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A Discussion on the Bulgarian Literary and Publishing Landscape

Lina Dokuzović (ed.), Todor Hristov, Tsvetelina Hristova, Stanimir Panayotov

Stanimir Panayotov: In 2016, the Bulgarian literary newspaper, *Literaturen Vestnik*, which we will refer to as *Literary Newspaper*, celebrated its 25th anniversary. What was supposed to be a rather uneventful event triggered a series of reactions and discussions in Bulgarian literary life – and by literary, I mean well beyond the field of literature and criticism, to also engaging all sorts of scholars and writers from different fields – for the simple reason that the edition has always been a meeting point for different disciplines in the humanities. What followed was a debate on whether Bulgarian literature has been well represented in the course of those 25 years, especially in the past 10–15 years, and there were several very caustic opinions shared by people, both from within and outside of the *Literary Newspaper*. Two important results from this debate were the recognition of the new and the emergence of a couple of important splinters.

Todor Hristov: Many important figures took part in the scandal and many of them still refuse to talk about it, which shows the intensity of the scandal, but I would like to focus on a very

important Bulgarian literary theorist, Nikola Georgiev, who said that anything new in Bulgarian literature comes out of scandals around journals. So, he expressed hope that the scandal around *Literary Newspaper* would produce the setting for the future of Bulgarian literature. I think that this special desire not to relinquish hope has its roots in the 1980s, in late post-socialist Bulgaria, when a culture existed of seminars of communities that lived together, that hated together, that loved together. Georgiev was perhaps the biggest proponent of it. It was a culture of hope because many of the academics and the members of those communities believed that they were thinking in a way that no one else was, and that the only reason their ideas weren't recognized by the West, globally, was because of the Iron Curtain. The hope was, of course, that they would be recognized after 1989, because they had something important to offer the world. Nikola Georgiev expressed this in one of his major works from the early 1990s, "The Marriage of Literature to the World," stating "This is one of our roles, I think, insofar as Bulgarian Literary Studies is recognized at all. It is marginal, peripheral, and this negative – in one respect – image can be used in our dialogue with the Literary Studies of the world. We can tell others how their problems look from a marginal perspective" (1999, p. 141).[1]

This quote expresses the hope that marginality can also mean autonomy, but this hope rests in a couple of assumptions. First of all, that knowledge is something we can give the world or take from the world, and, therefore, that knowledge is a gift economy. And this concept of a gift economy was deeply entrenched in socialist academic institutions, and it was even further stimulated by the early years of transition. Those years of abundant funding, channelled mostly through foundations like Open Society and its network, led Bulgarian thinkers, including Georgiev, to believe that

if the West is paying for projects, then the West is going to support their ideas. That hope turned out to be futile for a number of reasons, and the culmination of his disappointment took place during a lecture trip to Göttingen University, in which he suddenly realized that whatever he says, he is actually in the position of a *native informant*.

Tsvetelina Hristova: I think that Georgiev, not just as a thinker, but as a writer, is a very good example of this complete inability to merge how meaning and form relate and how they would exist and coexist in, e.g., the Anglo-Saxon or German academic traditions – because he has this very, very specific, very narrative-driven type of exposition of his theories that is often really not the way an academic text is expected to look. One of the ways that peripheralization can be created is through the standardization of academic writing, which can reach extremes to the extent that any kind of originality is undesirable.

Todor Hristov: The quote I read from Georgiev was actually from his first article published in a foreign language, in German. In the introduction, the editors comment on Nicola (sic) Georgiev's article, saying "A large historical arc is drawn – from Opitz to Foucault [...] his sometimes ironic contribution may not entirely conform to usual scientific conventions" (1995, pp. ix-x).[2] Georgiev was, of course, frustrated and this was the time when academic reform started in Bulgaria, and it was the first sign of what was to come. Later, after the reforms of 1997 and the hyperinflation crisis, education started to be perceived of as an investment – as opposed to the gift economy perspective of socialism. In his later years, just before pension, he had to strive to meet the standards of the new accreditation system and the process

of citations. Georgiev was deeply opposed to that, because he believed that we are constantly using the thoughts of other people that we transform. He was a huge believer in this concept coined by Julia Kristeva, *intertextuality* – and believed that citation is a limited, privatized form of intertextuality, which actually inscribes the property of the author onto the influences and the exchange of ideas. He tried to resist this, and, of course, failed, but his most intense resistance was against projects as such, because, even in the early 1990s, the funding that came from Open Society was organized as projects. His argument was that a project is a temporary association that's going to fall apart very quickly without teaching people how to live together or how to communicate together in a dialogue that actually integrates and incorporates the entire life of the community.

After 1997, and the arrangements with the IMF and the World Bank after inflation started, came the reform of the Bulgarian university system and the Bulgarian publishing system. Later, the accession process to the European Union began, and, with it, the reforms associated with the Bologna Process. One important thing was that when we started to use standards of research evaluation, more or less associated with the Bologna Process, Bulgarian journals no longer received public funding, including the journals of the university. There was no association that could provide the funds necessary for the publication of a journal, and, because of that, journals started to depend on projects. Since the attempt to create a database of quality journals on a national basis failed in recent years – it started in 2014, I think, but it still failed – the last wave of reforms now only counts articles published in Scopus or Web of Science as publications in the field of humanities, which means no articles in Bulgarian journals, no matter how authoritative or renowned they are – and this actually discounts

more than 95% of the academic publications of Bulgarian researchers in the field of humanities. So, in Bulgaria it's not "publish or perish." It's "publish *and* perish" – or it's even *perished publishing* – because 95% of it just doesn't count.

Tsvetelina Hristova: It is important to note that the reason for this is because of the local context of how these journals are produced, and this is a really important issue that concerns not just the quality, but is also a misleading and false meritocratic narrative about why reforms are introduced. It concerns very important questions about what it means to have global or international standards for academic publishing or academic knowledge. How is this reflected in local contexts? So, this is not just linked to the economy of production of knowledge and what counts as valid knowledge and how it is measured, but it also reflects on the politics of knowledge reproduction. So, for whom are these publications? If you measure the quality of academic publications of Bulgarian scholars, is it important for them to be publishing in globally recognized databases or is it important for these publications to be accessible for the local public, Bulgarian readers, for example? Especially if you think about the students who are going to be the future academics in this country. And this is partly a question of language, whether Bulgarian can be recognized as a legitimate language, but also of how the quality of a publication is measured.

I think that what would be important to take on from here is actually a little bit of a critique of Bulgarian academia. I really like what Manuela Bojadžijev says, that contemporary academia has two modes of operation: one is as a feudal institution and the other is as a neoliberal one, and both are really bad. So, we can criticize the kind of neoliberal reforms that were introduced through

standardization and measures of outcomes, etc., but there is also the need to actually be able to intervene into peripheral academia, and not just peripheral *academia*, because it can become very endogamic. There is a need for interventions into Bulgarian academic publishing in its current form, but not in this way, and some of the attempts for actually making space for alternative ideas have come from a few social centers that were established in the past 15 years. They have mainly been established in Sofia and predominantly by a kind of intellectual diaspora of people who studied abroad. A lot of them studied in the Central European University. And this group of people that mostly studied social sciences in Budapest or elsewhere actually developed a very different politically intellectual nucleus that didn't really have much room in Bulgarian academia and in Bulgarian academic publishing.

Stanimir Panayotov: Georgiev said something very interesting about Bulgarian literature in the early 1990s, in an essay that's written in his book *Mnenia i Samnenia* (1999), he states that Bulgarian literature had lost its guiding role as a sort of didactic literature for the population, so it no longer serves a social function. And, of course, this is very understandable, because the entire socialist period of Bulgaria was all about literature in particular, but also the arts in general, serving the needs of the good socialist citizen. And there was obviously a desire to be liberated from this state-imposed function. But that created all sorts of other problems. I think another problem that followed this very correct observation after transition is the rather seemingly apolitical approaches to the humanities.

There's a backstory to the social centers that has its genealogy in the Bulgarian emigre culture of the early 1990s. We're talking about Bulgarian academics who, for one reason or another, had to

pursue career options abroad, which was very difficult as these were the times when you couldn't just go to another country without a visa, but a good amount of Bulgarian-born scholars relocated, and a good amount of them entirely lost contact with Bulgarian culture, and they didn't invest in a bicultural connection. This had a direct consequence for the phenomenon of a kind of academic literature that's not published by academic publishing. Tsvetelina is right that there's a good amount of scholars who bring perspectives into Bulgaria and Bulgarian theory in general by way of contaminating the local cultures with ideas to which Bulgarian academia is sadly sometimes not exposed. And that outlet began sometime in 2008 with the establishment of the first social center in Bulgaria (which, strictly speaking, is the second, but I call it the first for all sorts of reasons). It's called Xaspel. It later became an NGO, called Collective for Social Interventions, which exists to this day in a different composition. That social center had a publishing leg throughout its entire existence, and the existing organization still publishes very interesting books. Now, there is another circle of people who were associated for a time with another social center, but also with Xaspel, sometimes in a particular location. That circle is called dVERSIA, and it publishes an online journal, but also annual volumes of selected articles. Some of its members also publish translations, etc. There is some interesting publishing going on in feminist and queer self-organized entities as well. Worth noting is the collective LevFem, as well as feminist mobilizations that have published interesting studies on social reproduction issues. These publications have always been published both online and in print, with very few exceptions. Most of these publications are usually NGO-funded, by way of different grants.

What is of significance here is that a good deal of the original *Literary Newspaper* conflict of 2016 was triggered precisely by that

loss of literature's social sensitivity. That's not just limited to literature, though, but more generally, to social and political life. So, there was a need to rekindle literature and even the humanities as socially engaged tools. I think this work has been done in parallel by the social centers from 2008 onwards. So, there was conflict. There still is conflict. But collaborations also exist – sometimes at the cost of cutting personal ties, but I guess that's just normal sometimes.

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[1] Georgiev, Nikola. (1999). *Mnenia i Samnenia: Po Dirite na Edno Literaturovedsko Chergarstvo* [Opinions and Doubts: Following the Trails of a Critical Nomadism], Literaturen Vestnik: Sofia. Available in Bulgarian here: https://liternet.bg/publish/ngeorgiev/m_s/prilozhnost.htm

[2] "Einleitung," (1995), in: Hendrik Birus, Manfred Schmeling, Rüdiger Schmitt (eds.) *Weltliteratur Heute: Konzepte und Perspektiven*, Königshausen & Neumann: Würzburg, pp. ix-xii.