



**CLUB OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS**

“30 January” № 1, et. III, P.O.B. 177, Targovishte 7700, Bulgaria, tel./fax +359

(0)601 6 34 25,

e-mail: [clubngo@abv.bg](mailto:clubngo@abv.bg)

[www.clubngo.org](http://www.clubngo.org)

**Young People and (Resisting) Ethnic Stereotypes in Bulgaria:  
the case of *chalga* music**

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**Dr Apostol Apostolov**

**Club of Non-Governmental Organisations –  
Targovishte**

**[a.apostolov@clubngo.org](mailto:a.apostolov@clubngo.org)**

## Methodology

- This paper is based on an ethnographic study conducted with young people in two provincial towns in Bulgaria ( Targovishte and Veliko Tarnovo) in the period 2000-2001, as part of a PhD thesis at the University of Birmingham.
- Methods: Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation/ethnographic fieldnotes

## Multiculturalism in Bulgaria

Bulgaria as a multi-ethnic country:

- Bulgarians
  - Ethnic Turks
  - Roma
  - Pomaks
  - Armenians
  - migrant minorities since 2007
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- In the Socialist period, although cultural life in Bulgaria was politically inclusive of ethnic minorities, in as much as they were allowed to participate in the production of 'formal' cultural activities, such as concerts and communal vocal groups, such activities could not be identified as anything but 'Bulgarian' (Kaneff 2004: 167). Thus, the Bulgarian dominant ethnic culture was the only ethnic culture available for mainstream consumption and production.

## Discrimination and Stereotypes

- towards groups of ethnicities
- towards individuals

## Resisting and Enacting Stereotypes through popular culture (*Chalga* music)

- *Chalga*, sometimes also referred to as 'pop folk', consists of the production and consumption of a particular type of ethnically mixed music. It is a Bulgarian modernised reworking of regional folklore, heavily influenced by a variety of regional musical styles. Serbian, Greek and Turkish national musical motifs are used as a source of creative experimentation within Bulgarian popular music, which also draws on sounds usually associated with the cultures of the Roma or ethnic Turkish minorities in Bulgaria.

## *Chalga* as multi-ethnic 'national' music

- One of the popular ways of describing *chalga* in Bulgaria is to say that it combines re-worked Bulgarian folk music with Turkish and Roma musical traditions. It is also known for attracting to clubs or private parties young people from all ethnic backgrounds in Bulgaria, but primarily ethnic Bulgarians, ethnic Turks and Roma people. *Chalga*, therefore, appears to be a musical genre in Bulgaria which, because (or in spite) of its associations with ethnic minority cultures, narrows the cultural gap between ethnic majority and minority participants in the *chalga* youth cultural scenes.
- The multi-cultural diversity represented in *chalga* suggests that production and participation in youth cultural practice in contemporary Bulgaria is moving away from a mono-white or a mono-ethnic rationale for cultural engagement, representative of the Socialist past of Bulgaria.

## The amalgamation of Turkish, Roma and Bulgarian folk musical elements in *chalga*

- “It doesn’t bother me that *chalga* contains a lot of Turkish and Gypsy melodies. I like Turkish rhythms and I like the romantic character of Gypsy music. But *chalga* is not only Turkish and Gypsy music; it also contains re-worked Bulgarian folk music. It is not traditional folk music, but a lighter pop version of it; it’s more dynamic. The combination is strange, but the music is great for dancing” [Jana, female, age 24, Targovishte]

## The fusion of Turkish and Roma cultural motifs with Bulgarian folk music

- “I don’t normally listen to Turkish or Gypsy music because I am Bulgarian, but *chalga* uses such music alongside Bulgarian music and the final product is party music – I like it”. [Tonny, female, age 20, Targovishte]



## *Chalga*: just party music?

- *Chalga* music therefore appears to provide its ethnic Bulgarian fans with an opportunity to appreciate Turkish and Roma musical cultures within their local environments; something which is justified by reference to the fact that it creates a good party sound. As the previous quotation suggests, however, the inclusion of Turkish and Roma musical elements into the dance scene does not automatically translate into including Turkish and Roma cultures into notions of 'Bulgarian-ness'. On the contrary, it was 'unnatural' for my respondent - because of her understanding of what it means for her to be 'Bulgarian' - to associate herself with any notion of 'pure' Turkish or Roma music, which effectively excludes these types of music from the realm of 'Bulgarian' culture.

## The rejection of *Chalga* as non-Bulgarian

- The enjoyment of inter-ethnic cultural exchange facilitated by the *chalga* youth cultural scenes is not necessarily shared by young people who are not fans of *chalga*. In fact, young people who reject *chalga* often do so because of its use of Turkish and Roma musical elements, which, in the minds of these young people, trigger popular associations based on stereotypical knowledge of, and attitudes towards, Turkish and Roma cultural traditions.

## Re-enacting ethnic stereotypes through resistance

- “What is *chalga*?...It is Gypsy stuff (*tsiganija*). It originated from Turkish music – some Turkish girls doing belly dancing. And the people who make *chalga* are ‘peasants’”. [Plamen, male, age 18, Targovishte]

## Chalga – rural and oriental?

- Thus, although *chalga* could be seen to ‘banish racial things’, in the words of Back (1996: 112), within its own cultural parameters, resistance to *chalga* by non-*chalga* fans suggests that stereotypical attitudes towards the Turkish and Roma minorities in Bulgaria limit a wider appreciation of *chalga*. As suggested by Levy (2002: 199-212), this opposition to *chalga*, primarily among the Bulgarian majority, may in fact reflect deep-lying xenophobic or racist attitudes towards the Roma and Turkish minorities in Bulgaria. These stereotypical notions of Turkish and Roma cultures are also embedded in particular practices or socio-cultural characteristics associated with Turkish and Roma ways of life in Bulgaria. The links between *chalga* and Turkishness, for example, are signified by associations with Oriental – and therefore ‘un-Bulgarian’ - culture, usually borrowing its repertoire from Turkish TV programmes (fieldnote 03.08.2001). Likewise, the popular links between *chalga* and Roma culture are manifested in associations of Roma communities with ‘rural culture’, ‘uncivilised’ behaviour, and involvement in illegal businesses (fieldnote 26.08.2001).

## 'Pop Folk' as a Balkan-Bulgarian Fusion

- The other defining characteristic of *chalga* music is its association with regional Balkan cultural traditions, and when this aspect of the scene is emphasised the genre is often referred to not as *chalga* but as 'pop folk'. Pop folk is considered to be the most popular music genre among young people in Bulgaria and its association with Balkan folk music is perhaps one of the reasons for its widespread success. Like its association with ethnic minority cultures, however, this connection with Balkan folk has proven also to be a source of contention; young people either strongly liked or disliked this association.

## *Chalga : a product of inter-Balkan cultural exchange*

- “*Chalga* is quite simply a compilation of Serbian and Greek musical traditions on top of re-worked Bulgarian folk music. It is ‘modern’ folklore. A lot of people in Bulgaria who used to listen to Serbian and Greek music, now listen to *chalga* or pop folk. I don’t understand why some people are against it – as if there is something wrong with listening to this kind of music. If you don’t listen to *chalga*, you have to listen to other [pop or Western] music of some sort. Everybody listens to other music but pop folk is something many people find more familiar”. [Julia, female, age 22, Veliko Tarnovo]

## Re-Balkanisation, re-regionalisation, re-traditionalisation

- The popularity of *chalga* music since the mid-1990s among young people in Bulgaria, therefore, suggests that regional Balkan cultures are a key factor in determining musical and cultural trends in Bulgaria. This process of 're-Balkanisation' or 're-regionalisation' of Bulgarian culture must be seen in the context of the wider process of 're-traditionalisation' of local cultures inherent in globalisation. Occurring in parallel with processes of modernisation, it serves to consolidate Balkan inter-ethnic links and foster distinct alternative youth cultural identities and lifestyles. Thus, the choice young people make to appropriate *chalga* as a regional resource of cultural activity is rooted, albeit semi-consciously, in a desire to sustain a sense of 'traditional' Balkan culture in the face of powerful infiltration of global 'popular' music in Bulgaria.

## The anti-Balkan sentiments

- As well as fostering identifications with the Balkan region and its collective, albeit selective, 'self', *chalga* acts as a counter-force to other social or cultural processes which attempt to 'leave behind' any associations with a Balkan past and adopt pro-Western orientations. Indeed, for participants in other youth cultural scenes, it is precisely the association of *chalga* with Balkan culture that makes its acceptance problematic. *Chalga* is seen as 'stealing' musical elements from other Balkan cultures and not being 'authentic' or sufficiently Bulgarian. Its lack of 'authenticity' is often associated with lack of, or reduced, aesthetic value:



## *Chalga*: not authentic enough

- “*Chalga* is a total musical mixture – Serbian, Turkish, and a little Bulgarian. Maybe this is what I don’t like about *chalga* – the fact that Bulgarian folk music has completely lost its original sounds. I also don’t like the lyrics of *chalga* music – in 99 per cent of cases they are dirty and vulgar. I simply can’t like music like that. If I want to listen to ethnic music, I listen to authentic Bulgarian folk music. It is a pity that we [the Bulgarians] don’t appreciate our own music enough”. [Anton, male, age 24, Veliko Tarnovo]

## Xenophobic attitudes or resistance to cultural diversity?

- The resentment towards the ethnic mix of music, described by my respondent, suggests that *chalga* might be seen as a threat to Bulgarian national identity. Perceptions of *chalga* as 'dirty' or 'impure' could also be seen as symptomatic of certain xenophobic attitudes towards the ethnic national or Balkan 'other'. Xenophobia and racism are tightly woven into the structures of multicultural societies and can be manifested sometimes through opposition to cultural diversity. Thus, although it would be too simplistic to suggest that opposition to *chalga*'s ethnic mix by young people is a *typical* example of xenophobia, concealed behind aesthetic opposition to certain types of music, the possibility that such attitudes are deeply rooted in the dominant society's nostalgia for a 'pure', or 'monolithic' Bulgarian culture should not be ignored.

## *Chalga* – the opposite of being ‘European’?

- “When I meet foreigners in Bulgaria, I always let them listen to authentic Bulgarian folk music. After all, this is what we are famous for in the world. But the foreigners love *chalga*...and they soon learn that it is not Bulgarian but a mixture of Balkan kinds of music. I try to tell them that they should not associate Bulgaria with this Oriental stuff. Real Bulgarian music is different... We will never become truly European if foreigners associate us with music like *chalga*”. [Milena, female, age 24, Veliko Tarnovo]

## Conclusions 1

- Young people's attitudes in Bulgaria to *chalga* music derive from its simultaneous association with ethnic, regional and national cultures. On the one hand, *chalga* is associated with Turkish and Roma ethnic minority cultures in Bulgaria. This association invokes deeply divided attitudes among young people who either support, or resent, *chalga* music because of its connection to ethnic minority cultures. On the other hand, *chalga* music is associated with a mixture of Balkan types of music, primarily Greek and Serbian. Young people's attitudes to *chalga*'s association with Balkan cultures are also divided, however; some welcome these associations as a way of holding on to 'traditional' or 'Balkan' culture, despite pressures from other global musical forms, while others reject them.

## Conclusions 2

- Young people's associations and attitudes towards *chalga* are deeply infused by issues of ethnicity, nationality, and cultural identification. The attitudes of those who reject *chalga* might be seen as racist, xenophobic or nationalist since they see *chalga* as 'dirtying' the national. However, those who enjoy the ethnic and regional mix of *chalga* are more inclusive in their attitudes towards the cultures of the 'other', foster practices of inter-ethnic cultural exchange and develop positive - ethnically or 'regionally' aware - youth cultural identifications or lifestyles.

## Conclusions 3

- A preference for *chalga* does not only reflect pre-existing dispositions, however, but *chalga* itself plays a key role in the way participants in the youth cultural scene construct their perceptions of the 'other'. It can be argued that inter-ethnic musical exchange is not a discrete process of communication between two groups but takes place against a historical and international backdrop. In the case of *chalga* music, this context is evident in the associations it evokes with the Balkan region, its ethnic groups and their history. These symbolic associations between historical cultural contexts and contemporary musical tastes mean that *chalga* may provide a channel for the articulation of deep-rooted xenophobic and racist attitudes towards 'the other' among some sections of Bulgarian society. At the same time, however, *chalga* allows its fans to openly embrace ethnic difference and foster inter-cultural exchange.

## Conclusions 4

- Participants in the *chalga* scene, therefore, contribute to the production of new multicultural experiences or realities, which are informed by their own subjective constructions of ethnicity and inter-ethnic culture. It is the constant give-and-take of different cultural messages which facilitates the evolution of such subjective constructions. The popularity and visibility of *chalga* in the youth cultural space in Bulgaria means that the scene plays a part in the historical configurations and re-configurations of ethnic perceptions and identities. It does so, moreover, not only within its own youth cultural boundaries, but also beyond them. Thus, even though 'outsiders' to the scene may not understand or may resent the 'Orientalness' of *chalga*, by articulating this perception, they too participate in the re-negotiation of the youth cultural and ethnic order in the youth cultural space. *Chalga*, therefore, is a powerful vehicle for cultural change not only because it thrives on the growing mix of national and regional cultures, but also because it engages both its fans and its opponents in a cultural dialogue about ethnicity, national identity and the possibilities for imagining a future in which multiculturalism will be the dominant discourse in Bulgarian society.