On the Bulgarian Folk Dance Club Movement

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This essay is composed of three parts.[1] The first provides a general picture of the Bulgarian folk dance club movement's birth and development. The second elaborates on the club's genre and the national genre spectrum. And the third addresses the club's performances abroad, the Bulgarian national image, and the today's "branding of Bulgaria."
The Bulgarian folk dance club movement is a complex 21st-century phenomenon that is dynamic. The observations below only address a few particular aspects of this movement as observed in 2008-2018.

I. The Bulgarian Folk Dance Club: Picture at Large

On the Bulgarian National Exoticism

In 2001, I shared my first observations on "The folk dance ensemble in the period of transition" while describing the period metaphorically after 1989 as the "Dirty Days, or the "Karakondzhol's period." (Ivanova 2001). In the traditional Bulgarian calendar, this is the period from December 24 to January 6 – "Yordanovden," also called "Voditsi" or "Bogoyavlenie." This is the day of purification by blessing the water, allowing a fresh start of the new year. These 12 days are often described as the time where "the old" is about to go but is still there and "the new" is about to come but is not yet here. This "neither-nor" time is a dangerous one because creatures from the underworld may attack people and cause fatalities.

For Bulgaria, the painful transition in finding a democratic way of governance was "on" during the entire first decade of the 21st century. It continued to be "on" during the second decade. Even today (2022), the country continues to endure a long "dirty days-period," and there is no clarity about the coming of the political and economic "Yordanovden."

The mentioned earlier "Karakondzhol's" image, describing the Bulgarian political and economic transition, evokes (at least in me) the notion of "national exoticism", as suggested by Bulgarian philosopher and culture theorist Boyan Manchev. This "national exoticism," on its part, plays a significant role in the Bulgarian national project and the EU's "United in Diversity."[2] The latter, recognized or not, is related to folk dance. How might this be?

The article, "Modernity and Anti-modernity: The Bulgarian Nationalexotism" by Boyan Manchev (2003) reminds us that "for any 'classical' national project, as well for the modern European culture in general, the paradigmatic role of the mythological and historical figures of the Ancient Greek culture is undoubted. [3] For various reasons, however, Bulgaria could not follow the same path in developing its own national project. The problem with legitimization was solved by the fact that Ancient Greece had two faces, personified by Nietzsche in the figures of Apollo and

Dionysus.[4] At this point, Manchev brings the notion of "nationalexoticism," which he composed by the analogy of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notion of "nationalaesthetism ." Along with an elaborated description of this concept, Manchev suggests an ordinary, or "banal" description as he put it, which is: "The nationalexoticism believes that, to rescue its identity, the national culture should not agree to be shaped by the cast of the "European one" (Manchev, 2003).

I can easily apply this "banal" description to the boom of the Bulgarian folk dance club movement. My fieldwork includes various interviews and surveys with participants in this movement, most believing that our music, dances, and folklore, in general, are among the richest in the world, if not the richest. There is a widely spread understanding that we might not yet have an economy or organized society as developed as Western Europe, but we have our folklore.

The Bulgarian national project lays upon the fiction of the lost paradise, a condition of an initial nature-community harmony, an idyllic state of "natural," organic, pre-political society, writes Manchev. This lost happiness still keeps its source – the pure materiality of the Bulgarian-ness, of the Bulgarian soul.[5] When living in such a dysfunctional state, holding hands gives a sense of security, a feeling of togetherness, and enjoyment from being part of the circle, home, and family. Folk dancing may be seen as unconsciously seeking re-connection with the "noble savage," pre-political state, a lost paradise.

While reading Manchev, I turned back to the works of the first Bulgarian ethnographers, musicologists, and national character psychologists who, with such passion, collected traditional music, dance, and artifacts to build a dignified image of a culture that is distinctively Bulgarian.

To a certain degree, this passion is still in existence today. It is related to this noble image of the Bulgaria's centuries-old culture. It is associated with the beauty of Bulgarian traditional music, traditional songs' poetics, and dance rhythms that are pretty "exotic" for the ordered "West." One may say that the mere affiliation with this music and dance rhythms today acts as an expression of one's Bulgaria-ness, a cultural reaction against *chalga* that is not only a mix of Balkan music motives but represents the cynicism and the vulgarity of some people of power. And, yet, things are more complicated. Many folk dancers are "consumers" of *chalga* products and productions. Some of my interviewees even believe that the ethno-pop-and-chalga[6] music prepared the ground for the folk dance club's appearance.

The Historical Background of the Urban Folk Dancing and the Birth of the Club

Before addressing the club's birth, let me briefly summarize what I discussed in length in my earlier essay on the ensemble.

The 1920s, 1930s, and 40s in the 20th century were the years when recreational folk dance groups were first established in larger Bulgarian cities. The first group in Sofia was affiliated with the city's sports union (See Dzhudzhev 1945). The socialist period, 1944-1989, set the standards for professional ways of arranging traditional dance. As a result, a new genre was born: "Bulgarian stage dance art based on folklore," also called the "ensemble genre."

In the second half of the 20th century, if one was born in a city and wanted to learn Bulgarian dance, the only way to enjoy folk dancing was to join an amateur folk dance performance group.

Some of the reasons for the blooming of urban folk dancing in organized forms were discussed earlier. Among the key factors were:

- the large migrations into cities (changing from agrarian to industrial economy) in the 1950s and 1960s
- the cultural politics of the time in supporting professional and amateur dance arts activities and using them for propaganda and control
- the adoption of the high professional ensemble training system from the USSR
- the need for folk dancing (entirely apolitical), a joy to perform and compete with others through an artistic and social activity in Bulgaria and abroad.

The folk dance group and folk dancing was meant to be a "safety valve" by the government, but it also became a "safe(ty) place."[7]

The post-1989 transition affected professional and amateur folk dance ensemble activities profoundly. But life appeared to be stronger.

Along with the closures of many urban performance groups, new dance-related cultural entities appeared. By then, Bulgaria had established several institutions offering bachelor's degrees in Bulgarian folk choreography. This fact started to play a crucial role. Many professional choreographers needed a job. In addition, the new economic situation encouraged private initiatives. Later on, in one of my surveys, the boom of the recreational club folk dancing was described as a "business response to the needs of the market."

What were these needs, and how they were recognized as such? And when?

Personal Involvement and First Observations

I started a group for recreational folk dancing in the Beli Brezi neighborhood in Sofia in 2004. By that time, I had been discussing the opportunity of offering recreational folk dancing in a group, club, or a Balkan House with colleagues and friends, for few years. I believed that the moment for this kind of recreational club activity in Bulgaria had finally arrived. I felt it almost as an imperative, a call, to establish a form, a medium, that differs from the ensemble model. Everybody should be welcomed to dance traditional Bulgarian dances. At any age. No obligations.

To my invitation responded about 15 people and we started to dance in an apartment complex's meeting room, half a mile from home. At that time, there were some similar initiatives in Sofia and Plovdiv, but very few.

I was highly motivated to teach my middle-aged students popular dances and village patterns. The suggested donation was two leva per class. The earnings were minimal because some people couldn't afford to pay even this symbolic amount.

I vividly remember carrying two large bags to our venue: a CD player along with the CDs in one bag, and a teapot, an immersion heater, teabags, and teacups – in the other. I enjoyed making tea during the breaks, wishing to create evenings in which everybody would dance and would have a good time. With no exaggeration, to me, this was a healing activity for our struggling

society. I called these folk dance evenings "gatherings" (*sreshti*). In the same fashion, later on (2014), I initiated folk dance afternoons with the Bulgarian Seattle community on Saturdays. It never occurred to me to call such gatherings rehearsals (*repetitsii*) or *trenirovki* (sports-like training hours) – in the way that many people call them today. Which actually reveals what they think they are doing when going folk dancing. When such groups grow an appetite to perform, then rehearsals are unavoidable.

Because of my lengthy tours to the States in 2005 and later, I couldn't sustain my group leadership and asked someone with choreographic training to take over. Two years later, in 2007, *Horo se vie izviva* – the first festival competition for recreational club dancing was held in Sofia. This was followed by another in 2008. My former group was among the several hundred participants, now three times bigger, all dressed in uniforms – pants, skirts, and t-shirts with the group's logo – like almost all these clubs.

This club folk dancing has branched out fruitfully since 2007-2008. Right from the beginning, the movement began demonstrating curious relationships with the Bulgarian folk dance ensemble.[8] And at this point, Anca Giurchescu's words echoed in me: "instead of complaining about the disappearance of some forms," to quote her freely, "dance scholars should pay attention to the many phenomena that are now emerging." (Giurchescu 1999).

In 2008 I took this reminder as a green light to look closely at the dance clubs' activities. Under the spin of this fieldwork, I delivered a paper on the Bulgarian folk dance club competition for our first ICTM group meeting in 2008 in Struga (Ivanova-Nyberg 2009). I was convinced that the Bulgarian club movement, although inspired by the club movement of other European countries (some of which were inspired by American International folk dancing), was taking a direction that clearly differed from the known European and American models.

I was also positive that the "revival" concept, as interpreted in a country like Norway (see Bakka 1999), cannot be fully applied to the Bulgarian context. This was so because this "revival" did not begin because of academic endeavors but started as a grassroots movement. It was initiated by professional choreographers, not by scholars. The political, cultural, and economic context was different, the professional backgrounds and motives of the initiators were different, and so was the entire phenomenon.

What Happened? Why Recreational Folk Dancing Now?

"Why going folk dancing in a club and why now?" This survey was conducted with members of several newly established clubs participating in Sofia's 2008 "Horo Se Vie Izviva" festival competition. Most of the members were people with a Bachelor's degree or higher. And here are some representative responses:

> There is interest, and it is pretty big; it is not only among middle-aged people but also among younger generations.
> Finally, folks understood that we are Bulgarians, and it is a shame that it is only *chalga* that is listened to.

There is an increased patriotism and more sensitivity to Bulgarian identity.
Yes, there is an increased interest because the Bulgarian dances are unique.
Yes, definitely, because dance is a never-failing source of emotional stimulation.
Yes, there is an interest because our national consciousness has changed.
Yes, we get tired of *chalga*.
Yes, there is an interest because Bulgarian music and dance reflect our spirit, and we must retrieve these Bulgarian values.
Yes, there is new interest because of fitness and music.
Hmm, good question…. Healthy spirit – in a healthy body, I would say.
There is rebirth, and it is evident. In my opinion, this stems from the resurgence of our interest and love for the rhythms of Bulgarian dance. We all have this love inside, which was sleeping until now. Second, there are many taverns and restaurants where they play Bulgarian music, and you could enjoy both music and dancing. And also, nowadays it is affordable to pay the monthly dues for your leisure activities. Some of us, during university study, barely succeeded in paying for our books.

Grouping the motives under "I go folk dancing *in order to*…, and I do it *because of*, which I did in my "ensemble research" in following Schurz (Ivanova-Nyberg 2011) revealed several key words and phrases. For example, dancing in a club was related to "physical effort which allowed (provoked) psychological "discharge." After dancing, people are in *high tonus, great spirit, so excited; dancing is fun; I feel as if I am about to fly.* One goes folk dancing because it is fun. On the other hand, satisfaction comes from the established friendly relationships among the people dancing together and joining hands. Many classify the dance club as a "second home" or a "second family." One starts loving going folk dancing *to* dance and have fun but also *because* one feels welcomed in such a second home.

The reasons for folk dance club's popularity go far beyond "folk dancing is fun." And we cannot even begin listing the titles that analyze the complexity of this human activity and the folk dance itself. But we should not forget that this desire for dance within a community and in a circle by holding hands lies in a centuries-old village (peasant) tradition.

Now let us look at one of the factors outside of folk dancing *per se* that appeared to be of a particular significance.

"Folks Finally Understood that We Are Bulgarians?"

While considering the topic for my paper for the 2013 conference of ASEEES (Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, I encountered an article entitled, "To Be or Not to Be... Bulgarian?" It was written by Slavka Karakusheva, a Ph.D. student at the Department of History and Theory of Culture at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." Her research attempted "to explore the processes of (re)construction of the national from below through the private initiative in the area of folklore." This article provided current first-hand observations.

One of Karakusheva's interviewees, a dance leader, claimed that he personally can name at least 100 groups in Sofia only. According to this choreographer, whose club "Chanove" had 1000

members, 20 choreographers as instructors, and eight branches around the country, nowadays, there are about 200 000 people involved in the recreational folk dance club dancing (Karakusheva 2013).

Karakusheva's article provoked me to think of conducting a new survey, "Why Folk Dancing?" This time, however, by transforming one of the responses to my 2008 survey (the answer about the raised patriotism) into a question. Was there in 2013 indeed an increased patriotism and raised ethnic awareness that played a specific role in the rapid multiplication of the clubs' numbers? If yes, how influential such a factor might be? So, the 2013 survey, distributed online, included questions about personal motives, the reasons for the growth of the club's popularity, the development of the club's form, the preferred repertoire, the role of the competitions, and the emotional relationships with the club, and more. But also, the question about the raised patriotism.

To the latter, some people responded that this is pseudo-patriotism; people living in Bulgaria get into this deeper and deeper.[9] *Unfortunately, this is expressed mainly as dividing people and negating others (nation, people, religion, etc.), i.e., the difference.* (Anon.)

From the 50-plus responses, one third believed that, *yes, the increased patriotism is a factor*; nearly another third suggested that it is the other way around (which was never mentioned in my 2008 survey). And the rest answered that the club folk dancing has nothing to do with patriotism: *Hah-hah…Where do you see these patriots?*

Some used the opportunity to share additional comments and thoughts. For example, a person who had lived in the United States for two years expressed how ashamed she was that an American thought her "Pravo horo." *I promised myself that as soon I returned to Bulgaria, I would start learning folk dances.* (Anon.)

Although this survey was not a broad sample, the opportunity to juxtapose 2013 answers to the 2008 responses helped me broadened my perspectives on the national awareness as a factor in club's development. It also reminded me to be careful in claiming any particular factors as "the factors" and to stay aware of the complexity of the club phenomenon.

On the Club's Development Issues

> I wanted to believe that people are returning to the "source," to their roots, to some emotions and feelings of connection with the past, with our ancestors, and at the same time – to the future with the feeling of the unbreakable line of life. But unfortunately, I am more and more convinced that the interest is only on the surface. There is only a desire for some kind of sport, gymnastics, and having a good time. (Anon.)[10]

Interviews from 2013-2016 recognized further changes since my 2008 research. The situation in the country: There are so many clubs that people are not asking themselves, "Are you dancing somewhere?" but "Where are you dancing?"

The latter I hear from my interviewee. Emil Genov, Georgi Garov, and Stefan Vitanov. The first is in his early 60s, the second is in his early 40s, and the third is in his early 30s. All three were professionally and passionately involved in the Bulgarian folk dance scene. Moreover, all

three believed that recreational club dancing continued developing in the most dynamic ways. To them, it was wonderful that so many people were involved in recreational folk dancing today. This is a beautiful occurrence: people dance Bulgarian dances, listen to Bulgarian music, and are drowned in Bulgarian folklore.

On the other hand, some new trends were not welcomed. Enthusiasts who danced for a couple of years decided they had learned enough to start their own businesses because, as Emil Genov pointed out, this folk dance club movement is a commercial enterprise. But today, one may observe all kinds of compilations. Internet flashes dance clips mixing different dance regions and styles. This is a very irritating issue for people who danced for many years and studied Bulgarian choreography at the highest level. Stefan Vitanov advises these newborn club leaders to be careful with their public activities: "It doesn't look funny anymore, and I don't feel like laughing… Nothing will change, but I am saying it because it bothers me."[11]

All three interviewees understood that the instructors needed to feed the dancers' interest. They have to introduce new material all the time.And as a result, some "nice dance pieces" appear but also *golemi gluposti* (nonsenses). To all three choreographers, creation is a "normal" development. Still, presenting a newly created choreography without clarifying its nature is not alright. These new *izmisltsi* (creations, pl.) go viral on the internet because of the thirst for new material.

The club's dances distributed via YouTube are often called "synthetic dances" by some specialists – "X is one of *these* dances." Yulian Yordanov, who, up to 2019, led a Bulgarian group in Sunnyvale, California, shared: "But sometimes I have to teach some of these creations because my dancers want to learn them." (Yordanov 2016)

The unified repertoire goes along with the unified music. Garov: "Dance leaders must understand that they need to invest some time in research and also some money in recording so that every club will have its own music." (Garov 2014)

Many folk dance competitions exist: "If you want to observe a competition this weekend, you can open the internet and find one right away" (Vitanov 2013). These competitions have positive and negative poles. It keeps some groups stimulated, but on the other hand, "what kind of competition could be a competition for traditional dances?"

> I was a jury member for one competition, and I will not repeat it, even if I have to live thirsty and hungry. I initiated a gathering like this in my area. However, it is for outdoor dancing and having fun to live music… We shall bring people together in the dance and the joy, not to separate them… (Garov 2014)

There are three main trends in the repertoire: one toward attempts to resurrect some old village patterns, another – to find a "catchy" tune and develop a new choreography (Garov 2014), and the third one lies in between. According to Emil Genov, if a newly presented pattern has the needed quality, it will stay. One day it will become folklore. People will dance to it without knowing who introduced it. Folklore is not frozen but constantly developing (Genov 2013). Among the choreographers, there are different opinions about what folklore is and is not. Several

choreographers even attempted to create an organization that will, so to say, "approve" the legitimacy of newly introduced patterns. Genov strongly disagrees with this idea because such censorship belongs to the communist/socialist era, and we now live in a *pazarna ikonomika* (free-market economy).

Some choreographers try to use dance descriptions presented by Bulgarian researchers and choreographers several decades ago. "But the result from reading and interpreting such written documents was just horrible… (Garov 2014)

From Dancing for Fun to Performance

Soon after the first wave of the Bulgarian recreational folk dance club movement, clubs started to perform. Most dance leaders arranged several traditional or newly composed dances and built a stage repertoire. "Is it a kind of neo-folklore, post-folklore, or neo-fitness?" I asked one of my interviewees, the choreographer Yordanov. "I don't know," he said. "It's a mixture, kind of a hybrid" (Yordanov 2016).

I cannot discuss the complicated nature of hybridity here.[12] Concerning postfolklore, I would suggest, along with Inna Golovakha-Hicks (2006), that we probably don't need this concept (at least in this text) since the dynamics lay in the very heart of folklore.

This question of what kind of cultural form the club is may be better approached by looking at the overarching style of the club's performances. "Where there is style, there is a genre," Bakhtin pointed out (1986, 66). And "any style is inseparably related to the utterance and to the typical form of utterance, that is, speech genres" (Bakhtin 1986, 63).

In Bulgaria, as discussed earlier, the relationships between the dance and the text have been terminologically established for decades: choreographers talk about dance text, teach the dance alphabet, etc. It has been accepted by the folk choreography guild nationwide to define the staged dance arrangements as a "folk stage arts genre." The ensembles have their own specific types of utterance or folk dance styles.

So, what about the folk dance club genre? The club's performances across and outside the country? The Bulgarian national genre spectrum and the Bulgarian national image?

The following two parts will address these challenging topics.

II. On Bulgarian Folk Dance Club Genre and the National Genre Spectrum

This journey with the genre began with reading and rereading Michail Bachtin (1986), Tzvetan Todorov (1990), John Swales (1990, 33–67), and others. Miller helped me first approach the genre as social action (Miller 1984). Next, I happily encountered Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff's "Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy" (2010). I knew these works on the genre are a tiny portion of the tip of the iceberg and remained open for insights from scholars working in different disciplines.

While thinking on the vast dissemination of the club's repertoire in Bulgaria and around the globe,[13] the role of the internet and social media, I was also provoked by the concept of mediatization. Andreas Hepp describes mediatization as "a frame for researching the relationship between media and cultural change" (Hepp 2009, 140). The process is on an impressive scale, and I would argue that this impacts Bulgarian culture as a whole.

Understanding Genre

Let me begin by reviewing an introductory paragraph from Bawarshi and Reiff:

> Despite the wealth of genre scholarship over the last thirty years, the term genre itself remains fraught with confusion, competing with popular theories of genre as text type and as an artificial system of classification. Part of the confusion has to do with whether genres merely sort and classify the experiences, events, and actions they represent (and are therefore conceived of as labels or containers for meaning), or whether genres reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways (and therefore play a critical role in meaning-making) (Bawarshi; Reiff 2010, 3–4).

I found this way of looking at genre to be very productive. Also helpful was how Bawarshi and Reiff discussed the etymology of the word genre:

> On the one hand, *genre* can be traced, through its related word *gender,* to the Latin word *genus,* which refers to "kind" or "a class of things." On the other hand, *genre,* again through its related word *gender,* can be traced to the Latin cognate *gener,* meaning to generate (…) At various times and in various areas of study, genre has been defined and used mainly as a classificatory tool, a way of sorting and organizing kinds of texts and other cultural objects. But more recently and, again, across various areas of study, genre has come to be defined less as a means of organizing kinds of texts and more as a powerful, ideologically active, and historically changing shaper of texts, meanings, and social actions (Bawarshi; Reiff 2010, 3–4).

And a final quote:

> Such a dynamic view of genre calls for studying and teaching genres beyond only their formal features. Instead, it calls for recognizing how formal features, rather than being arbitrary, are connected to social purposes and to ways of being and knowing in relationship to these purposes. It calls for understanding how and why a genre's formal features come to exist the way they do, and how and why they make possible certain social actions/relations and not others (Bawarshi; Reiff 2010, 3–4).

So, my first premise will be that the Bulgarian folk dance club genre reflects processes in Bulgarian society (occupies a passive role, so to say). There are specific features that distinguish this genre from both "classical" folklore, with its traditional dance patterns and the folk dance ensemble tradition. The second premise may be defined in contemporary jargon. In essence, it is not proper

to say that folk dance leaders and attendees create a new genre; we can also say that the genre creates them. And, as is the case with the disseminated "synthetic" dances, we indeed observe processes of dissemination and adaptation of particular cultural knowledge.

Performing Abroad Before 1989

Let us bring a few paragraphs from the previous essays that will provide the historical perspective of before/after 1989 performance politics.

Along with the Philip Koutev State Ensemble (est. 1951),[14] nearly 20 professional ensembles were formed in the 1960s and 1970s in the largest municipalities across the country. At the same time, there was "an army" of amateur ensembles for children, students, and adults, all supported by the State. In the 1950s, in parallel to ballet professional training at the high-school level, the professional folk dance training branch was established at the National Choreographic School. Graduates of this school would either work as professional folk dancers at one or another professional ensemble or pursue a MA or BA choreographic diploma to become professional choreographers. An academic institution for higher choreography training in Plovdiv began to offer its MA degree in 1974. At the same time, a similar program (with BA in Bulgarian choreography) was founded in Sofia by the Institute for Music and Choreography. In addition, other folk dance courses/schools were offered in Plovdiv.

The performance quality of some amateur ensembles was nearly at the level of the professionals; such ensembles were granted the distinguished title of "predstavitelen" [representative] ensemble. These would be the ensembles that possess the prestigious privilege of traveling abroad. The tours abroad were not initiated by the choreographers alone. The entire activity was well-organized and monitored by the Center for Amateur Art. The Center was a domain of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, and they coordinated all the invitations for domestic and international festivals.

There was no way for an ensemble to travel abroad, i.e. to represent Bulgaria at international festivals and forums, without the approval by the Center. It was unimaginable for a group to travel by simply accepting an invitation received through private channels. All the profiles of the ensembles – with their leaders, repertoires and overall activities – were "card-indexed." Prior to departure, the selected ensemble's members were subjected to careful investigation. This would typically involve the Bulgarian Communist's Party (BCP) Secretary within the dancers' affiliated institutions.

Becoming a Stage Performer

A child or an adult couldn't appear on a big stage for being simply talented and loving to dance. In the early 1970s, several children's ensembles across the country had more than 300 children organized into groups. Each group had a specific repertoire according to the age group. This went hand in hand with proper character exercises[15] that inevitably shaped a child's body postures,

movements, and overall performance style. At age 10, at such a high-level ensemble, every dancer had learned how to wear stage costumes and change one outfit with another in the blink of an eye. Such troupes regularly performed complete concert programs for foreign state officers, diplomats, and Bulgarian Communist Party officials. In addition, they appear at other major celebrations and travel to national and international festivals and competitions.[16]

Children dancers repetitively travel to perform abroad to present characteristic examples of Bulgarian staged folk dance repertoire. They typically continued to academic or cultural house ensembles at higher levels. This would also be the usual pathway for choreographers that pursue MA or BA degree in Bulgarian folk choreography.

Performing Abroad as a Competitive Endeavor

For a child, student, or an adult member of a folk ensemble before 1989, traveling abroad, especially to a "capitalist" country, was an exciting opportunity to see the world outside the "Iron Curtain." But folk dancing in the city was an engaging and stimulating activity all by itself. It presented a chance to participate in building "stage art based on folklore," to be a performer, to be good at it, to enjoy the stage and the social experience, and much more. So it would be inappropriate to say that the opportunity to perform abroad was "The Factor" and the thing "at stake" for participating in the ensemble's rehearsals. And, yet, it was a factor.

Performing abroad was a very competitive endeavor. The competition was executed on two levels: ensembles/choreographers across the country (on the "predstavitelen" – representative list of the Center) and among the dancers within the ensemble. All of these disappeared with the disappearance of the Berlin Wall.

Back to the Topic of the Democratic Changes and the 21st Century Urban Folk Dance Scene

The reader already learned that with the change of the political and economic model in the 1990s, the State lost interest in keeping the "windows-display" shining and as a result, most ensembles have lost their financial support. So, many folk dance ensembles began collecting a monthly fee from their members and continued their activities. Some began exploring new artistic forms and approaches. Traveling abroad was now possible, but the expenses were covered by the ensemble members or private sponsors, not the State.

The choreographers wanted to keep the performance quality high. However, they soon realized that the best dancers could often not support themselves. The cast for a tour now consisted of those who could pay for the travel expenses. The best dancers in the ensembles were not necessarily included in this new expectation for self-support.

After the closure of the Center, every choreographer began creating their own network at home and abroad. Everyone started seeking sponsors, became aware of the role of marketing, and began to explore various avenues for self-promotion and self-sustainability.

Those who graduated with a choreography diploma from one or another state or private institutions began offering folk dance lessons for recreational enjoyment. There were no particular directions or requirements by the State about how to organize such initiatives. Simultaneously, there was this "hunger" in the air for recreational folk dancing.

The reasons for the appearance of such a "momentum" in the society, and the variety of the motives of the participants were complex.[17] The motivations ranged from interest in folk fitness to "know thyself" – in this case, "know thy roots." The initial involvement spawned an excitement and pride in Bulgarian cultural heritage as expressed through Bulgarian music and dance. And here probably one may sense the connection between folk dance club's movement and the notion of the nationalexoticism (with its belief that, to rescue its identity, the national culture should not agree to be shaped by the cast of the "European one," Manchev, 2003).

Along the way, most dancers from recreational clubs developed an appetite to perform and compete (See Ivanova-Nyberg 2011, 384–395 and Ivanova-Nyberg 2019). Many clubs elicited two platforms: one for recreational dancing and the other for performance. The second collected a wardrobe of various costumes (along the process of elaborating stage repertoire). Some dance leaders went deep into field research. They created complete choreographies, sometimes with particular dramaturgy. Others established a partnership with leading Bulgarian composers and choreographers and took their groups to a high-performance level.

With the apparent strive to organize-lead-and-attend competitions, answers could be approached from different perspectives offered by studies of culture, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, folklore, and more. At the same time, this strive may also be linked to the past Socialist era. One of the most significant stimuli for the folk dance ensemble genre for both choreographers and performers for decades was the regional and national competition. The folk dance competition is deeply grounded in the past and well embedded in the culture. It returned again in the 21st century as spring blossoms.

On the National Genre Spectrum

The changes in the type of Bulgarian folk dance performance abroad are related to the observed changes within the "national genre spectrum." The concept of "national genre spectrum" contains the general understanding of the relationship between dance and politics[18] as is the case with "national dance." The latter is understood in the sense proposed by Nahachewsky, to whom the core of national dance activity is connected with political power and statehood; "national dance" is dance performed primarily as an expression of allegiance to a state or a potential state." (Nahachewsky 2012, 19).[19]

In the Bulgarian context before 1989, "national dance" meant "dance art based on folklore" or "dance ensemble." After 1989 "national dance" is still related to the "dance art based on the folklore." One of the differences is that Bulgaria today has both its "old" National Folklore Ensemble "Philip Koutev" and a new private National Ensemble "Bulgare."[20]

In the past few years, however, "Bulgare," not "Philip Koutev," toured the United States with the support of private sponsors. Although "dance art based on folklore" remains the "national dance," there are significant changes in the national genre spectrum. These are addressed below.

National Genre Spectrum Before 1989

Before 1989, one can distinguish the following dance genres within the Bulgarian genre spectrum: traditional/folk dance, stage art based on folklore, ballet, European ballroom competitive dances, and modern dance.[21] And although ballet, modern, ballroom, and traditional dance received funding from the government,[22] the most substantial support was given to the stage art based on folklore. This was "the art form" of the socialist government, the chosen type of "national dance" that would serve as the "business card" of Bulgaria to the world. It was based on Bulgarian music and dance village tradition. At the same time, it was closely related to the origin of the Bulgarian communist leaders. It demonstrated the affiliation with the Soviet system throughout the Soviet's ensemble genre that gave birth to the suite form. Ethnographic regions were defined and represented by various suites with a prevalence of geometric figures.

The ensemble genre reached a high professional standard on the artistic level, with the government's support. Manifestations of this professionalism and staged repertoire were proudly presented abroad and cultivated a sense of national pride.

Bulgarian Folk Dance Club Phenomenon and the 21st Century National Genre Spectrum

The national genre spectrum was most visibly shaped by the appearance and development of the folk dance club. It may be defined as a hybrid, the latter used in its broader sense.

The Bulgarian dance club today is neither a recreational folk dance club (house) as it is known in other countries, such as Hungary, nor an ensemble or performance group. It possesses a duality, being neither entirely recreational form nor quite a performance group. It is not an ensemble in the "classical" sense either. Yet, it adopted some of its characteristics.

Among folk dance recreational club's membership, there are people who, in their youth, had always wanted to join an ensemble. Still, there was never the opportunity for this. Others had never dreamed they would be interested in such a "thing" as a regular practice in a recreational dance group. With the democratic changes, this momentum came into the culture when interest in Bulgarian music and dance bloomed.

Why dancing in a participatory mode[23] is not "good enough" is a separate topic and has become the subject of additional research. [24] The attention now is on the type of performance. After everything said so far, one would assume that an average club's stage appearance would differ from that of an ensemble. And not only because clubs typically perform in their uniforms with the club's logo (excluding the clubs that elicited its more technically advanced performing formations). But shall one consider the club's stage appearance an "artistic product?" Or rather,

it is as a performance of a new democratic practice. One that shows the process, rather than the product, a new kind of cultural performance.

The club folk dance-and-dancing grew to be a way to perform one's "Bulgaria-ness," one's cultural identity – within and outside the homeland.

III. The Bulgarian National Image: Who Has the Right to Perform Abroad?

"What Happened to Your Choreographic School?"

Apparently, among the international folk choreography guild, there were (and still are) specific expectations of what a Bulgarian dance performance is "supposed to look like." This "look," or image, [25] was related to the ensemble model developed to its highest points in the 1970s and 80s. Ensembles that toured abroad were, if not all, professional, semi-professional, developing repertoires similar to those of professional ensembles. Before 1989 village groups also traveled abroad but presented their programs under the category of "authentic" or "not-arranged" folklore.[26] Bulgarian choreographers and ensembles' performers were accustomed to compliments for their programs and awards for their professional artistic achievements. The credit for such warm receptions would go to individual choreographers, of course, but also to the Bulgarian national choreography school. To a certain extent, this is valid also today when ensembles with a high standard (masterfully directed) present their programs abroad. But not only such troupes travel abroad.

Reactions to questions regarding the compromised prestige of the Bulgarian national choreography school are related to one's seriously-taken devaluation of one's professional career. This profession indeed requires years of disciplined training and practice to develop mastery in creative work. Understanding such reactions would involve discussion of feelings, i.e., emotions. These are part of the larger picture, composed of identity, image, reputation, and nation branding.

Performances Abroad and "the Branding of Bulgaria"

"Today, almost every country wants to manage its reputation."[27]

Although comparing a country to a brand is only a metaphor[28] and "nation branding" doesn't exist,[29] the idea called "nation brand," as introduced by Anholt[30], stimulated many researchers to explore this metaphor's potential. Part of the latter are studies that investigate the strategies for building a positive image of a country.[31] How do these strategies relate to the clubs' performances abroad?

In 2007 Bulgarian scholar Nadia Kaneva published a paper entitled "Meet the 'new' Europeans: EU accession and the branding of Bulgaria." This paper focuses on the two government-commissioned commercials (one on the occasion of the Treaty for Accession signed in 2005 and the second commemorating the country's formal accession on January 1, 2007

(Kaneva 2007). A subsequent study provided an analytical overview of the "growing body of research on nation branding, arguing for expanded critical research agenda on this topic." (Kaneva 2011). These two works and the investigations of nation branding in post-communist Bulgaria[32], were especially contributive to this study not only because of the broader theoretical framework but also because of particular fieldwork observations. Here is a quote from comments on "Nice to meet you," a one-minute TV spot:[33]

> The main purpose of the spot, it appears, is to show Bulgaria as "not different" but the same as other EU member states. It portrays a "normal" city lifestyle decidedly not unique to Bulgaria. […] It does little… to distinguish Bulgaria from any other European country and in this sense, it is a branding paradox—in this spot what is unique about Bulgaria is its lack of uniqueness. […] The spot projects a "desired" national identity which, in simplified terms, might be read as: "Bulgaria: a normal country."
> The myth of normality – and the limits it sets on the way a "normal country" is supposed to look – are borrowed from the West and wrapped up in the larger ideology and image repository of modernity. This repertoire of modern images inevitably includes technology, urban settings, and a certain level of affluence and comfort. By creating a narrative about the image of Bulgaria that remains strictly within the limits of a Western imaginary of modernity, the spot implies that the West is a model and a standard against which Bulgaria must judge its national development and its image. (Kaneva 2007, 7).

The Bulgarian folk dance club fits well into this urban picture; it doesn't have the ideological "baggage" of the ensemble previously supported by the State. Instead, the club's model was borrowed from Western Europe and the United States. And yet, this is only a part of the club's characteristics; it is unlikely for recreational clubs from the West (International Folk Dance clubs) to travel abroad and perform.

More examples are included in Kaneva and Popesko's paper from 2011. Kaneva's analysis here shows that without the Bulgarian music and dance-related scenes, the chosen sites/images (that are presented without their contexts) could be representative of other countries that follow global marketing objectives.

> While the images in the spot are appealing, the overall symbolism is rather generic, offering a simple listing of Bulgaria's tourism assets: monasteries, wine, beaches, mountains, skiing and golf, hotels and beautiful young people. Were it not for the logo at the end and the folkloric musical theme used as the commercial's soundtrack, one could take this to be an ad for just about any country. Like the Romanian commercial, Bulgaria's branding narrative combines references to ancient traditions (Roman ruins, Christian monasteries), natural beauty (beaches, mountains) and images of modernity and opulent lifestyle consumption (spas, skiing, golf, hotels). The juxtaposition of these elements captures the tension between a national identity narrative rooted in a pre-communist historical heritage and a new one expressed through the tropes of Western, capitalist modernity.
> (Kaneva 2011, 200).

The "normality" of today's Bulgaria includes one's freedom to have a private business/dance company, even a national ensemble, and to be an entrepreneur. To obtain one's education at a private institution, live within or outside the country, and travel without restrictions. Within this picture of "normality," borrowed from the West, there is not much attention paid to Bulgarian folk dance art based on folklore and its ("spoiled") image abroad. This art doesn't play the same role as it once did. Bulgarian music and dance activity became "more democratic" in the sense that this activity is totally decentralized and there is no censorship.

The folk dance is the domain of not only the state but also private institutions/organizations establishing their own identities. The state (throughout its institutions) doesn't consider itself the one and only responsible "body" for the condition of this art. It does not believe that the folk dance ensemble genre deserves special attention for its national and international affairs.

Regarding State funding, after 1989, folk dance activities of all kinds are treated as marginal. These activities are associated by many new politicians with the previous regime and Bulgaria's socialist past. The club, however, is a new "democratic" phenomenon that follows the private entrepreneurship model.

Both ensembles and recreational groups/clubs rely on their own marketing to recruit members and sponsors. The annual opportunity to travel abroad and perform at festivals (in a socially friendly environment) serves as a successful strategy to attract new members and keep the group motivated.

Bulgarian Music and Dance as a Constituent of the Bulgarian National Image

Bulgarian music and dance have always been part of the Bulgarian national image. Many talented people worked passionately and developed the genre "Folk Dance Art Based on Folklore." With its transition from rural to urban, this art form involved people from all levels of Bulgarian society – peasants, workers, artists, intellectuals, and academics. However, because the ensemble had been previously used as a political symbol,[34] it generated mixed public appraisal and attitude.

The politics of the past – prior to 1989, supported their own ideology. Still, they succeeded in building a national professional status with established institutions for choreographic education.

In today's period, many professional choreographers are irritated by the quality of the club's arrangements presented abroad. To them, these compositions lack any artistry. According to some of my interviewees, such "medleys" resemble the immature period of folk dancing on stage from the 1960s. Presented abroad, these arrangements somehow eclipse decades of sustained efforts toward building a respected reputation of the Bulgarian professional school. It is considered a long step backward.

Simultaneously, this step backward is also a step forward – reaching out to a larger membership. Some promotional videos today include scenes that involve ordinary people folk dancing.[35] A possible interpretation could be that this is an attempt to "improve or enhance the country's reputation among an international target audience" [36] by showing its democratic character. It is not a strategy to diminish the achievements of professional and semi-professional

folk dance ensembles. From this perspective, what is considered a "spoiled" image of the Bulgarian choreography school could be seen as an attempt to build a new image and reputation of 21st century Bulgaria.[37]

The Ambition Is…

Beyond one's joy, dance has always been related to a specific political stratum. Today's national genre spectrum reflects the political, economic, and cultural changes after 1989. Clubs' tours abroad (a combination of tourism and performance) illustrate Bulgaria's transition from one form of governance to another, from one economic system to another, and from one aesthetic to another. This is one of the Bulgarian ways to perform democracy. [38] This is also congruent with, what appears to be, the new strategy for the country's "nation branding."

To conclude, I will borrow two sentences from Wittgenstein, keenly aware of how dangerous such borrowings might be. "Nearly all my writings are private conversations with myself" – wrote Wittgenstein in his Culture and Value – "Things that I say to myself tête-à-tête, […] (since) ambition is the death of thought."[39]

So, my essay doesn't have the aspiration to say who or what is right or wrong. Because the ambition is…

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[1] The entire text rests on previously delivered papers and presentation. See Ivanova-Nyberg 2009, 2013, 2013b, 2016 and 2018)
The first, "'Horo se vie izviva' festival-competition and the newly-born clubs for recreational folk dancing in Bulgaria," was prepared for the First Symposium of ICTM Study Group on Music and Dance in South-Eastern Europe, Struga, N. Macedonia (September 2008). The topic was also presented at the Door County Festival's Cultural Corner (April, 2009).
The second, "A door wide open: Bulgarian dance lessons on YouTube," was delivered during the Western States Folklore Society Annual Meeting, "Folklore in a Digital Age" (University of California, San Diego (April, 2013).
The third, "'Folks finally understood that we are Bulgarians:' Increased patriotism and raised ethnic awareness as factors in recreational folk dance phenomenon in 21st century Bulgaria?" was written for the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies' 45th Convention, held in Boston, MA (November, 2013).
The fourth, "Bulgarian folk dance club repertoire ten years later: what genre? Where shall we put it? was prepared for the ICTM Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe Symposium, held in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria (May, 2016).
And the fifth one, "Who has the right to perform abroad?" was presented (in an abridged version) during the Dance Studies Association Annual Conference "Contra: Dance & Conflict," held at the University of Malta (July, 2018).
[2] See Europa – European Union website.
[3] "Ancient Greece is understood as the authentic territory of the incarnation of the Spirit – its native land – and because of this Ancient Greece is the virtual generating *topos*, the universal arche-phantasm of every European nation…" (Manchev, 2003). Translation by Daniela Nyberg.
[4] From this point of view, the national project of a country that geographically is a neighbor of Greece, the virtual topos and the phantasm-historical inheritor of this culture, appeared to be a very complicated endeavor… The rejection of mimetic rivalry toward the Greece national project and the acceptance of the appropriated as one's own antiquity model as a foundation for the Bulgarian national identity (or, more precisely, as generator for figurative power in the establishment of the Bulgarian nation is impossible. This put under discussion the very "ontological" foundation of this nation. It cannot be "engrafted" upon the archetypical model of the European universality, as it is the case with the Roman's and German's nations. Therefore, the legitimization project of the Bulgarian nation hits at-the-very-outset obstacle that does not allow access to the "roots" of the European universality. (Manchev, 2003) See also Manchev 2007.
[5] Here comes the figure of the noble savage which may act to neutralize the stigmatization of Bulgarians as undeveloped, uncivilized in comparison to the civilized but degraded Greeks, who are the biggest rival of the Bulgarian cultural enlightenment. However, (…) the peasant does not have individuality, and consequently is always a "collective image", so in fact the basis figure become the figure of the idyllic community, which synecdoche became its locus – *The Village*. (Manchev, 2003)
[6] For further discussion on ethno-pop and *chalga* see Dimov (2001), Statelova (2005), Silverman (2008, particularly pp.53-54), and Nielsen (2008).
[7] "A safety place in an insecure world." See Stavelova (2012, 250).
[8] The latter made me include an additional chapter in my research on the ensemble (Ivanova-Nyberg 2011), quite unexpectedly for myself and my academic committee.
[9] The respondents were folk dance club members from different Bulgarian cities.
[10] This comment came from someone returning to Bulgaria after living in Germany for eight years. This person have gained a significant international folk dance experience. From the survey *Zashto na horo*? [Why Folk Dancing?], 2013.
[11] Facebook post, April 21, 2016. (Accessed April 22, 2016).
[12] For further discussion, see, for example Statelova et al. (2008).
[13] My paper, "A door wide open: Bulgarian dance lessons on YouTube," (cit. Endnote 1) was provoked by my observation of practices of some newly founded Bulgarian folk dance groups in the United States. To them, the online tutorials served as a primary repertoire source, at least at the beginning. In addition, there was the role of the media (through which "everything is within reach," as pointed out by Welsh, 1999, 198). The folk dance boom in Bulgaria and the media bridge that facilitated its spread (repertoire) across the Globe made this topic truly fascinating.
[14] The State Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances was renamed after 2000. It continued its life as National Folklore Ensemble "Philip Koutev."
[15] See Yanakiev 2000 and, also, earlier essays including in this book.

[16] I learned about the duration of the training and the intense discipline that run the process of becoming a performer by taking part in the process. Enthusiastically and lovingly. This was my act of witnessing (or my "stamp of authority" to use Grau's words (Grau 2007). Writings on "ethnographic self" (see Amanda 1999, Ingold 2018, and others), help me to see myself inside the picture.
[17] See for example Ivanova-Nyberg (2009, 173–182; 2011; 2013), Karakusheva (2013), and Grancharova (2013).
[18] See Öztürkmen (2001).
[19] See on this and other related issues Nahachewsky (2012, 90–123).
[20] See Ivanova-Nyberg (2018).
[21] During the socialist era there was also a genre, called "zabavni tantsi" – dances choreographed to "estradna musica" (popular music).
[22] For further discussion see Bŭlgarski Folklor (2015).
[23] See on participatory-presentational dance Nahachewsky (1995).
[24] See Ivanova-Nyberg 2019. The survey and the abstract are accessible on Academia.edu website: <https://www.academia.edu/38704306/Анкета_Защо_на_сцена_Why_Performing> <https://www.academia.edu/38247162/Why_Performing?fbclid=IwAR0nHaYgDwnTqZ6P-wyNhExrS3K_RZug5_ESAqOlP8rCKiVCnMtyQzub_L4> (Accessed June 23, 2020).
[25] The terminological complexity of "image" is apparent. For further discussion see Boulding (1959, 120–121), also Rezarta (2011).
[26] For interpretations of "authentic" see Ivanova-Nyberg (2017, 81) with references. And for "authenticity on stage" see Stavelova 2012.
[27] Anholt (2008, 22).
[28] See online <https://www.livemint.com/Companies/zqjdX3w79ZEowSX2VCEZVI/Comparing-a-country-to-a-brand-is-only-a-metaphor.html> (2018 November 10.)
[29] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/why-nation-branding-doesnt-exist/articleshow/5799304.cms>. (2018 November 10.)
[30] See Anholt (2008).
[31] See, for example, the topics and the list of contributors to Dinnie's volume (Dinnie 2008).
[32] See Kaneva; Popescu (2011).
[33] "The 'Nice to Meet You' spot was produced by M3 Communications Group, a Bulgarian-owned PR and advertising company, and aired in early May of 2005 on pan-European television channel EuroNews." (Kaneva 2007, 6, with references)
[34] See Loutzaki |1994, 15–114), quoted by Nahachewsky (2012, 20).
[35] They are indeed "cultural performers" (Dunin; Wharton; Felföldi 2005).
[36] See Fan (2010, 6) also Fan for Key perspectives in nation image (Fan 2008).
[37] On the "the displeasure at state-sponsored, communist art and heritage construction […]" see Bendix (2015, 226).
[38] For further discussion see Buchanan (2006; 2015).
[39] See (Wittgenstein 1980, 77e).