

# Forming the “Socialist nation” through television (1960-1980) in Bulgaria. TV programs for children

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the formation of the so-called “*socialist nation*” in Bulgaria through television between 1960 and 1980. During that time, television was seen as an important tool for education and propaganda. It was supposed to contribute to the unification of socialist’s states, but also to serve as an agent of patriotic education. Special attention was paid to the socialization of children. They were expected to be the “new face” of the socialist nation. The main task is to identify the different images of socialist childhood on the TV screen.

**Keywords:** socialist nation; television; Bulgaria, children.

## Introduction

The paper is dedicated to one specific part of the Bulgarian socialist television program 1960 – 1980 - the programs for children and young people [1], seen as a significant element of the nation-building process. The children were the most important part of the socialist system. They were “the New People”. They were the tabula rasa (the white board) where the state, the government, and the Communist party were supposed to write the new rules. The symbol of these new generations was the first socialist town in Bulgaria called “City of dreams” – Dimitrograd, established in 1947 by young people and for the young people.

Television as a powerful ideological tool of the state also takes its responsibility for children and young people. In this paper, we will try to show how young people were seen by the Bulgarian Television and which of the TV functions were used in order to communicate the political discourse and to conceptualize the self-image of childhood.

The socialist system was introduced in Bulgaria in 1946 after the monarchy was abolished by referendum. Obviously, the new political order desperately needed a new form of community’s or national self-consciousness, in order to motivate the people in the state-building process. This was the idea of “*socialist nation*”. The term comes from Soviet politicians (often considered socialist philosophers) who interpret the basic views of Marx and Lenin. It was an opposition to the bourgeois nation [2]. As Stalin notes, it was not a question of destroying the nation *per se*, but destruction only of the bourgeois nation. The “*socialist nation*” should be constructed or invented (by Gellner and Anderson) after the victory over capitalism as a new social community of people. The concept of “*socialist nation*” kept some main characteristics of the nation, such as ethnicity, language, territory, and cultural heritage, but they were newly interpreted with the help of the State and Communist party as a hegemonic or ruling group. The new key role was given to the “Working class” as and to the “Socialist international” that should help to achieve convergence of the fraternal socialist countries.

During and after the Cold War the “*socialist nation*” was conceptualized as a different phenomenon, related with the socialist state. It was rooted in a new tales about the history of the nation. A part of this process was the invention of new national heroes – politicians, socialist authors, partisans etc. After the system went bankrupt, the building of “*socialist nation*” started

being considered an unsuccessful and often brutal process. But the paradigm has only a formal ideological difference with the concept of national identity in Western countries, where the nation-building process was also sometimes forceful and assimilative. As Eric Louw shows, “Politicians and their spin industry necessarily attempt to construct such collective identities ...by manufacturing stories, memories, myths and beliefs” [3]. And, of course, “the media (especially television) have become the main storytelling vehicle, journalists have become the key (but not only) players in myth making and identity building” [4].

We believe that the analysis of the “*socialist nation*” as an important part of the socialist consciousness that reflects all public and private spheres is more useful than putting a quick sentence on the socialism. The collective identity “is merely a system of relations and representations” [5] and in order to understand it we need to go deeper into the social subsystems involved in forming and spreading the national images.

Such an important part of the social construction was (and is) Television. The Bulgarian Television (BT) was founded in the late 1959 as a “window, from which a lot of things could be seen” [6]. The introduction of television was a conscious social need for expanding the educational and cultural strategies of the socialist state. From an ideological perspective, the television was a continuation of the radio by other means (reformulating Clausewitz). It was the second ideological institution supposed to interpret the political discourse and to spread the socialist idea in the state frame, using various commonly known functions as education, entertainment, information, and propaganda. The incorporation of television into society was a process of integration of all of society’s classes and segments. Special attention was paid to the young audience as the most sensitive part of the new society. Young people don’t share the old (pre-socialism) culture. They don’t have memories that are unnecessary anymore. They need new socialistic myths and believe they have been constructed for them. Last, but not least, they were the first authentic generation of the “*socialist nation*”.

The broad TV influence on the kids is not a reserved trade mark of socialist television. It plays a key role in children’ socialization in any political regime everywhere. “Television – like other mass media - influences children’s beliefs, attitudes and behaviors in both intended and unintended ways” [7].

The programs for kids appear at the very beginning of the BT in 1959 [8]. There were different types of programs aimed at children and young people. Herein we will try to reconstruct the TV children image or how children were seen by the Bulgarian Television at that time. This is not a content analyses of the programs for children. Rather this is research on the way media addresses the public. TV divides the kids in various groups depending on the intended messages. Thus, a child appears in different roles and images simultaneously. For example, a kid could be a *child/pioneer/student*. The corpus of the research data contains descriptions of the programs depending on to the addressee.

Research of the Television programs revealed three different TV children image types:

- **The biological image.** The children were considered simply as young persons “between infancy and youth” [9]. This is the classical children image. The limits of childhood were not given in the TV magazine.

Considering this image we have four groups with not clear age limits between the groups: *Children, teenagers, youth* and the so called “*the youngest*”. All of these groups have their own programs, such as cartoons (for kids), films, different types of games (quizzes or athletics), entertaining programs, concerts, some documentaries. Worth mentioning the popular even nowadays the oldest BT kids program – “Leka nosht, detsa” (Good night, kids), started in 1964.

Cartoons for children were one of the products with a high level of exchange within the socialist bloc. As a prominent researcher in field of Socialist Television Aniko Imre notes: “Animated films and television series, many of which were free of dialogue, were also easy to circulate within the bloc and thus constituted a shared transnational cultural register for children growing up in different parts of the Soviet empire” [10]. Since the “*socialist nation*” was thought of as belonging to a socialist international, we can summarize that these programs target simultaneously the national and international socialist identity. Even children shared the common Socialist space through the television products, most of them completely unknown for their western peers.

- Young people were considered by the Television **as a part of the educational and socialization system**. Here we have the groups of *preschool children, pupils* and *students*. Half of these programs are for students. The reason is that in 1973 there was a Summer Universiade for students which was followed by the television with reportages and live broadcasting.

These groups of young people were the first part of the audience which had to be socialized in the both socialist ideology and the educational system. Some of the programs were directly connected to the school (reportages from schools; different programs dedicated to pupils’ and students’ career choice, etc). From the early 1970s on, BT expands the amount of programs for school with films and lessons in “Bulgarian language and literature, history, mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography” [11], not only because of the increasing role of television in society but as a compensation for the slow educational level increase as well.

Other programs were focused on topics such as labor, love and friendship. These human stories were accompanied by programs “of a patriotic cognitive character” [12], such as “Hubava si, tatkovino” (You are beautiful, Fatherland). The programs dedicated to the “contemporary or historical problems with social meaning” played an important role [13]. This sophisticated description of the programs could be understood in the broad meaning of socialist education, whose main idea was as Gramsci notes about philosophy – to show “a unity of faith between a concept of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct” [14]. The TV influence on children is well known and observed as an intended way and effect of educational television. In this context, we cannot separate the ideological layer from the educational purpose, as Imre suggest.

TV quizzes and competitions for preschools, pupils and students deserve special attention. Some of them involve international participation, such as “Burzi, smeli, sruchni” (Fast, brave, skillful), started in 1969. From 1979 on, school teams from Bulgaria, the USSR and Czechoslovakia took part in the competition [15]. This was an entertaining form of education, but again a rapprochement of *socialist nations*.

The young person was also considered a **Zoon politikon or as an object of ideology**. Here are the programs dedicated to *pioneers*, who were the second obligatory organization, connected to the communist party for students between 7 and 14 years of age, for example – “Drujno pioneri” (“Together, pioneers”) and for *Komsomol members*, the youth division of Bulgarian Communist Party. The genres in this group were again films, quizzes, and documentaries. Programs were made with the help of different organizations, such as Dimitrov Communist Youth Union (Komsomol), Bulgarian Communist Party, so called Creative Unions [16] etc. The main purpose of these programs was to follow the whole “ideological and thematic plan”, which ruled television as an institution. The purpose for television was to work as a cultural agent in society, but from an ideological perspective. This means a production of openly nationalistic content as a foundation of the “*socialist nation*” combined with international messages, but framed in the Socialist block. On the other hand, these programs were dedicated to the cultural heritage of the

human race. The fusion between ideology and culture was so deep that they cannot be separated. For example every year, a lot of programs appeared during the celebration of the anniversary of the “liberation from fascism”. They introduce not only political persons, but also artists and sportsmen from the country. Various semi-didactic programs for children and youths were widely broadcasted in all Eastern Europe.

The programs for children have a special and dedicated role in the building of the “*socialist nation*”, conceptualizing childhood not only as a biological life time, but as the first step of a human’s political development. The realization of this concept shows the main functions of television, which were used in this period:

1. First, there was (and still is) entertainment. The socialist television was less entertaining than the capitalistic ones. Nevertheless, when we talk about children as an audience we should confess that the main way to keep their attention is to show cartoons, films and quizzes. Maybe, the content of these films was strongly ideologically based (which is not the case), but still the genre remains mainly in the zone of entertainment. It is not a surprise, because not only the common sense (Gramsci), but popular culture is a significant site of ideological struggle. During socialism, entertainment was close to education and television perceived its function as “enlightenment-entertainment” that “broadened the social role of television” [17].
2. The second function of socialist television was education. Not only the cultural power of television, that brings the common society values to the young audience (patriotism, internationalism, solidarity with other socialist states), but also to educate them about what is healthy, who is Mozart, etc. Education is a key factor in a nation-building process as “Members of the nation are deemed to share a set of common understandings, aspirations, sentiments, ideas, symbols, myths, traditions and memories, i.e. a common culture and/or ideology” [18].
3. Last, but not least, was the political function which was tightly bound with education. Not only television, but the system as whole was designed in an ideological way. So, there was no reason to leave the kids outside the system. Television products were dedicated to building a sense of socialist national identity - patriotism and internationalism combined with a core didactical composition. This gives some researchers the courage to summarize that all children’s program were predominantly ideologically based [19]. This was only partly true since it was children’s programs that were supposed to first cross the Iron Curtain, as they were of a “supposedly non-political nature” as Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers and Christian Henrich-Franke note [20]. The good quality and the low price of east European children’s movies were generally recognized by the west European television [21].

The Bulgarian socialist television had a huge amount of programs for children. There was a big diversity of views that the TV held about children, comparing to post socialist era, and diversity of genres that were used in the programs for children. The socialist television for kids was an illustration of “social engineering of childhood”, where the childhood has a “sterile attractive carelessness and fascinating propaganda force” [22]. The socialist nation (bad or good) was a nation with a clear aim – to build a new international community, based on solidarity of the people, working under communism. The way to communism starts in childhood. But that communism didn’t come at all.

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