management of differentiated social processes” that included the entire society, and not only the working class. To attract all social groups, the regime not only “updated the ideological narrative” but also “broadened the scope of official taste.” People were engaged in cultural activities according to their age, employment, inclinations, or lifestyle and in various contexts, such as work, free time, everyday activities (bit), and family life. In 1972, KIK published a “Program for the Aesthetic Education of the Workers and Youth,” which outlined the essence of “socialist mass culture” as an “active, transformational social practice”—completely different from “bourgeois mass culture and elitism”—whose goal was to create “new cultural habits among the masses.”
Reimagining the role of culture under real socialism also meant that there was a pronounced increase in patriotic themes entering the cultural sphere. As in Romania, eloquently described by Katherine Verdery, cultural producers became key figures in the promotion of cultural nationalism, which exalted the long-standing accomplishments of the Bulgarian nation. Writers wrote historical fiction based on national themes while historians published popular historical accounts aimed at lay audiences. Archaeologists oversaw the reconstruction of the sites of the medieval Bulgarian kingdoms’ capital cities. Artists and sculptors decorated public spaces and venues in patriotic imagery featuring medieval and National Revival figures. The rediscovery of the ancient past became another aspect of this shift, evident through the founding in 1972 of the Institute of Thracology to study the ancient Thracian tribes in Bulgarian territory, while the Thracians acquired the status of ancestors. The number of historical series shown of television was a particularly visible part of this campaign, which continued into the 1980s. Cultural producers were now at the forefront of the patriotic turn.

This is not to say that communist ideology disappeared from cultural production. In December 1973, the Eastern European leaders of the respective ideological organizations convened in Moscow to discuss the role of ideology in the context of détente. They concluded that due to the expanding contacts between East and West, only an “ideological offensive” and “multifaceted propaganda of the success of the socialist states” could counter Western propaganda, which now focused on the lower standard of living in socialist states. As a response, in February 1974, Alexander Lilov, the secretary of the Central Committee of the BKP in charge of ideology, convened a plenum dedicated to the “ideological front” in which culture was discussed as an important aspect of ideological work. Yet, this “ideological offensive” went hand in hand with new approaches to culture in the conditions of real socialism, including pragmatism, departure from black-and-white propaganda, and the adoption of scientific vocabulary, in addition to accumulating empirical knowledge about Western reality and selectively disseminating the critical work of certain “progressive” Western intellectuals at home.

In line with the new functions assigned to culture, in April 1974 the Central Committee of the BKP spelled out its goals: the reorganization of the cultural front would lead to “the satisfaction of the cultural needs and aesthetic interests of the people, [and their] turn to communist ideas.” The state centralized cultural policy further: the KIK was put charge of the new vision
and acquired administrative oversight over all cultural institutions. In July 1975, Zhivkov’s daughter, Liudmila Zhivkova, assumed the leadership of the KIK—which in 1977 was renamed the Committee for Culture (KK) and became a ministry (Zhivkova thus became a member of the State Council). Under her leadership, culture experienced far-reaching reorganization that reflected both the new spirit of the times and Zhivkova’s own idiosyncratic visions.

Several projects dominated the work of the KK under Zhivkova. Discussion of what became known as “aesthetic education” had begun before Zhivkova’s time, but in December 1975 the KK accepted the “All People’s Program for Aesthetic Education,” which framed the agenda of cultural institutions for the rest of the 1970s. In the end, the concept of aesthetic education—which emphasized the need “to awaken the creative abilities of each person,” starting with children and continuing for life—became associated with Zhivkova. In her conception—which she conveyed in long-winded speeches in front of her closest associates—aesthetic education was based on the “concept of beauty,” which she saw as a “universal category than constitutes the basis of everything.” The goal was “to teach people how to feel, think, act, and live according to the laws of beauty” so that citizens would become “harmonically developed personalities” able to balance rational and emotional elements. Instead of the worn-out Marxist-Leninist vocabulary, in the context of developed socialist society cultural functionaries offered a vision of “a new personality, reborn through beauty.” By enshrining this vocabulary of beauty, in Elenkov’s analysis, the regime “replaced the old proletarian enthusiasm with a new creative euphoria.”

As the content of culture became updated, so did its technologies. Zhivkova and her associates promoted the use of new cultural tools such as film, television, radio, photography, publishing, music, sports, and tourism to make culture more accessible and guarantee its wide social resonance. Another innovation was the creation of “national cultural complexes”—cultural projects of long duration, whose goal was to include the entire population and guarantee the effectiveness of the cultural message. The cultural experts of the KK developed new cultural forms—“new cultural phenomena”—such as television theater, television film series, radio dramas, television novels, and “synthetic concert-spectacles” that combined theater, film, photo collages, and musicals. This vocabulary of cultural innovation was ubiquitous in the 1970s; often, these new technologies were implemented as a result of the study of “foreign experiences,” with the goal of bringing Bulgaria in line
THE CONTRADICTIONS OF DEVELOPED SOCIALISM

with global cultural trends. But based on their socialist conception, the role of these new cultural mechanisms was to bring together the agendas of the “spiritual elites” who conceptualized these projects and the “mass audience” who consumed them. The ultimate objective was to cultivate new “active consumers of culture”—the new citizen of developed socialism, which was expected to be fully by 1990.  

Within the flurry of cultural activity during the late 1970s, two programs stand out. In March 1978, the Central Committee of the BKP affirmed “The Long-Term Complex Program for the Elevation of the Role of Art and Culture,” which outlined the priorities for the next decade. This document described two cultural initiatives to be carried out under Zhivkova: first, “The Program for the Harmonious Development of Individuals and Society” focused on the cultivation of “multifaceted personalities” (vsestranno razviti lichnosti) and, second, the celebration of the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 681, which was envisioned as the focal point of all cultural efforts.  

Until Zhivkova’s death in 1981, educational and cultural institutions concentrated on implementing these two ideas. Both programs pursued domestic and international agendas, highlighting the intimate connection between local and global aspirations at the core of official cultural policy.

Zhivkova’s interest in multifaceted personalities led to the launching of “complex programs” (kompleksni programi) dedicated to famous individuals seen as having had an indelible impact on the development of human civilization. Experts designed “complex events” (kompleksni meropriatiaia) that encompassed the entire year but also had a clear “culmination” (kulmatsiia). This model would become the signature of Bulgarian cultural outreach under Zhivkova. The program began with a celebration of the Russian artist, humanist, and peace activist Nicholas Roerich in 1978; his choice allowed Bulgaria to mollify Soviet suspicions of unorthodoxy and national self-promotion while still promoting its universalist cultural agenda.  

The second program in 1979–1980 focused on Leonardo da Vinci; the goal here was to emphasize the “common traits between the Renaissance and Eastern Orthodox civilization,” making the world aware of the unique contributions of the lesser-known civilizations in the East.  

Next, the program celebrated Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in 1980 (the 110th anniversary of his birth) and Saint Cyril (Cyril the Philosopher to Bulgarians), the father of the Cyrillic alphabet, in 1981 (to coincide with the 1300th anniversary). These were safe choices, both ideologically and nationally, because they affirmed everlasting commitment to communism while emphasizing Bulgaria’s unique contributions
to Slavic civilization. By studying the impact of such extraordinary people, Zhivkova expected that these programs would reveal “the creative essence of human development” and highlight the interconnectivity between world cultures. Domestically, by learning from example, the citizens of developed socialist society would nurture a new attitude toward art and culture and become harmonious personalities. To promote these new ideas internationally, Bulgaria initiated contacts with the United Nations, UNESCO, and a range of other international organizations, governments, and independent cultural actors. Zhivkova believed that by ambitiously bringing their creative energies together, a small state would contribute to the development of a new attitude to culture in the contemporary world. Both in terms of the ideas promoted and the range of activities planned, this global, humanistic approach to culture constituted a breakthrough for the relatively isolated Bulgarian society.

Next, cultural efforts focused on the celebration of all celebrations, the 1300-year jubilee, the second core element of Zhivkova’s ambitions to reenvision the role of culture. Anniversary celebrations were not a new phenomenon in Bulgaria: officials regularly participated in various commemorative events, both domestically and internationally. But for Zhivkova, the 1300th anniversary was no ordinary anniversary—it was the “focus,” “crossroads,” and “culmination” of rethinking the historical processes within the country and its contributions throughout the world. Because of the critical importance of this “big event” (goliamoto sâbitie) in the cultural policies analyzed in this book, I engage its conceptualization in the next section of this chapter.

The reorganization of Bulgarian culture in the 1970s involved an explicit expansion of its international agenda. This trend was consistent with the pursuit of cross-border contacts by state socialist societies after 1956, but the depth and breadth of Bulgaria’s reach invites us to consider the role of state socialist societies in advancing cultural globalization as it accelerated in the 1970s. In 1974, one of the “representative” (predstavitelni) Bulgarian exhibitions, Thracian Treasures, premiered in Paris, followed by an avalanche of appearances throughout Europe, North and South America, and Asia to showcase the ancient heritage of contemporary Bulgaria. With the success of the treasures concept, officials put together other high-profile exhibitions, including 1000 Years of Bulgarian Icons (focused on the role of Orthodoxy in Bulgarian history), Medieval Bulgarian Civilization, Treasures of the Rila Monastery, and Ethnographic Treasures of Bulgaria, among others. The first project of the multifaceted personalities program also included an international agenda. It focused on Roerich—a Russian poet and artist who had
emigrated to the West, lived in Central Asia and China, and eventually settled in India. In June 1978, a photo exhibit of Roerich’s artwork opened in Accra, Ghana, followed by Prague, Berlin, Washington, Delhi, Damascus, Madrid, Helsinki, and Vienna; the goal was to showcase Bulgaria’s role in facilitating contacts between states at the crossroads of cultures. However, these exhibitions received mixed reviews, especially in Europe, where the showing of photo reproductions did not impress. This experience reaffirmed the focus on high-profile “representative exhibitions,” which became the cornerstone of international cultural policies specifically designed with global audiences in mind.

By the mid-1970s, international cultural outreach had become a core aspect of state policy. Within MVnR, the Department for International Cultural Affairs and Foreign Press coordinated events carried out by the Bulgarian embassies and monitored foreign media coverage. In 1975 the ministry created a Department of Cultural Heritage whose goal was to acquire artistic works from abroad—both Bulgarian and foreign—to enrich the holdings of Bulgarian museums and art galleries. State Security also started to recruit agents for historical espionage in foreign archives, libraries, and museums. Another signature project of Zhivkova’s was the Gallery for International Art, which opened in Sofia in 1985, several years after her death in 1981, to house the foreign masterpieces that were purchased by Bulgarian experts or gifted to the Bulgarian people on the occasion of its 1300th anniversary.

Bulgaria also hosted international cultural events and famous international figures, who were carefully chosen not only to have a desired ideological impact, but also to enrich the cultural scene. In September 1972, African American activist Angela Davis visited Bulgaria to “a welcome of red carnations and friendly smiles.” In February 1973, at the last stages of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Bulgaria gave a warm welcome to writer Erskine Caldwell who visited Sofia as a part of his antiwar campaign. In June 1977, Bulgaria organized an International Writers’ Meeting that brought 144 writers from thirty-two countries to Sofia to discuss the world after Helsinki. Despite anxieties over dissidents and the threat of boycotts, with the meticulous planning of the Union of Bulgarian Writers this event continued regularly throughout the 1980s. In 1978, an International Conference of Bulgarian Studies was held at the Black Sea resort Druzhba (friendship), with a follow-up meeting in Sofia in 1980. In 1981, this event morphed into an even more ambitious project, the First World Congress of Bulgarian Studies, which brought together scholars from fifty-one countries to discuss the worldwide advancement of knowledge about Bulgaria. The World Parliament, convened by the
World Peace Council in 1980, was another high-profile event that brought foreign dignitaries to the capital.  

One of the most innovative and memorable international events was the Banner of Peace International Children’s Assembly that Bulgaria hosted in 1979 for the United Nations’ International Year of the Child. In August, 1,321 children from seventy-seven countries joined 1,100 Bulgarian pupils for a two-week visit that included artistic, musical, and performance events, from chalk art competitions in parks and squares to joint choir performances in public venues and sightseeing excursions to historical sites. The motto of the event—Unity, Creativity, Beauty—reflected Zhivkova’s thinking and the new cultural phraseology in Bulgaria. At the opening of the Banner of Peace Monument on the outskirts of Sofia—which displayed bells from seventy-nine nations brought together in “peace and harmony”—Zhivkova spoke about “the unity, peace, and beauty uniting humanity” and appealed to UNESCO to recognize this “unique memorial” as a heritage site. The organization of this event reflected a core idea of the domestic focus on aesthetic education—the development of harmonious personalities began at a young age. However, Zhivkova had larger aspirations—she saw the assembly as an opportunity to cultivate a “world spiritual brotherhood” (svetovno duhovno bratstvo) with a global impact. It is not coincidental that Zhivkova decided to hold the Second International Children’s Assembly, with more than 2,500 participants, in the 1300th anniversary year of 1981.

These were far-reaching changes in Bulgarian cultural policies, both domestically and internationally, and they caused great excitement among the cultural bureaucracy and had wider resonance in Bulgarian society. The state invested in new ideas and projects that created a dynamic official cultural life during the 1970s. For the first time, Bulgarian citizens saw Ray Charles and Tina Turner on television and viewed da Vinci’s paintings in downtown Sofia while their cultural products toured famous museums or secured international prizes and Oscar nominations. In this context, some among Zhivkova’s entourage spoke about a new, second golden age of Bulgarian culture, following on the first golden age of King Simeon the Great (893–927), the most glorified of the medieval Bulgarian rulers. It is important to emphasize that this state-directed cultural investment was not a selfless promotion of culture, but clearly pursued the goals of the regime. The new cultural practices were not optional; they became compulsory, all-encompassing “events” (meropriiatia) in the life of each Bulgarian. Despite the relaxation of class and party vocabulary, the coordinated omnipresence of these events created, in the words of Elenkov, “a new official, ideologically
unified culture” that could only be the product of a state-managed system of cultural production that imposed its vision on its citizens without transparency or feedback. As Irina Gigova demonstrates in her examination of Bulgarian writers, cultural practitioners felt that they were constantly under demand to produce for various state-sponsored events, participating in an “endless series of mandatory and carefully scripted official gatherings, conferences, and award ceremonies that kept authors mindlessly busy.” If Zhivkova’s policies were seen as the second golden age by some, for others
they constituted the essence of “the bore of the 1970s,” highlighting the contradictory experiences of developed socialism. 68

**The Big Jubilee: 1300 Years Bulgaria**

Because the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian state (also referred to as 1300 Years Bulgaria, Thirteen Centuries Bulgaria, or simply 1300) became the focal point of all domestic and international cultural endeavors, in this section I analyze the core logic, organizational models, and institutional arrangements of the “big jubilee.” The anniversary was envisioned as “the system 1300”—it had to encompass everything and everyone, and a series of secondary events led up to it—the centennial of modern Bulgaria on 3 March 1978, the thirty-fifth anniversary of the socialist revolution on 9 September 1979, and Lenin’s 110th birthday on 22 April 1980. The celebration of 1300 Years Bulgaria in 1981 constituted the culmination of them all. 69 This “big event”—another favorite bureaucratic designation—was planned as a “chain of connected cultural events” involving a range of celebratory activities in the country and abroad, coordinated in consultation with all state institutions, from the Politburo to the neighborhood citizens’ associations. 70

The jubilee clearly pursued patriotic objectives by promoting visions of the historical unity and national glory of the Bulgarian people. In this sense, the “big event” constituted the culmination of the embrace of cultural nationalism in the long 1970s as well. The celebration of the 1300th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian state centered on a foundational event in Bulgarian history: in 681, the Bulgars (or Proto-Bulgarians) of Khan Asparuh crossed the Danube River and, having defeated the Byzantine troops, signed a treaty with Emperor Constantine IV who agreed to pay tribute. Khan Asparuh entered into an alliance with Slavic tribes and began the process of settlement in Byzantine Moesia in a first step toward the establishment of what would eventually become the Bulgarian state. Taking this date as the starting point, the jubilee highlighted Bulgaria as one of the oldest states in Europe. However, this was a celebration of the most notable Bulgarian historical accomplishments more generally. Due to their association with the Thracians, modern Bulgarians had an ancient history that predated the Greeks and Romans. 71 By welcoming the disciples of Cyril and Methodius, who had created a new alphabet for the Slavic languages, the medieval Bulgarian kingdom contributed to the development of Slavic culture and became the beacon of Slavic civilization during the golden age of culture in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Courage, vision, and progressive
The contradictions of developed socialism

Thinking, the argument went, were evident throughout the history of the Bulgarian people, who fought multiple invaders over the centuries (Byzantine, Ottoman, and fascist alike) but preserved their fighting spirit and rich cultural traditions. In sum, Bulgaria was a deserving match to the better-known Greek and Roman influences that were assumed to be the basis of “European civilization.” Also, the Bulgarians built their unique Slavic and Eastern Orthodox civilization even before the arrival of the various “barbarian” tribes that would become the basis of the contemporary Western European states, including the Franks, Anglo-Saxons, and the Germanic tribes of the Holy Roman Empire. The goals of the 1300-year jubilee, which traced the long, glorious history of the Bulgarian people, were twofold: to chart the historical consolidation of the Bulgarian nation over the centuries and to place this process in the context of other European and world civilizations. The architects of the jubilee not only tried to construct an inspiring patriotic narrative of national uniqueness, but also sought to inscribe the history of the Bulgarian nation in the context of universal human values and shared civilizational characteristics. Bulgarian officials thus consciously avoided crude national(ist) characterizations and adhered to more refined, universal, and even cosmopolitan messages.

In addition to these national aspirations, the celebration of the 1300th anniversary had clear ideological objectives. As conceptualized by Zhivkova and her collaborators, the end goal of the 1300 Years Bulgaria program was the collective recognition of the most important figures in Bulgarian history in order to connect the past to communist mythology. By emphasizing the “unity of past-present-future,” the ultimate culmination of Bulgaria’s centuries-long history would be the construction of communist society in the foreseeable future. Conveniently, 1981 was the year of the 1300-years jubilee and the ninetyeth anniversary of the birth of the BKP (as counted from the establishment of Dimitar Blagoev’s Bulgarian Social Democratic Party in August 1891), so as the Bulgarian people were preparing for the 1300th anniversary, they were also celebrating the longevity of the BKP. The function of the jubilee, then, was “to merge the history of Bulgaria with the history of the Bulgarian Communist Party.” Ultimately, the 1300 Years Bulgaria events, seamlessly blending historical and ideological narratives, would skillfully serve the purpose of public relations, as they would increase small Bulgaria’s reputation throughout the world while also advancing its political and economic agenda. Morale-building and prestige-making agendas conveniently came together.

The preparations for the 1300 Years Bulgaria anniversary started in June 1976 when the Central Committee of the BKP approved the celebration of
the “big event” and established a commission that circulated a number of “idea plans” (ideini planove) for the jubilee. In 1978 the National Coordinating Committee 1300 Years Bulgaria (NKK), under the leadership of Liudmila Zhivkova, took charge of organizing the domestic and international programs associated with the anniversary. In November 1978, the NKK accepted the National Program for the Development and Coordination of Activities Related to 1300 Years. Planning for the big event sped up in 1980: in April, the KK and NKK signed off on the calendar of anniversary activities and in October they affirmed the program of important events for 1981. Many of the celebrations were conceived as “complex events” that combined diverse genres and audiences to create a lasting “multiplication effect.” Overall, the NKK coordinated over 3,500 meetings of various institutions and created a planning template for celebratory events. Bulgarian officials designed what can be likened to target plans for jubilee events; these “jubilee plans” were written by each state institution, sent to the NKK for approval, and required a final “general report” detailing the rationale and execution of the plan. The total cultural mobilization of the nation was underway.
To promote the narrative of national unity, the domestic celebration of 1300 Years was conceived as an “all-people’s celebration” (vсенародно тårзхestво) encompassing the entire nation. At the end of 1980, Zhivkov launched the commemorations with a speech titled “Long Live Our Ancient and Always Young Motherland!” Mass events—meetings, congresses, openings of new monuments, youth marches, sporting events—were planned for the Thirteen Days of Bulgaria, each one organized around a distinct theme that reflected the “essence” of the “Bulgarian spirit.” The culmination was the official celebration of the 1300-year jubilee on 20 October 1981 in the newly built People’s Palace of Culture in Sofia (NDK)—a brand-new convention center first used for the Twelfth Congress of the BKP in April. Other monumental structures built for the jubilee included the Founders of the Bulgarian State complex in Shumen, the monument of Khan Asparuh in Tolbuhin (today Dobrich), and the 1300 Years Bulgaria Monument across from the NDK in Sofia.

In Bulgaria in 1981, there were more than 3,000 exhibitions dedicated to the “big event,” featuring over 800,000 artifacts. One of the most conspicuous accomplishments was the opening of the National Museum Palace in the former building of the Jurists’ Council, which housed the 1300 Years Bulgaria exhibition showing the best archaeological and historical artifacts. (Although this caused some controversy because it emptied regional museums). There were over one hundred photographic exhibits around the country, hundreds of theatrical performances, over 550 musical events, dozens of historical film productions (including the epic production Khan Asparuh), more than two hundred books dedicated to the 1300-year jubilee, and dozens of scientific symposia. Some 50,000 Bulgarians participated in the national television trivia competition “Bulgaria, Ancient and Young,” attracting an audience of 750,000. The country was inundated with medals, pins, buttons, coins, posters, calendars, and stamps featuring the 1300th anniversary theme, which proudly disseminated the message of the national glory of small Bulgaria.

Yet from the beginning, 1300 Years Bulgaria was also envisioned as a global affair. In preparation for their international plans, Bulgarian officials meticulously studied “foreign experiences” beyond the anniversary celebrations typical for the Soviet bloc. One survey of anniversary celebrations for the period 1979–1994 in fifty-seven countries compiled examples from “brotherly socialist states, Balkan, Arab, developed capitalist, and some developing countries.” The countries listed under “a” included Australia, Austria, Albania, Algiers, Angola, Argentina, and Afghanistan. In the end, cultural functionaries chose the anniversaries of Poland, Iran, and the United
States as the three models that most fit their needs, while also singling out two counter-models of practices to avoid, those of Belgium and Romania. Surprising cultural partnerships and unlikely exchanges of ideas framed the conception of the “big event.”

Bulgarian experts studied in detail the Polish millennium of 1966, which celebrated the Christianization of Poland in 966. An appealing element of the Polish celebrations was the blending of historical and contemporary themes: the anniversary emphasized the progress of Polish socialist society throughout the centuries, but showcased the twentieth anniversary of
the establishment of the People’s Republic of Poland in 1966 as the peak of the millennium celebration. Experts paid close attention to the role of the “reactionary and fanatic” Catholic clergy, which had tried to “divide the population into religious and non-religious” through the organization of alternative, church-led millennial events; they tried to anticipate similar difficulties in Bulgaria due to the similarly prominent role of the Orthodox Church in Bulgarian history. Finally, the mass participation of a large number of émigrés in the millennial celebrations had highlighted the “moral and political unity of [Polish] society,” an appealing example for the Slavic Committee, the official Bulgarian organization for Bulgarians abroad, which similarly tried to rally the Bulgarian diaspora.

While Poland was an understandable model for the Bulgarian jubilee, some of the other choices appear more eclectic. This was especially the case with the 2500th anniversary of the establishment of the Persian Empire celebrated in Iran in 1971, a lavish affair that included the opening of beautifully reconstructed historical sites, such as Persepolis, the capital of Cyrus the Great (which may have inspired the extensive reconstruction of the medieval Bulgarian capital Veliko Târnovo). The appeal of the Iranian anniversary, however, was in its international features, namely the promotion of tourism, the involvement of UNESCO, and the establishment...
of “national celebratory committees” to coordinate jubilee celebrations in some fifty-two countries. The Bulgarians similarly pursued the recruitment of high-profile foreign public figures to spearhead Bulgarian cultural events abroad. Yet, surprisingly, Bulgarian functionaries also studied the U.S. experience in the bicentennial celebrations of the American Revolution in 1976, despite the compulsory castigation of “the failures of American propaganda” and the “important problems of contemporary American society.” Appealing elements of the U.S. program included the active state involvement in a long-term, complex celebratory program and the constitution of a Bicentennial National Committee; the mass participation of Americans in celebrations at the local level; the use of souvenirs, badges, banners, and other paraphernalia; and the extensive media coverage.

The study of these foreign anniversaries produced some curious transfers of knowledge across ideological lines. Notably, considering the “ideological overload and overdose” of the U.S. events, Bulgarian experts recommended the removal of propaganda language from events associated with their own 1300-year jubilee.

This obsession with not going overboard was most obvious in the study of celebrations that Bulgarian officials believed had gone astray. The 150th anniversary of the formation of the Belgian republic occurred in 1980, but the official motto of that jubilee, “Belgium, in the Heart of Europe,” was problematic because its idea of Europe consisted of “the Europe of NATO, of the [Western] European common civilization (including the USA and Canada) . . . as an antithesis of socialist Europe.” Rejecting the limited resonance of the Belgian celebrations—which were confined to Western Europe—the Bulgarians instead wished to engage with all European states, East and West. The 2050th anniversary of the unification of the Dacian tribes by Burebista in a centralized state, seen as the basis of contemporary Romania, also occurred in 1980. Bulgarian officials openly mocked this “fake anniversary” that “contradicts historical truth” because of Romanian “nationalism and historical revisionism.” By contrast, the Bulgarians planned to use measured national language and adhere to professional historical analysis.

In the end, the Bulgarian experts designed an international celebratory structure that selectively combined elements from the Polish, Iranian, and U.S. celebrations, while heeding the mistakes of Belgium and Romania. First, ideological or nationalist “overload”—like in the United States, Belgium, and Romania—was to be avoided. Instead, even if promoting a vision of national history, the 1300-year celebrations tried to embrace universal civilizational ideas and rigid historical standards. Second,
international involvement became a core element of the commemorative program, whether reaching out to the diaspora, as the Poles did, or involving UNESCO and foreign dignitaries, as the Iranians did. Third, like the U.S. experience, the Bulgarian celebrations were long-term, broad-spectrum complex events that would utilize all available resources but would have a clean culmination to emphasize the core message. Fourth, based on the Iranian model, special national jubilee committees would recruit well-meaning foreign public figures to enhance the international dimensions of the events. Finally, following the Polish example, these would be mass events involving the total mobilization of the state apparatus, the population at large, and foreign participants.

With these plans in hand, in the period between 1977 and 1981, Bulgarian officials organized more than 38,000 cultural events abroad. Bulgarian

Figure 12. Logo for the 1300th anniversary featured in official Bulgarian publications for foreign audiences, such as the magazines Bulgaria Today and Slaviani.
embassies throughout the world were charged with conceiving “jubilee plans,” which they sent for approval to the NKK in Sofia and followed up with regular quarterly reports. As 1981 approached, priorities shifted to the organization of high-profile “complex events” to attract political and media attention. Diplomats also sought to establish national celebration committees composed of local public figures that would facilitate those events; committees were established in sixty-two countries in all. Each embassy was expected to have a “culmination” marking the jubilee while they were also tasked with securing the attendance of heads of state or parliamentary representatives at the “all-people’s celebration” in Sofia in October 1981.

By official estimates, some 25 million visitors attended the various events abroad. The demand to deliver cultural events put stress on the bureaucracy of a small state working in conditions of total cultural mobilization. In one sense, the organization of the 1300-year jubilee abroad could be understood as a series of target plans executed in conditions of fierce competition within a cultural field characterized by acute product shortages. These “cultural shortages”—to paraphrase Janos Kornai’s interpretation of socialist societies as “economies of shortage”—were particularly intense during the peak of the jubilee in 1981. With the high demand for cultural products, the 1300th anniversary celebrations became an aspect of the power struggles between institutions and political personas, because in the context of cultural shortages all state officials vied for the best of Bulgarian culture. Altogether, these efforts consumed a vast amount of time, energy, and resources for over five years and produced an elaborate international cultural program without precedent in Bulgaria and possibly the rest of Eastern Europe.

The People: Bulgaria’s Power Elites

The elevated role of culture in Bulgaria in the 1970s went hand in hand with the promotion of a new generation of intellectuals and officials—often intellectuals in the role of officials—who were in charge of the new processes. The emergence of “new younger blood” in Bulgaria was not limited to the cultural sphere; the new generation of communist elites also entered the economic sector, foreign policy, and trade. Western reports on Bulgaria remained obsessed with its “power elite,” which—in the analysis of RFE—acted as a “steering mechanism” in a “closed society.” British diplomats, for example, compiled biographical compendiums of Bulgaria’s “leading
personalities” that summed up their official roles but also added vivid personal details. What is striking in these bios is the sizeable presence of functionaries who launched their careers in the cultural front. Zhivkov first promoted a number of new faces among the intellectuals in the course of the state reorganization after the 1971 constitution. He saw those cadres as “new blood” with professional training and modern thinking, but also as people directly indebted to him for their careers. Some of these intellectuals became a part of his inner circle by joining Zhivkov’s hunting crew, an ever-changing group of party leaders, state officials, intellectuals, and public figures whom Zhivkov patronized and who, in turn, often benefited from their proximity to him. At the same time, Liudmila Zhivkova promoted her own protégés whom she recruited to transform her ideas into policies, giving rise to what became known as Liudmila’s circle. Some of “Liudmila’s people” also joined Zhivkov’s hunting crew. Evgeniia Kalinova speaks about a symbiosis between intellectual and political circles in the 1970s when the state generously provided loyal intellectuals with material benefits and opportunities for recognition and new informal power groups with enormous influence arose. It is thus imperative to present the most prominent members of the power elites relevant to this story, who also promoted Bulgaria’s reimagined position as a global player.

Todor Zhivkov, a secretary of the Central Committee of the BKP since 1954, firmly enshrined his power with the 1971 constitution. According to a British assessment, Zhivkov was “energetic and practical rather than intellectual. He has a quick mind, a bluff manner, a sociable temperament, an earthy sense of humour and a habit of laughing uproariously at his own jokes. But he . . . may deliberately play the jolly peasant role of popular consumption.” This psychological portrait of Zhivkov is important because many of the internal dynamics in the country were attributed to his personal style of governance. In 1977, after the removal of yet another political adversary, Boris Velchev, a longtime secretary of the Central Committee of the BKP, Zhivkov initiated a series of new appointments in the Politburo (including his daughter’s promotion in 1979). In Alexander Vezenkov’s analysis, after the 1977 restructuring of power, the Politburo was firmly under Zhivkov’s control and consisted of a group of “veterans without any functions,” “long-term collaborators of Zhivkov’s,” and younger technocrats who owed their rapid promotions to him. With this new wave of appointments, the third generation of communist elites—following the first that came to power in 1944 and the second installed by Zhivkov after his takeover in 1954—was emerging as a powerful force; some, such as Zhivkova, were related to the
old guard, but others rose from the ranks or despite their family’s bourgeois origins. Many involved in the new cultural activities were part of this third generation.

The most visible member of the third generation was Liudmila Zhivkova, whose meteoric career caused much fascination, both domestically and internationally. She became highly visible in 1971 (at age twenty-nine) when she became acting first lady following her mother’s death, a status augmented by her appointments as the chairperson of the KK in 1975 and a member of Politburo in 1979, positions she held until her death in July 1981 (at age thirty-nine). There is some discussion in the Bulgarian literature about whether she executed policies of “enlightened absolutism” that benefited the public or used her family background to advance personal agendas in the worst manifestation of the dynasticism and nepotism of communist elites. Her depictions in Bulgaria at the time remained dogmatic and, after her death in 1981, hagiographic. But details of her biography did not follow the conventional expectations of communist elites: in one example, she did her PhD in Oxford, not in Moscow. Further, her idiosyncrasies—her practice of yoga, meditation, and theosophy; her unconventional clothing and diet; and her rumored close relation with a famous Bulgarian clairvoyant, Baba Vanga—have produced prolific scholarly and popular writing.

Figure 13. Todor Zhivkov during an exhibition in the company of Svetlin Rusev, chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Artists. Undated. Zhivkov liked to be seen as a cultural benefactor. Source: P. Kolev, published with permission.
Even though it was taboo to talk about these peculiarities of Zhivkova’s in Bulgaria in the 1970s, they were under discussion in the West. A British study of 1980 described her thus:

[She is] well-travelled . . . [and] small of stature, neat and expensively dressed. She is intellectual, committed, and ambitious; and holds strong (although not necessarily coherent) views of art, culture, and ideology. She is prone to regale visitors with long lectures on topics like “the public-state system of cultural management” or “aesthetic education.” . . . In private she is apt to speculate on quasi-religious subjects. . . . She is interested in yoga and transcendentalism. Her latest enthusiasm is for humanism. . . . She is a formidable person in her own right and her future career is not necessarily dependent on her father’s remaining in power.  

It is worth engaging Western coverage of Zhivkova because the foreign press was fascinated by her appearances and associated the organization of Bulgarian events abroad with her. Much of her appeal was in the perception of freshness she was supposedly bringing to Bulgarian power circles. “Having a dictator for a father was a good start to a political career,” claimed the press, but observers also admired the fact that Zhivkova was “intelligent” and had an “independent mind.” She was a “good Marxist-Leninist,” insisted that intellectuals in Bulgaria were “monolithically united around the Party,” and knew how to counter criticism of her father’s regime. In 1976, when the newly minted “culture boss” was asked if she would consider becoming the head of state one day, she jokingly answered, “why not, we have no sexual discrimination.” Other “power kids” in the communist world also spent time in the West, and the nomenklatura everywhere had access to special stores, cars, homes, and travel, creating “red dynasties” that functioned as “family affairs.” Bulgaria, too, enjoyed “a high degree of family management” because Zhivkova’s goal was “to place her country’s culture at the service of the regime headed by her father.” But when comparisons were made between Bulgaria and Romania, for example, Zhivkova earned high marks from Western observers; if Elena Ceaucescu (the wife of the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaucescu who held various senior party and state positions) destroyed people, Liudmila Zhivkova promoted them.

In the end, even RFE—despite its universally negative attitude to communist elites—described her as a “politician, scholar, and widely travelled diplomat” who had gathered an “inner circle of talented young officials.” By 1980, “the energetic daughter of the durable [Bulgarian] president” who “combine[d] oriental mysticism, European philosophy and Marxist doctrine”
had become “the most influential woman” in the communist bloc. The Western media celebrated her for promoting technocrats while observers eagerly watched her pet project, 1300 Years Bulgaria, which was “unlikely to please the Soviet Union which is traditionally suspicious of nationalist feelings that could loosen ties to Moscow.” In the end, she was seen as a positive phenomenon among the Eastern European power elites because she was assumed to be introducing fresh ideas that undermined the domination of ideology in the cultural sector.

There were a number of other “fresh faces” from the third generation who shaped the Bulgarian policies of the 1970s. In one British assessment, the new Bulgarian power elites shared certain common features: “They have been advanced rapidly and deliberately, and one day soon they may really rule the country. They will be more open to ideas. They would die in the last ditch in defense of what they conceive to be ‘real socialism’ but their concept of it will be very different from that of their predecessors.” First among them were three recently appointed members of the Politburo, who represented the ideological, foreign policy, and economic sectors. Alexander Lilov, initially the head of the Arts and Culture Department of the Central Committee of the BKP, was made responsible for ideology in 1974, demonstrating the important role of both culture and ideology (and their close link) in the Bulgarian state apparatus. Because of the speed of his promotion and his young age, the British saw him as “effectively No. 2” after Zhivkov. Petar Mladenov, a minister of Foreign Affairs since 1971 and Politburo member since 1977, had been educated in Moscow after his father, a member of the resistance, was killed during World War II. “Confident and effective” and “generally serious, but with a fairly relaxed manner,” he was well-received abroad because of his erudition and foreign-language skills. As obvious from his long-standing position as a foreign minister, he “enjoy[ed] good personal relations with Todor Zhivkov,” who trusted him to represent his agenda abroad. Finally, Ognian Doînov, one of the youngest Politburo members since 1977, became an increasingly influential voice in economic policy. Knowledgeable in the areas of industry, transportation, and science, including the sphere of electronics, he initiated a number of ambitious international projects of economic and technical cooperation.

As far as the cultural sphere was concerned, there was a precarious balance between the old guard and the “new blood” that Zhivkov constantly had to manage. While his daughter promoted her protégés, he tried to appease the secret services who viewed the newcomers with suspicion. In 1977, the philosopher Liubomir Pavlov—seen as an ally of Zhivkova’s—became the head of the Department for Arts and Culture of the Central Committee of
the BKP, which set the main cultural priorities and vetted proposals from cultural and creative institutions. But some old cadres remained influential, including Academician Pantaleî Zarev, a literary scholar, deputy chairman of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAN), and member of the State Council, who was seen as a “highly orthodox spokesman for the regime on literary matters, a hard-liner, sharply critical of western literature and its influences.” In contrast, the poet and playwright Georgi Dzhagarov, recently elevated from the cultural circles by Zhivkov, was viewed as “outwardly anxious to promote better relations with the West” (despite his “contempt for foreign pop music”). A former president and secretary of the Union of Bulgarian Writers, Dzhagarov had served as the vice president of the State Council, effectively right under Zhivkov, since 1971. Dzhagarov, Zarev, and another writer, Emilian Stanev (who shied away from politics but published prolifically), were core members of Zhivkov’s hunting crew, as was the sociology professor Stoian Mihailov, who joined the Central Committee of the BKP in the early 1970s and became the head of its Agitation and Propaganda Department in 1973. 106

In the meantime, a number of Zhivkova’s protégés—who formed “Liudmila’s circle”—assumed important positions. Three of these stand out in particular. Alexander Fol was the son of an interwar intellectual, and his bourgeois origins had caused problems during his university studies. A specialist in ancient archaeology—“more an academic than ideologue or politician”—he was behind the establishment of the Institute for Thracology affiliated with BAN in 1972 and initiated many international cultural initiatives showcasing Bulgarian culture. He began his career in the state apparatus as Zhivkova’s deputy in the KK in 1975, and in 1979 he was appointed as the minister of education. British diplomats described him as “a friendly, rather burly man, with an informal manner,” who “makes good impressions on Western academics” and “continues to hanker after the academic life.” Liubomir Levchev, “a poet of some distinction,” also became a deputy chairman of the KK in 1975, which underlines how these functionaries relied on Zhivkova for promotion. “A leading figure in the younger generation of Bulgarian poets,” he had become a member of the Central Committee of the BKP in 1972 and chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Writers in 1979 and continued to shape the larger agenda of cultural policy through his close relationship with Zhivkov’s family, both father and daughter. Similarly, the artist Svetlin Rusev, a “close associate” of Zhivkova’s and a “people’s artist,” became the chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Artists in 1973 and a member of the Central Committee of the BKP in 1976. In the assessment of the British he was “of saturnine appearance, . . . [and] a prolific artist whose painting
does not offend the canons of socialist realism.” His paintings and frescoes, executed in a uniquely recognizable style, were featured generously at home and abroad throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As a sign of their growing influence, in the late 1970s Levchev and Rusev joined the hunting crew, which now became a desirable destination for cultural figures. Mihail Gruev describes “Liudmila’s circle” as “guild elites”—educated in the West and possessing a different value system, they were frustrated by the static thinking of the second generation in charge, so they used their influence in the cultural bureaucracy and their international contacts as a channel for upward mobility and professional realization.

The term power elites seems suitable to describe those shaping policies in the 1970s due to their closeness to or cooperation with Zhivkov’s family. It is true that the new policies sometimes also benefited the lower echelons of society. Similarly to elsewhere in Eastern Europe, professionals and experts in Bulgaria played an important role in redefining the relationship between state and society during real socialism and successfully carved out a degree of autonomy; for example, Kristen Ghodsee has shown the active agenda of the official women’s organization in guiding social policy during the exact same time. Yet, the power dynamic described here remained top-down, capturing the less optimistic side of détente, eloquently described by Jeremi Suri, who insists that détente represented the conservative choice of political elites, in both East and West, who wished to impose a stable status quo through selective appearances of change in the aftermath of 1968. In the 1970s, the “new blood” among Bulgarian officials, including those from the cultural sphere, successfully entered political circles and consolidated their own power. They did not push for far-reaching reforms of the existing system, but helped perpetuate it.

**Where Are the Dissidents?**

The dynamics of official Bulgarian culture and its changing and high-profile entanglement with the power structures of the 1970s is connected to another contentious question, namely why, during the classic period of dissidence elsewhere in Eastern Europe, dissidents were scarce in the Bulgarian intellectual landscape. Episodic manifestations of nonconformity—for example, the refusal of five Bulgarian writers to sign a 1970 telegram to the Nobel Committee protesting Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s prize (engineered by Dzhagarov)—were often overblown by Western media, which fixated on highlighting protest in Eastern Europe. When Bulgarian officials and cultural producers planned their international events, the question of dissidence
was constantly on their mind because they expected that they would need to confront the issue of dissent (or lack thereof) in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian situation highlights the slippage between nonconformity, opposition, and dissent when thinking about the engagement between intellectuals and the late socialist regimes. While there may not have been a dissident movement that explicitly and systematically defied the regime, pushing back against the establishment through nonconformity (avoidance or refusal to comply) and opposition (criticism of and going against the official position) was certainly present.

In the mid-1970s, the cultural scene in Bulgaria seemed to have fallen in with the official line. In Kalinova’s opinion, many intellectuals, despite the lack of official institutions of state-enforced censure, practiced a form of self-censure in order to be able to produce and be acknowledged publicly. Yet, various behaviors were certainly manifest; as the state generously invested in culture, intellectuals had a range of ways to respond to institutional demands. While Levchev embraced conformity and joined the Central Committee of the BKP, a fellow poet, Konstantin Pavlov, chose dissent and faced intellectual exclusion and physical deprivation that earned him the nickname “the Uncompromising” (neprimirimiat). The writer Georgi Markov was initially tempted by the rewards made available to him, only to become one of the staunchest critics of the Zhivkov regime after defection to the West: as an RFE and BBC correspondent, his blistering critiques of the Bulgarian power structure and society in the 1970s turned him into the main target of State Security. Markov was an exception, and he also worked from overseas; few intellectuals openly defied the regime from within. Interestingly, cultural producers now regularly traveled abroad, including to the West, but very few chose to emigrate (defectors included the sculptor Liubomir Dalchev and the writer Atanas Slavov).

This is not to say that all intellectuals were reluctant to criticize the regime: as Natalia Hristova has shown, criticism of select policies and the public “poking” of those in power had existed since 1956. In 1975, a work by Blaga Dimitrova and Iordan Vassilev, a biography of the famous poet-ess Elisaveta Bagriana, criticized the political complicity of intellectuals and described some positive aspects of interwar society, choices unpalatable for cultural arbiters. But while Vassilev was fired from his position as the editor of a premier literary magazine and transferred to a less public academic position, Dimitrova remained an active public figure and continued publishing, showing that the regime carefully chose how to retaliate. Others, such as the poet Radoi Ralin and writer and screenwriter Hristo Ganev, often expressed “heretical” views on “ethical” issues and had earned
the reputation of being “thorns” in the side of the state since the 1950s. In fact, by the 1970s, the Bulgarian state apparatuses had accepted the fact that “total control was impossible.” In 1978, the British ambassador observed that public criticism in Bulgaria was now flourishing as grassroots grievances were encouraged and some (lower) officials were fired; for him, this was far from real liberalization, but part of a strategy so that the Party would maintain control. The spirit of public criticism was evident in official cultural production, as well. In 1977, the newspaper of the Komsomol (Communist Youth), Narodna mladezh (People’s Youth), published a dialogue between Ralin and cartoonist Boris Dimovski that criticized aspects of the political regime. These episodes demonstrate that nonconformity was selectively tolerated. Yet, one shift was clear in the late 1970s: with the rise of more visible dissent elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Western media now tended to imbue oppositional and nonconformist episodes with a new, clear-cut dissident meaning across the entire region.

In February 1977, the Viennese newspaper Die Presse, based on information provided by a putative Bulgarian Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, reported that four Bulgarian writers had been arrested for their refusal to condemn the Czechoslovak oppositional advocacy group Charter 77. Kamen Kalchev, Hristo Ganev, Gocho Gochev, and Valeri Petrov all denied that they had been arrested (yet did not deny they had been questioned), and Kalchev declared to the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA), “if I were ever repressed, that was by the fascist authorities thirty-two years ago.” Likely under pressure, the four published a denial in the French newspaper Le Monde in early March, while other writers appeared on the radio, denying that intellectuals were unable to express critical opinions in Bulgaria. Later in 1977, Blaga Dimitrova gave an interview to the French magazine Nouvelles Litteraires and discussed the challenges of maintaining one’s creative and civic position in socialist society. The French journalist rather naively speculated about the existence of a dissident organization in Bulgaria, demonstrating the careless Western attitude that caused complications for Eastern European intellectuals who were working in precarious environments. Finally, in March 1978, a document titled “Declaration 78” was slipped under the door of Western embassies in Sofia (Dutch, German, and British). The longer Bulgarian text was accompanied by a shorter, and rather sloppy, English translation, which included a call for the end of human rights violations in Bulgaria and demands for freedom of expression, religion, travel, and independent trade unions. Despite the discrepancy between the two texts and their unclear authorship, the Western press was buzzing with news about
a “Bulgarian Charter 77.” For both the Western press and Western diplomats, the search for Bulgarian dissidents was on.

This shift in the West also had domestic repercussions. In 1977, the Sixth Division of the Committee for State Security started to obsess about dissidents and “potential dissidents” in Bulgaria and began compiling files of intellectuals to watch. Still, the conclusion of the operatives was that “currently, there is no imminent danger of the creation of a dissident movement and there is no clear public figure that could lead it,” demonstrating that the vigilant secret police, whose raison d’être was the existence of enemies to the regime, did not find the situation alarming. At the same time, official propaganda campaigns to undermine any Western claims of Bulgarian dissidents began, especially after a number of high-profile defections, including the trusted correspondent of Bulgarian television in Paris, Vladimir Kostov, who received asylum in France in summer 1977 and joined RFE shortly thereafter. In its foreign broadcasts, Radio Sofia called reports of dissidence “Western slander” and charged that dissidents were “political renegades” and “people sick with their unfulfilled ambitions” who sought “profitable jobs” in the West. Further, such broadcasts reassured listeners that in socialist societies “constructive criticism is not punished, but encouraged.” Zhivkov proactively tackled the issue. In December 1977, he appeared at the annual Conference of Young Writers to describe dissidence as “the fastest way . . . to be forgotten.” He branded dissent as a “phenomenon of conjuncture” (konjunktura) created artificially from abroad and insisted that “dissent does not exist in Bulgaria” because that required opposition to the political system, something that did not occur. In Bulgaria, there were no dissidents, which were a fantasy of the West, but only nonconformists, or as Zhivkov called them, “otherwise thinking individuals” (inakomisleshti). In the late 1970s, the official position was that the West was “inventing dissidents in Bulgaria” to create a sensation because in its observation of human rights and its social policies, “Bulgaria had outstripped the West.”

The biggest blow to the image of the Zhivkov regime, however, did not come from within. Throughout the 1970s, Georgi Markov, as a correspondent of the BBC in London and a collaborator of RFE in Munich, published and broadcast profusely against the regime and Zhivkov personally. Bulgarian diplomats protested Markov’s employment, as well as that of fellow journalists Vladimir Kostov and Petar Semerdzhiev, calling them “defectors and traitors of the motherland” and foreign commentators who disseminated “lies” and “false commentaries” against Bulgaria. State Security branded Markov as “the main loudspeaker of anticomunist and
CHAPTER 1

anti-Bulgarian propaganda and active perpetrator of ideological sabotage against our country.” Markov fell ill in London on 7 September 1978 and passed away on 11 September; a poisoned pellet had been injected into his leg with an umbrella (the notorious “Bulgarian umbrella”), creating speculations about KGB (the Soviet Committee for State Security) involvement but pointing to the unquestionable targeting of the author for political reasons. The Western press exploded with the news. From the Bulgarian perspective, “lies and gossip against our country” proliferated, at exactly the same time that Bulgarian diplomats were promoting a new image of their country through culture. In the words of British diplomats, “For once, the Bulgarians have reached front-page attention in the British press—and they don’t like it.” As Bulgarian reports from London put it, the “anti-Bulgarian campaign” in Great Britain became “dissolute and malicious” in insisting that the Bulgarian government had ordered the murder. British journalists “exposed the corruption in Bulgarian leadership” and presented Bulgaria as “a country that does not observe the most basic democratic rights and freedoms of individuals.”

Hostile publications in the Western press snowballed. Bulgarian diplomats in France now frantically reported “anticommunist propaganda” that presented selective information and glorified Soviet and Eastern European dissidents. Prominent French leftists condemned the human rights abuses in the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union, which they said were “full of concentration camps and psychiatric wards.” Once a friendly destination, France had become uncertain terrain, as had Austria. There, attacks on the Zhivkov clan became personal. In an article titled “Zhivkov on the Eve of His Fall,” the Viennese magazine Internationale Politik criticized the lavish lifestyles of his daughter (“the princess”) and his son-in-law (“the playboy”) and contrasted their shopping sprees, fashion statements, and expensive restaurant choices to the modest lifestyles of ordinary Bulgarians. In another article, the same outlet criticized the building of NDK to celebrate the 1300th anniversary events (and the Twelfth Congress of the BKP), labeling the structure “Liudmila’s palace.” Although it had started with human rights and dissidents, the Western press was now dredging up the depravity of the Bulgarian power elites and the responsibility of the Zhivkov clan for the direction of the country.

Zhivkov remained confident in his ability to preserve his power and disarm domestic and international challenges. When a new British ambassador presented his credentials in September 1980, Zhivkov, “relaxed, jovial, [and] confident,” joked that ambassadors liked to see the countries in which they served in the news. He then assured the diplomat that Bulgarians were
“easy-going people” and “hard workers,” and there were no dissidents, “not because everything [in Bulgaria] is perfect,” but because the Bulgarians did not want to “shame” their country and “embarrass” their families. Up until the mid-1980s, while the Western press and Bulgarian émigrés would keep looking for dissidents in Bulgaria, the regime remained secure in its control of the cultural sphere. Famously, in 1985 the literary journal *Puls* (Pulse) published an acrostic poem, “Down with Todor Zhivkov,” but Zhivkov confidently dismissed the incident as a “trifle.” The intellectuals, the most likely source of dissent, had been mostly tamed. There were some “otherwise thinking individuals,” but no dissidents threatening the core of the regime (at least not until the late 1980s).

What is the explanation for this lack of a more organized dissident movement? In the interpretation of a number of scholars, it was the velvet prison of material benefits and the calm personal attitude of Zhivkov that persuaded many Bulgarian intellectuals not to pursue the path of dissidence. Further, if, as Hristova claims, dissidence required Western sanction to acquire legitimacy, then the West’s failure to embrace any Bulgarian intellectual except Markov also played a role. While “a small part of the cultural intelligentsia showed a clear tendency toward disagreement with the regime,” ultimately it was “Zhivkov’s style” (zhivkovata atmosfera) of personally engaging with the “otherwise thinking individuals”—as eloquently described by Markov himself—that undercut the effects of “potential Solzhenitsyns” in Bulgaria. In her work, Gigova similarly describes “the transformation of [Bulgarian] writers into an obedient, materialistic, and nepotistic administrative body.” With active state investment in culture, the slippage between cultural producers and cultural bureaucrats erased the possibility of dissent. This situation is not without parallel elsewhere. Czechoslovak playwright Milan Uhde explained that it was the “mechanisms of ostracization” after 1968 that had led him down the path of dissent: “If they had only treated me a little bit better, they would have had me,” he confessed. Zhivkov apparently knew better than Gustáv Husák, and instead of firing and imprisoning intellectuals, he invited those who grumbled to lunch, listened to their grievances, promised cooperation, and then evaded or watered down his promises, while reassuring the public of the success of developed socialism.

The Normalization and Nationalization of Late Socialism

The features of late socialism that emerge out of this analysis of the long 1970s in Bulgaria are full of contradictions. The consolidation of Zhivkov’s political regime was not the result of political repression; instead, he
promoted new faces and reform programs, leaving the illusion of change while solidifying his position. Further, relative economic stability, rising living standards, and the social accommodation of the population undermined the allure of protest and facilitated the silent acceptance of Zhivkov’s “benevolent dictatorship.” As Zhivkov played off adversaries against each other, promoted loyalists, and disarmed dissidents, society grumbled, but did not revolt. The question remains, were the 1970s the period of the great boredom of monotonous state-produced propaganda or a golden time of state socialism before the collapse of its legitimacy in the mid-1980s? One might answer that it was both.

The cultural policies analyzed here allow engagement with this question as they involved elites, regular citizens, and international representatives in multilayered discussions about the values, traditions, historical lessons, and future directions of the country. The 1300-year jubilee, as the focus of these policies, played a critical role in the promotion and cementation of (cultural) nationalism as a strategy adopted by the Bulgarian regime for its legitimation during the period of developed socialism. Given the apathy of the population vis-à-vis worn-out ideological clichés, it was ultimately the national rhetoric that awakened the collective sentiment of Bulgarians and created an emotional bond that brought together the people and the state around shared national ideas and values. Katherine Verdery has demonstrated the similar functioning of national ideology for the legitimization of the Ceausescu regime in Romania. In Bulgaria, too, cultural events often promoted national narratives, which appeared as sophisticated and universal, yet their patriotic charge clearly sought to mobilize and unify the population. This observation demonstrates the role of official culture in the perpetuation of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe; while some citizens of developed socialism brushed off these activities as propaganda, for many others such national campaigns had value and impact.

Anniversary celebrations played an important role in inserting nationalism into socialist public debates elsewhere in Eastern Europe, as well. In 1966, the Polish regime organized a celebration of the Polish millennium, which similarly charted a continuum of the Polish nation throughout the centuries, from the Christianization of the Polish people in 966 to the socialist revolution in 1946, and similarly served the purpose of legitimation. In Romania, too, the Ceausescu regime orchestrated the 1980 celebration of the 2050th anniversary of “the unified Dacian state of Burebista” as a precursor of contemporary Romania and charged intellectuals with rewriting national history to serve this goal. In her comparative analysis of Bulgaria’s 1300-year jubilee and East Germany’s celebration of 750 Years Berlin, Elitza
Stanoeva analyzes those two celebratory occasions as the “search for positive instruments for mass mobilization.” As far as the GDR is concerned, this trend involved the invention of an East German socialist nation, but the desire to engage the masses was paramount. As shown by Emil Dimitrov, in Bulgaria the use of “national mythologies” in times of crisis had the function of creating a “positive national ideal in the sphere of culture, not politics or war.” In the precarious 1970s, cultural policies ultimately provided a positive national ideal that could unite a dispirited society around shared values.

The focus on “the national” (natsionalnoto) and its elevation to “fate” (sâdba) was at the core of the conceptualization of Bulgaria’s 1300th anniversary, which embraced the euphoria of national triumph. The 1300th anniversary eulogized the spiritual strength of the Bulgarian nation and put national pride at the center of what Ivan Elenkov describes as an officially promoted “national cult.” At the same time, the global dimensions of the jubilee reinforced the Bulgarian longing for reassurance that, indeed, “we have also given something to the world,” as Ivan Vazov, modern Bulgaria’s most prominent literary figure, put it in verse. In the end, the promotion of (cultural) nationalism, both at home and abroad, provided a safety valve for the regime. In its most sinister version, this nationalism was also responsible for the suppression of the Turks in Bulgaria during the “rebirth” campaigns that began in 1984 with name changes and the prohibition of Turkish-language use and Muslim practice and culminated in the forced expulsions carried out in 1989. But for the period of the 1970s, patriotism was a strategy for positive reinforcement of a normalized developed socialist society that would otherwise be dominated by apathy and disappointment, and possibly tempted by dissent.