Is There Any Social Cohesion in the Bulgarian Multicultural Society?

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Abstract: Bulgarian society is multicultural and multiethnic, a fact very much linked with the historical and cultural roots of the country. The current paper outlines the main problematics linked with the concept of social cohesion in Bulgaria. Social cohesion is discussed in three main contexts: (1) cohesion for the sake of a national cause, where the unique “Chitalista” cultural and community system plays a key role; (2) reconciliation between ethnic groups, who live in peace and avoid conflicts; and (3) social stratification, difficult economic conditions, and absence of a middle class as serious burdens for building a cohesive society. The paper also discusses the role of voluntary organizations, media, and education in encouraging social cohesion in a time of democratic change.

Introduction

Bulgaria is a country with rich cultural heritage and dramatic history, located on the Balkan Peninsula—a region which bridges Europe and the Middle East. It is one of the oldest European states, founded in 681. In 865, the Christian religion was incorporated into the official state policy of Bulgaria. Several years later two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, created the Slavonic alphabet in order to translate the Bible into the Bulgarian language. Despite the acceptance of Christianity, Bulgarians retained their own folk celebrations and religious beliefs. As a result, they
created a mixed calendar marking old beliefs and the new Christian ones, which is still used for celebrating holidays. During the Middle Ages, Bulgaria was occupied by the Byzantines and the Turks and during this period, many different ethnic groups became inhabitants of the country: Turks, Jews, Armenians, etc., each of the minorities retaining its own religion and traditions with no historical facts relating to serious cultural misunderstandings. The only threat to Bulgaria at the time was the Turkish Empire. The “Bulgarian Renaissance” started in the eighteenth century—later than the Renaissance in Europe—when Bulgarians began to create their own literature, independent of religious and liberation movements.

The people of Bulgaria—a multicultural and multiethnic diversity
The Bulgarian population is 7.7 million people (July 2001 est.), which when compared with 1990 statistics shows an alarming decrease in the population growth rate, averaging -1.14% a year. This is because of the huge emigration wave mainly to Northern America, Western Europe, and Turkey. The majority of immigrants are young people who are either highly educated intellectuals or skilled specialists. The increasing “brain-drain” is a serious threat for the future of Bulgaria.

Despite the fact that Bulgaria is characterized by a large ethnic population of various religious backgrounds, the majority of the population (83%) are Bulgarians. Those who identify themselves as Muslim Turks represent 9.5% of the population. In the minority groups, ethnic identity and religion do not always coincide, as variations of uncertainty in the declared ethnic identification are often witnessed. Thus, for example, Gypsies, the third large ethnic group (around 3.7%), speak several very different dialects, some of them are Christians, others Muslims. There are also Armenian, Jewish, Russian, Tatar, Gagauz, and Circassian minority groups living within the territory of Bulgaria.

Within each of the ethnic groups there are also astonishing differences in customs and dialects which variety from region to region. Bulgarians, for example, can be distinguished as Shopps, Dobridjans, Thracians, Rhodopians, Torlaks, Graovians, and many others. These distinctions in some cases date back more than 15 centuries and originated in the various tribes who lived in this part of the Balkans at this time.

The vulnerable time of transition
During the totalitarian regime, Bulgaria’s economy and culture were centrally planned, hierarchical, and highly monopolized. The process of moving towards democracy and a market economy began in 1989. It brought freedom of expression, abolished state censorship, provided diversity in all areas of life, and opened a space for private entrepreneurship. Cultural organizations became more flexible, free to choose their programming, and became open to international co-operation. New private and non-profit artistic initiatives appeared. Several other positive trends included:

- freedom of expression of all minority groups;
- freedom of media and free flow of information;
• growing diversity of cultural initiatives and organizations;
• the implementation of a new legislative system to facilitate cultural life; and
• an emerging third sector in the field of culture.

Unfortunately, Bulgaria is certainly not one of the success stories of transformation in Eastern and Central Europe. Structural transformation and privatization were considerably delayed, the banking sector collapsed totally a few years ago, and the country has not succeeded in attracting foreign investments. The not promising economic reality is accompanied by dramatic changes in social welfare, health care, and the cultural sector. Negative tendencies in society have started to appear, such as social alienation, growing aggressiveness, crime, and corruption. Family cohesion, which has been a long-lasting tradition in Bulgaria, has started falling apart because of alcohol abuse, absence of income for basic survival, and a general sense of hopelessness. The drastic fall in living standards is reportedly visible among 90% of the population with the gap between the very rich and very poor constantly increasing. The average salary in the country is reported at U.S.$120 per month, and the average pension at U.S.$35 per month. Thirty-five percent of the population is below the poverty line (2001). The unemployment rate reached nearly 21% in 2001, and is even higher in the culture sector.

It is still unclear how current economic reforms, undertaken by the newly elected government (April 2001) under Prime Minister Simeon Sax-Coburg-Gotha will keep Bulgaria on a path toward eventual integration into NATO and the European Union.

The cultural sector has been influenced by overall negative tendencies. The decreasing state budget for culture, the absence of a clear long-term cultural policy, and continual changes in the Ministries of Culture and their strategies put the entire cultural sphere into uncertainty and chaos. Some serious obstacles facing cultural organizations today include difficulties in finding alternative funding, inefficient sponsorship legislation, and extremely low box-office revenues (a ticket for an opera costs U.S.$2-3), to name just a few.

Aspects of social cohesion in Bulgaria
The topic of “social cohesion” is still a very luxurious one for countries from Central and Eastern Europe which face many political, economic, and social problems during this transition period. There is no special research on culture and social cohesion in most of these countries.

When we define the term social cohesion we use some key words and phrases—shared values, tolerance, dialogue between minority groups, and common hope for the future. At the Final Declaration of the Second Summit of the Council of Europe (October 10-11, 1997), it was written: “Social cohesion is one of the foremost needs of the wider Europe community and should be pursued as
an essential complement to the promotion of human rights and dignity.” From this perspective, strengthening social cohesion must entail the practical aspects of:

- contributing to solving the problem of unemployment;
- providing decent conditions for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of the population;
- taking action in the education sector, with a concern for the future development of the population; and
- facilitating access to efficient healthcare services for all.

The focus of social cohesion in Bulgaria can be explored in three main areas: national cohesion, reconciliation between ethnic and minority groups, and economic stratification.

**National cohesion— for the sake of the nation, shared values, and national culture, including traditions and symbols**

A good example of national cohesion is the cultural life within communities—the unique “chitalista” system, which is a wide-spread system of cultural and community centres (“chitaliste”) dating back to the nineteenth century. After the country’s liberation from the Turkish Empire, “chitalista” was used to revive the Bulgarian culture, language, and spirit. At the beginning of 1990, there were around 4,000 “chitalista” in the country, many of them with their own libraries, amateur artistic groups, and educational courses. As typical Bulgarian forms of cultural community life, these centres could provide direction for new cultural policy in Bulgaria, but unfortunately they are currently neglected, striving for new organizational structure and in need of fundraising. Their transformation into multipurpose educational and artistic centres with innovative programs might contribute to both local and rural cultural development. Some of the ethnic minority groups have their own form of “chitalista” within their own organizations, as is the case of the “Chitalista E.Shekerdjiiski,” a Jewish “Home of Culture,” and the Gypsy “Chitalista” in the town of Plovdiv, in the district of Stolipinovo, where the biggest Roma population in Bulgaria lives. Despite the fact that the cultural and educational policy for ethnic minorities has not been clarified yet, various ethnic groups are trying to work and live together, creating cross-cultural relationships.

**Reconciliation between ethnic/minority groups, avoiding potential conflicts, preserving cultural identities**

Bulgaria is a multicultural and multiethnic country; all minority groups live in peace and tolerance, accepting each other’s differences. Ethnic groups are spread throughout the country and are integrated within Bulgarian society. Generally speaking, minorities represent 20% of the population in Bulgaria and they have a relatively cohesive and rich cultural life. They have their own cultural and educational organizations, as well as rights and possibilities for artistic expression. Their music, dances, folk celebrations, and other forms of cultural expression are separate from the mainstream of what is usually called “Bulgarian culture.” For example, the Jews have their own independent cultural organization called “Shalom,” while the Armenians have their own cultural organization “Ararrat.”
The Gypsies have had no opportunity to create their own cultural organization, despite the fact that they have an organization based on ethnic principles. The Turks not only have an independent organization, but also a certain number of representatives in Parliament. These facts show that minorities are an important part of the contemporary political and cultural life of Bulgaria.

**Stratification versus social cohesion, the absence of economic policy for the formation of a middle class**

As mentioned previously, Bulgaria faces many difficulties along the path to democracy and a strong market economy. None of the governments during the 1989-2001 period succeeded in implementing economic strategies to form a strong middle class. The stratification of society is a negative phenomenon in Bulgaria. There is a new social separation within the Bulgarian nation, which is not based on consumption, earnings, or welfare, but on the level of poverty, or more precisely — on decreasing consumption. The social price of this transition period for households is very high. There has been a 52% decline in purchasing between 1990 and 1997. There is increasing income differentiation, a 40% decrease in real annual incomes in 1999 compared with 1990, and a restructuring of family spending — 76% of family spending goes to pay for food and electricity, creating a lack of funds to spend on education and leisure time. It is obvious that these changes reflect negatively on the possibilities for a wide audience-base attending cultural events.

Stratification is currently based on ownership status, educational status, health care status, mobility, access to information, access to cultural events, and cultural consumption, which have become inaccessible to the majority of Bulgarians. The existing stratification model in Bulgaria shows a sharp polarization between the very rich and the very poor with this gap increasing drastically. There are several obvious examples of current social inequality: general social dissatisfaction; very limited consumption; a decrease in the quality of the labour force; and the reduction of quality education and health care.

**Media for fostering social cohesion**

The media play a role in forming and developing the relationships between culture and social cohesion. Their role in the emerging democratic societies should be to help build tolerance, understanding, pluralism, and to diminish conflicts, as they reflect public opinion, change, and are leaders in the formation of new common values. Unfortunately, in many cases, Bulgarian journalists prefer to focus on sensationalism and report only negative tendencies, rather than spread news of positive cultural and artistic achievements. On the positive side, in 2000 the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee published the results of a survey about the ethnic press in Bulgaria. Between May 1999 and May 2000, it analyzed 19 ethnic publications — 7 Roma, 3 Armenian, 2 Wallachian and Romanian, 2 Jewish, 2 Russian, 2 Turkish, and 1 Macedonian — and outlined how these publications play an important role in helping to integrate communities into the broader society as well as their positive role in promoting national consolidation.
Broadcasting has also contributed positively toward social cohesion with some of the broadcasting time of Bulgarian national television devoted to broadcasts in the Turkish language. Broadcasting time for other minority groups is also being discussed.

The role of the third sector in encouraging social cohesion

Culture and social cohesion are linked via the help of the third sector. In general, the third sector promotes social cohesion in that it:

- solves conflicts by promoting social justice and tolerance between different groups in society;
- operates as a bridge between the other two sectors—the state and the private;
- creates cross-links between various cultural forms and organizations; and
- provides and facilitates free spaces for open public dialogue.

Non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have grown significantly in number and constantly diversify their activities in the countries. In Central and Eastern Europe countries the main factors encouraging this process are: the democratization of societies in general, the newly adopted legislative systems, peoples’ inspirations for innovative projects and independent programming, and the break up of the monopolistic position of the state system.

There are approximately 6,000 officially registered non-profit organizations in Bulgaria, although many of them are not operational or are unstable because of a lack of funding and a chaotic and unpredictable environment. Because the business sector has only been in existence for ten years, there is not a well-spread sponsorship practice. Individual charitable contributions are not successful due to low standards of living and widespread poverty. There are no well-established state mechanisms for the support of non-governmental organizations.

NGOs in Bulgaria are very diverse and numerous: foundations, associations, networks, clubs, societies, grassroots organizations, unions, and so on. Some of them operate with as little staff as one or two persons, others have extensive personnel and luxury office equipment—especially the largest NGOs, which function and rely entirely on international support.

Volunteering is not a common practice in Bulgaria; however, there are a few volunteers in the health care sector and in religious associations. In the cultural field, volunteering is not a wide-spread practice, although there are a few exceptions, mostly the use of student help for some specific artistic events. The lack of volunteers can be attributed to three main reasons:

- living standards are below average in the country, and there is an absence of free time because people work at several jobs in order to earn sustainable incomes;
- the word “volunteer” has a negative connotation, is linked to the past totalitarian regime, and is considered morally outdated; and
Many non-profit organizations are especially devoted to social cohesion, citizen participation, social policy, social surveys, and human rights, even though in some cases their mission statements are not clear, and they are linked to many problematic areas within our society. Most of the non-profit organizations are located in Sofia and other big cities. Cultural NGOs are primarily in the fields of cultural heritage, preservation of folk traditions and customs, performing arts, and literature.

The third sector in Bulgaria is growing extensively, but is still not a serious force for change or a factor for social cohesion primarily because strong national and regional networks of NGOs are still lacking. There is still a lot of work required to obtain sustainable development of the third sector, including increasing professionalism and the competence of NGO managers, implementing projects that reflect the real needs of society, and solving social problems.

**Social cohesion through language**

Languages are an important factor for social cohesion in Bulgaria; the Bulgarian language itself is more than 1,100 years old. Literacy among the Bulgarian population is one of the highest in Europe—98%. Each year on May 24th, Bulgarians celebrate Bulgarian Culture Day, emphasizing the Cyrillic alphabet. Recently, the media has begun to provoke debates about this celebration and about the real use of the Cyrillic alphabet, especially on the positive and negative effects that having our own unique language have on the current economic development of Bulgaria. Certainly, a unique language is a positive sign for a strong national identity and the support of traditions. But on the other hand, it can be seen as a burden towards international co-operation, a barrier for communication with people from other countries.

After 1989, for the first time, the educational system in Bulgaria created secondary schools for pupils with different ethnic identities, allowing them to learn two native languages, two cultures, and two religions—Bulgarian and their own native one. Two examples are the Jewish School in Sofia for Bulgarians and Jews, and the Turkish School in the town of Kurdjaly for Bulgarians and Turks. These schools show the advancement of the Bulgarian educational system toward creating a new type of culture, one that allows the mixture of two different cultures. This idea is based around the understanding that knowledge is the first step towards accepting differences and “otherness,” an agreed upon official educational policy of the country. Ethnic minorities do not enjoy special preferences in the higher university system because, according to the constitution, they are considered Bulgarian citizens and, therefore, enjoy equal rights to education. There have been attempts to create a special subject, program, or module on social cohesion, cultural diversity, or ethnic minorities as part of the higher university system, but this idea is still under consideration.
Conclusion

Bulgaria is at a crossroads in solving extremely important economic, political, and social problems. Debates about social cohesion and culture are still not on the agenda. Even after eleven years of the collapse of the totalitarian regime, Bulgarian citizens today still cannot recognize, agree, and articulate on shared social values. Communist ideas have been abolished, but nothing has taken their place. Building a common hope for the future is still far away from reality where corruption, poverty, child abuse, and criminality have taken hold. Minority groups in Bulgaria live in peace, they have freedom of expression, and they are well integrated into Bulgarian society. Serious conflicts are not obvious on the surface, but it certainly does not mean that dialogues and common understanding between them have been established.

So far, I cannot find answers to these questions: What kind of social processes are necessary in Bulgaria to build a cohesive and stronger society that works together with long-term perspectives in mind? Who is responsible for implementing these initiatives and how can they be achieved? How can our society motivate young artists to stay, live, work, and create in Bulgaria? How can we decrease the tensions and violations occurring in today’s society, many of which appear as a result of the increasing gap between the very rich and the very poor? How can we further build Bulgaria as a country that will meet the required standards to become an integral partner within the big European family?