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China as a role model? The ‘Economic Leap’ campaign in Bulgaria (1958–1960)

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the transnational dimensions of the industrialisation drive in Bulgaria in the late 1950s and poses the question of how extensively this campaign was influenced by the contemporary ‘Great Leap Forward’ in China. Although there is no evidence of comprehensive adoption of a Chinese model, there was widespread enthusiasm for China, and technologies were transferred in connection with the Chinese acceleration policies. These transfers did not have a geopolitical implication, as Western Cold War historians had supposed, but rather happened in a context of widespread technological exchange and hint at multi-centrality in the socialist camp before the Sino-Soviet split.

KEYWORDS

State socialism; cold war; transnational history; industrialisation; great leap forward; bulgarian history

Introduction

Upon returning from a trip to China in October 1958, Sofia’s First Party Secretary, Georgi Kostov, told an audience of local militants:

Probably most of you are impatient to hear what I have to tell about China. I do not object. About China one could talk the whole day. The experience of the Chinese people is very great, great is the heroism and the diligence of the Chinese people. . . . But allow me this time to stick to our own problems, the great tasks set by the Central Committee of our party in its decisions of its October plenum.¹

However, in outlining the tasks of the Bulgarian communists Kostov constantly referred to what he had seen in China, promoting it as an example for Bulgaria. He expressed fascination for the greatness of Chinese achievements in certain fields of technology and social engineering – above all irrigation and mobilisation of unpaid labour – and his speech culminated in the statement: ‘They have shown us the way to do it [to irrigate]’.²

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¹Protocol of the Assembly of the BCP City Committee with Bureaus of Primary Party Organisations from Agricultural Cooperatives in Sofia District, 4 November 1958, SGDA, f. 1B, op. 25, a.e. 20, l. 228.

²Ibid., l. 234.

Nowadays, Western scholarship and media present China's 'Great Leap Forward' as an exotic, insane, and of course, tragic and deathly campaign.³ At the time, before the catastrophic outcome of the campaign was clear, many party officials and members of the technical intelligentsia in East (Central) European states had a different perspective on it.⁴ In autumn and winter 1958, political circles in Sofia and throughout Bulgaria were fascinated by the Great Leap Forward and the economic progress they perceived in the People's Republic of China (PRC). More generally, they were enthusiastic about the fact that the country with the world's largest population was part of the socialist camp. The press was full of articles praising the achievements of socialism in China. At the same time, the Bulgarian Party leadership itself called for an 'economic leap' (*ikonomicheski skok*) and fulfilment of the Third Five-Year Plan in 'three to four years.' The Economic Leap campaign in Bulgaria was carried out from 1958 to 1960, when relations between the Soviet Union and the PRC were starting to cool-down and Moscow abandoned Stalinist ideas of economic development through shock policies and fantastical plan goals.⁵ Against this backdrop, at the time, some Western scholars of political science and history interpreted the Bulgarian leadership's policy as an adoption of the Chinese campaign and a political provocation of the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).⁶ Starting from this debate, this article poses the following questions: To what extent was this Economic Leap policy in Bulgaria based on transfers of ideas and techniques from China? What do these transfers reveal about the international power relations in the socialist camp and the transnational dimension of state socialism?

The evidence available with today's broader access to archival documentation points to a significant exchange of technology, of knowledge on technical processes, and of ideas on the mobilisation of workforce and the administration of economic structures between China and Bulgaria, and a curious enthusiasm about Chinese socialism in the southeast European country in the late 1950s.⁷ By no means, however, did this enthusiasm imply that

³For media reports see, e.g. "Der Wahn des Tyrannen". Der Große Sprung nach vorn 1958–1961/ *GEO Epoche* 51, (September 2011). For dedicated scholarly accounts see Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker & Co., 2010); Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). Research has estimated fatalities at between 15 and 45 million, but as this wide range of numbers indicates, the statistical evidence for exact quantification is very fragile. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 324–34; Felix Wemheuer and Manning Kimberley, introduction to *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 22. The causality of the famine is also debated, as is whether the Great Leap Forward, accompanied by local state violence, was the main cause of the mass starvation or just one among other factors such as foreign trade pressures and bad weather conditions during the 1959–1961 harvests.

⁴Reports about the famine and the economic disaster were already circulating in the Soviet bloc in early 1961. Austin Jersild, *Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2012), 139; Internal Note of SED Department for Foreign Affairs, 9 January 1961, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv [SAPMO-BArch], DY 30 – IV 2 /20/123, doc. 23–5.

⁵Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 46–51, 80–104.

⁶Jordan Baev, *Drugata studena voïna. Săvetsko-Kitaïskiyat konflikt i Iztočna Evropa* (Sofia: Voenno Izdatelstvo, 2012); Liliana Brisby, 'Leaping Forward Without Communes', *Chinese Quarterly* 1, No. 3 (1960): 80–4; James F. Brown, *Bulgaria Under Communist Rule* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970).

⁷This article is based on an analysis of internal documents of Bulgarian party organs and state institutions ranging from the Politburo to selected local branches, with a special focus on ministries and party departments that participated in delegations to China at the time. I have also examined periodicals of the agriculture ministry and magazines that reflect the theoretical debate of economists and agronomists (e.g. *Kooperativno Selo* [Cooperative Village], *Novo Vreme* [New Time], *Ikonomicheski Misıl* [Economic Thought]). Most of the research has been undertaken in the framework of an employment at the Leipzig Centre for History and Culture of East Central Europe (GWZO) from 2014 to 2016 and during a fellowship at the Centre for Advanced Studies Sofia in spring 2016.

the Bulgarian leadership questioned Soviet predominance in the socialist camp. Many of the measures in the framework of the Economic Leap campaign could also be interpreted as Khrushchev-style reforms, and contemporary media reports on China were outnumbered by articles praising the achievements of socialism in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.⁸

The Chinese-Bulgarian relations at the time, the Chinese-style labels of some reform measures and the Bulgarian interest in the developments in China did not have the dramatic world-political character ascribed to them by Western observers in the 1960s. Nonetheless, the Bulgarian Economic Leap campaign still offers interesting insights into Chinese-Eastern European relations as well as into the functioning of twentieth-century state socialism and its transnational dimensions.⁹ Bulgaria's government, agriculture specialists and local party officials obviously drew inspiration from their comrades' actions in the PRC. They adopted new techniques in soil cultivation and forestry and embraced the general idea of motivating labour through political mobilisation instead of material incentives. These features of the Great Leap Forward seemed to be appropriate to the Bulgarian planners, as they appeared to be conducive to rapid industrialisation under conditions of scarce capital and abundant rural labour resources. Thus, actors in the socialist camp who sought models of development and technological progress were not oriented exclusively towards Moscow. I will argue in this article that the campaign, far from having been a confrontational move towards Moscow on the part of the Bulgarian leadership, reveals instead that the power centre was not omnipotent and that economic policymakers, planners and specialists in the socialist camp had room to manoeuvre. It also hints at the significance of periphery-periphery relations that bypassed direct Soviet control.

The echo of the PRC's Great Leap Forward in the socialist camp

When Mao Zedong proclaimed the Great Leap Forward in early 1958, the socialist camp was in turmoil. Khrushchev had initiated reforms, decentralised the Soviet economic administration, and tried to enhance agriculture in a way unseen under Stalin. The new Soviet leader's proclamation of de-Stalinisation was breeding conflict inside the Communist parties, and popular unrest in Poland and Hungary put pressure on the governing bureaucracies and governments. These developments changed the power relations between the Soviet Union and its 'satellites'. Under these circumstances the Chinese leadership, no longer willing to accept the role of mere disciple of the Soviet Union, tried to gain a more active role in socialist camp relations. Temporarily, a formula in which the Soviet Union *and* the PRC led the socialist world became popular.¹⁰ Mao's initial claims that China would overtake

⁸This is a conclusion of an examination of the main Bulgarian newspapers of the years 1957–1960 (Rabotnichesko Delo, Otechestven Front, Narodna Mladezh, Zemedelsko Zname).

⁹Research and scholarly debate on the Chinese influence on the Bulgarian Leap are rather fragmented. The economist Kiril Tochkov of Texas Christian University has conducted a research project on the Bulgarian and the Chinese leaps in comparison at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Sofia, and a doctoral study by the historian Ma Li is under way at the Shanghai Cold War International History Studies Centre. For Bulgarian studies highlighting the Chinese influence, see Baev, *Drugata studena voina*, 81–9; Vladimir Migeu, 'Otrazhenieto v Bălgariya na politikata na Kitaiskata komunisticheska partiya za "Golemiya skok", 1958–1960 g.', *Minalo* 19, No. 1 (2012): 75–9. For a clear stance rejecting the idea of a significant Chinese influence, see Evgeni Kandilarov, *Iztochna Aziya i Bălgariya* (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2016), 153–62 and Iliyana Marcheva, *Todor Živkov: Pătyat kăm vlastta. politika i ikonomika v Bălgariya, 1953–1964 g.* (Sofia: Institut po istoriya – BAN, 2001), 189–216.

¹⁰E.g. Péter Vámos, 'Sino-Hungarian Relations and the 1956 Revolution,' Cold War International History Project Working Paper, Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington D. C., November 2006, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP54_Final2.pdf, 33–5.

Britain in steel production in a few years had been an approving, albeit competing response, to Khrushchev's 'overtake-the-West' rhetoric.¹¹

However, China's ambitions contributed to a cool-down in Sino-Soviet relations. The two powers' differences became evident in the economic policy of the Chinese leadership behind the Great Leap Forward. The Soviet government under Khrushchev's leadership had condemned the rapid industrialisation and collectivisation of the 1930s as erroneous and favoured a more balanced socialist development model, yet Chinese policymakers opted for a return to 'revolutionary Stalinism' as opposed to post-Second World War 'bureaucratic Stalinism'. The Great Leap Forward was thus one of the crucial controversial subjects that paved the way for the Sino-Soviet rift. In 1960, the Soviets further escalated the split by withdrawing their technical experts and advisers from China, leaving projects unfinished and contracts unfulfilled.¹² This decision had far-reaching effects, not just for the Chinese, whose industrialisation project was based on Soviet assistance, but also for the Soviet economy, as China had become the Soviets' main trading partner with an impressive share of 20%.¹³

The shift in Chinese economic policy did not incite political conflict in the beginning. Early on, Soviet specialists complained about the acceleration campaign's harmful consequences for their technical work, but the Soviet leadership forbore to judge the Great Leap Forward right away.¹⁴ The Soviet press was complaisant in its reporting during the first year of the campaign. The sensitive topic of the people's communes was simply omitted, as the line propagated by the Soviet leadership was to avoid interfering in Chinese domestic affairs and thus to refrain from sharp criticism.¹⁵

In other socialist countries, Moscow's disinclination to publicly position itself against the Chinese experiment opened up space for autonomous interpretation of China's policy. In East Central Europe, sympathetic attitudes towards the Chinese project prevailed at first. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), for example, officials and observers looked at the Great Leap Forward and the people's communes in China with great interest.¹⁶ Their sympathetic statements went so far that Western observers even thought they had discovered a 'Peking-Pankow axis'.¹⁷ Documents and reports suggest the existence of a faction of GDR officials sympathetic to the PRC, and a presentation on people's communes at an

¹¹Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 84.

¹²Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 174–80; Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

¹³By 1950 China had become the Soviet Union's most important trading partner, succeeding Czechoslovakia, Poland and the USA, which had held this position in the immediate after-war years. In 1960, against the backdrop of the quickly deteriorating Sino-Soviet trade, East Germany became the USSR's most important trading partner. Vneshnaya Torgovlya SSSR. *Statisticheski sbornik (1918–1966)* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1967), 70–1, 206–13. For the significance of Soviet assistance, see Jersild, *Sino-Soviet Alliance*, 15; Deborah Kaple, 'Agents of Change: Soviet Advisers and High Stalinist Management in China, 1949–1960', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, No. 1 (2016): 5–30; Shen Zhihua, *Sovetskie spetsialisty v Kitae, 1948–1960* (Moscow: Nauka – Vostochnaya Literatura, 2015), 6–9, 21–2.

¹⁴Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 90.

¹⁵Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, 'The Great Leap Forward, the People's Commune and the Sino-Soviet Split', *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, No. 72 (2011): 861–80.

¹⁶Photographer Wolfgang G. Schröter in 1959 portrayed the new China (Deutsche Fotothek, www.deutschefotothek.de; search Schröter/China), documentary films depicted People's Communes in China (DEFA-Film 'Wir berichten aus Pan Yü', Berlin 1959), and a leading member of the GDR government and Politburo published a treatise on the Great Leap Forward (Horst Sindermann, *Chinas grosser Sprung* (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1959).

¹⁷Hemen Ray, 'Die ideologische Achse Peking-Pankow', *Außenpolitik* 12 (1960): 819–25; Martin J. Esslin, 'East Germany: Peking-Pankow Axis?' *China Quarterly* 1 (1960): 85–8; Harald Möller, *DDR und VR China. Unterstützung der VRCh auf politischem, ökonomischem und militärischem Gebiet (1949–1964): eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Köster, 2003).

agricultural trade fair near Leipzig sparked domestic turmoil in 1960.¹⁸ China's Great Leap Forward had similar repercussions for other European socialist countries. In the ČSSR, for instance, the economist Michal Falt'lan promoted a partial adoption of the model.¹⁹ Meanwhile, research on Romania and Poland has devoted very little attention to references to the Chinese campaign in these countries, and different researchers have produced contradictory evaluations of the few existing sources.²⁰ In Bulgaria, high-ranking delegations returning from China praised the Great Leap Forward, and newspapers printed favourable reports about China's achievements. But, did the Chinese campaign resonate beyond these public declarations of sympathy?

A Chinese Great Leap Forward in Bulgaria? The research debate

In late summer and autumn 1958, Bulgarian communists were discussing the directives of the seventh party congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). This lengthy succession of media reports and work-collective meetings was typical of the state-socialist process of interpreting and implementing the vague political resolutions put out by the Party leadership. The general line, however, was very clear: the industrialisation of predominantly agrarian Bulgaria was to be accelerated. Thus, in October, the party leaders and the press called on Bulgaria's workers and farmers to 'fulfil the five-year plan in three to four years.' A comprehensive campaign was launched to scour Bulgarian farms, enterprises, land and people for hidden reserves and put the unused resources to use. Newspapers printed experience reports by collective farmers who had tested or even invented new working methods. At the same time, to put pressure on farm managements and workers, the press ran articles about enterprises that permitted failures. Besides these measures for mobilising the workforce (in agriculture), the state invested in huge industrial projects.

Some authors, noting the backdrop of worsening Sino-Soviet relations, have interpreted this campaign as an adoption of the Chinese Great Leap Forward.²¹ What arguments support the notion of Chinese influence in the Bulgarian Economic Leap? First, to some extent the Bulgarian policies were *similar* to the Chinese ones. The core of the campaign in both countries was to mobilise labour for agriculture and infrastructural projects via propaganda and pressure instead of financial incentives. As in China, in Bulgaria the recently collectivised farms were merged into far greater units. The Chinese mobilisation policy

¹⁸Beda Erlinghagen, 'Anfänge und Hintergründe des Konflikts zwischen der DDR und der Volksrepublik China. Kritische Anmerkungen zu einer ungeklärten Frage', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 49 (2007): 111–40; Letter of Foreign Ministry to the SED Central Committee (CC) Foreign Department, SAPMO-BArch, DY 30, IV-2/20/120; Doc. 116–7.

¹⁹Martin Slobodnik, 'Východný vietor prevláda? Čínsky Vel'ký skok vpred v Československu', in Martina Bucková and Gabriel Pirický, *Podoby globalizácie v Oriente*, (Bratislava: *Slovenská orientalistická spoločnosť pri Slovenskej akadémii vied*, 2015), 9–30.

²⁰Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng opine that Mao received full support for the leap in North Korea, Vietnam, the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, Albania, and Bulgaria, albeit not for the communes in the latter three. Shen and Xia, 'Great Leap Forward', 876. Lüthi sees Bulgaria and the GDR as having had a special role in endorsing the Leap. Lorenz Lüthi, 'China and East Europe, 1956–1960', *Modern China Studies* 22, No. 1 (2015), 248, 252–6. Studies on Sino-Romanian relations do not mention any allusions the Romanian leadership may have made to the Great Leap. Mihai Croitor, *România și conflictului Sovieto-Chinez, 1956–1971* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Mega, 2009), 123–208; Liu Yong, *Sino-Romanian Relations: 1950's–1960's* (Bucharest: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2006). Studies on the COMECON claim without further explanation that the Great Leap had an influence in Romania. Michael Kaser, *COMECON. Integration Problems of the Planned Economies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 77; Gospodinka Nikova, *Săvetât za Ikonomicheska Vzaimopomosht i Bălgariya, 1949–1960* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1989), 237.

²¹Baev, *Drugata studena vojna*; Brisby, 'Leaping Forward', 80–4; Brown, *Bulgaria Under Communist Rule*.

intrigued Bulgarian officials and engineers because they and their Chinese counterparts faced the same problems: insufficient investment funds and an overabundance of labour. Radio Free Europe counted 350,000 unemployed labourers in Bulgaria at the time, many of them pushed from rural areas to the cities in the aftermath of collectivisation.²² The British historian Liliana Brisby argues that 'the Chinese drive to substitute a maximum use of labour power for limited capital was what impressed the Bulgarian Communist leaders most'.²³

Second, some authors take *leadership rhetoric* as the main evidence that the leap policies in Bulgaria were 'Chinese'. At the Central Committee plenary session in November 1958, party leader Todor Zhivkov stated that 'the understanding, that our movement towards communism will be fulfilled only gradually and not also in great leaps, is flawed'.²⁴ At the same meeting, the BCP Central Committee decided explicitly to shift the slogan from 'speeded-up plan fulfilment' to 'leap in our economic development'.²⁵ The contemporary British-American historian and Radio Free Europe investigator James Brown is convinced that 'the name itself . . . was borrowed from China, as was the spirit and fervour of the campaign'.²⁶ However, the Bulgarian leadership and press, rather than use the whole term Great Leap Forward, called the campaign an 'Economic Leap' or a 'leap in the development of the country', or else used 'Great Leap' for developments on a local level.²⁷ The more official title of the campaign remained the 'All-People's Movement to Fulfil the Third Five-Year Plan in an Abridged Time Frame'.²⁸ At the mentioned Central Committee plenary sessions in November 1958 and January 1959, the leap terminology often came combined with a rhetoric of the 'Chinese experience'.²⁹ This connection also is reflected in the autobiographies of leading protagonists, which have drawn a lot of attention from scholars. Todor Zhivkov admits in a short paragraph of his memoirs that he was intrigued by the Chinese experiment in the beginning, before decisively coming out against it. He describes his predecessor, Vălko Chervenkov, who still was a member of government at the time, as the main protagonist who promoted the Chinese model.³⁰ Chervenkov's non-published memoirs and utterances of Zhivkov's assistant, Niko Jahiel, also are often cited as evidence for a short-lived but definitive adoption of a Chinese model in Bulgaria from autumn 1958 to January 1959, when Khrushchev supposedly called the Bulgarian leadership to order at the XXI party congress of the CPSU.³¹ Indeed, the CPSU leader dedicates several pages of his memoirs to the spreading of the Great Leap Forward in the Soviet dominion. Interestingly enough, he acknowledges to have been most worried by tendencies in the Soviet Far east of praising and adopting the Chinese campaign, but he also accounts that the Soviet leadership became concerned 'when we learned that the Chinese propaganda was beginning to have an effect in Bulgaria. . . . They [the Bulgarians] started enlarging their collective farms to

²²Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 85.

²³Brisby, 'Leaping Forward', 81.

²⁴Protocol of the enlarged meeting of the BCP Central Committee, 11 November 1958, Bulgarian Central State Archive (CDA), f. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 356, l. 4, <http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2773-----11--1958-->].

²⁵*Ibid.*, l. 140.

²⁶Brown, *Bulgaria Under Communist Rule*, 87.

²⁷See, e.g. *Zemедельско Zname*, 15 November 1958, 1; 9 December 1958, 1; January 1, 1959, 4; January 21, 1959, 1; also 'Za golemiya skok v Burgaski okrag', *Kooperativno Selo*, January 30, 1959, 2.

²⁸E.g. *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 17 October 1958, 1. ('vsenarodnoto dvizhenie za izpálnenie na tretata petiletka v skrátení srokove').

²⁹Protocol BCP CC, 11 November 1958, CDA, f. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 356, l. 4, <http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2773-----11--1958-->], l. 13, 46, 47, 86, 118.

³⁰Baev, *Drugata studena vojna*, 82; Todor Zhivkov, *Memoari* (Sofia: IK Trud i pravo, 2006), 468–9.

³¹Baev, *Drugata studena vojna*, 82.

ridiculous sizes, and they overinvested in heavy industry. (...) We felt compelled to talk things over with the Bulgarian comrades and give them an opportunity to hear our point of view'. At the following meeting in Moscow, Khrushchev remembers saying to the Bulgarian leaders that 'we feel that the Chinese experience is not applicable to European conditions, and that if you persist in your efforts to imitate China's Great Leap Forward it may result in serious complications'. The main concern in Khrushchev's talk to his Bulgarian comrades, however, seems to have been money and not ideology: 'We've received information that you've been forced to place large orders [for industrial equipment] with the capitalist world. You're incurring debts which you might not be able to repay. We're afraid you'll have to ask us for money and we won't be able to help you.'³² According to Khrushchev, the Bulgarian government changed some of its directives and reduced the size of the largest farms, but the problems of large investments in heavy industry persisted. In general, the leap rhetoric itself and the campaign-style measures went on in 1959 before they were stopped in the following year.

A third major issue in the debate about China's influence on Bulgarian policy was the role of *Bulgarian delegations* to China in autumn 1958. A high-ranking parliamentary delegation, led by the mentioned former party leader Vălko Chervenkov, visited factories, steelworks and farms and was obviously fascinated by the Chinese economic experiment. After returning to Bulgaria, Chervenkov praised the Chinese model publicly, for example, in several newspaper articles and in a speech in front of the parliament.³³

Fourth, authors tried to identify *factions* inside the Bulgarian leadership that promoted a Chinese way. Chervenkov is seen as the central figure in this network. He could not enforce his ideas, but he found followers among officials of the national nomenklatura and local politicians. The historian James Brown suggests that conservative Stalinists who opposed Khrushchev's reform policies gathered around Chervenkov.³⁴ Research has not yet clarified how significant this faction was, how it might have functioned, or how far it was pro-Chinese, beyond being Stalinist die-hards.

Fifth, some authors have argued, the concept of people's communes was in some cases adopted *locally*. These researchers thought they detected the most spectacular example of following a 'Chinese' role model in the municipality of Botevgrad near Sofia: local leaders announced that the entire district had been unified into a 'giant cooperative' (*koop-erativ-gigant*) and even dared to call the project the Botevgrad Commune (*Botevgradska komuna*).^{35,36}

In opposition to all these arguments, other scholars dispute the idea of a 'Chinese' Great Leap in Bulgaria, insisting that the Bulgarian industrialisation drive of 1958/1959 was essentially 'Soviet'.³⁷ They argue that the basic goals of the major industrial projects undertaken in the Third Five-Year Plan (1958–1962) had been approved by the party

³²Khrushchev *Remembers. The Last Testament*, ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown and Company: Boston, Toronto, 1974), 275–78.

³³Baev, *Drugata studena voïna*, 82.

³⁴Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 88–9. There were pro-Chinese factions or splinter groups in other Soviet-bloc countries as well. See Margaret Gnoïnska's chapter in this issue about the 'Mijal group' in Poland.

³⁵I. Nikolchovski, 'V Botevgradska okoliya sega ima samo edin kooperativ-gigant', *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 7 December 1958, 1; Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 88; Brisby, 'Leaping Forward', 81. However, an investigation of local and national archives did not show any indications of a (geo-)political scandal, which the founding of this enterprise supposedly produced. See below section 'People's Communes'.

³⁶See below section 'People's Communes'.

³⁷John R. Lampe, *The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Marcheua, *Todor Zhivkov*, 194–5.

leadership in 1956, long before the Chinese Communist Party launched its Great Leap Forward campaign.³⁸ They also point out that Bulgarian policies during the campaign were more imitative of Khrushchev's reforms than akin to China's Great Leap Forward. Moreover, the Leap terminology and the goal of implementing the Five-Year Plan in four years could also be seen as a throwback to the Soviet discourses of the Stalinist industrialisation campaign of the 1930s.³⁹

Drawing, in addition to the literature cited above, on archival material of Bulgarian state institutions this article argues that there is no substantial evidence that the Bulgarian leadership or a faction of it wished to confront Moscow or question the Soviet Union's leadership in the socialist camp. Ultimately, there was no attempt of a comprehensive adoption of the Chinese Great Leap Forward. Nonetheless, and apart from the question of whether the Bulgarian Economic Leap campaign was 'Chinese' or 'Soviet', the Chinese Great Leap Forward had repercussions on developments, policies and society in Bulgaria. The delegates who had travelled to China brought home a variety of techniques for improving agricultural production as well as methods of mobilising labour that were discussed and partially implemented in the Bulgarian Economic Leap campaign.

Transfers from China to Bulgaria

Mobilisation of Unpaid Labour

The Great Leap policy for mobilising unpaid labour in China attracted great interest from Bulgarian planners and politicians, who were eager to make use of unused land, labour, machines and other resources. The search for 'hidden reserves' generally was crucial to the Economic Leap campaign. Party officials suggested, for example, that there was no reason farmers should sit idle in winter; instead, they could prepare the soil for sowing and dig ditches and pits.⁴⁰ As the overall aim of the campaign was to increase yields with little capital investment, it is hardly surprising that the prospect of getting people to work without pay was highly attractive to the campaigners. Thus, party officials, town council clerks, teachers and other intellectual workers were called on to take part in 'physical labour', and farmers and workers were required to work additional days in agriculture and on huge construction sites. The unpaid labourers helped to dig canals, construct dams and supported agricultural work, not only during harvests but also in the winter campaigns for amelioration works, land terracing or silo pit construction.⁴¹

The idea of mobilising unpaid workforce beyond particular professions was explicitly inspired by the policies of the Chinese Great Leap Forward. In the speech mentioned at the beginning of this article, Sofia's Party Secretary Georgi Kostov openly expressed enthusiasm about the use of unpaid labour in the PRC:

³⁸Lampe, *Bulgarian Economy*, 149; Ulf Brunnbauer, 'Sozialistische Lebensweise' *Ideologie, Gesellschaft, Familie und Politik in Bulgarien, 1944–1989* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2007), 176.

³⁹Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 234.

⁴⁰'Prez zimnite dni', *Zemедельско Zname*, 16 January 1959, 1.

⁴¹Migeв, 'Otrazhenieto', 77.

And I will tell you, the great dam near Beijing that we saw; workers and farmers built it in 160 days. If we had done it the way we do projects, the planning organizations would have planned the project for three years, and then we would have spent five years building it with machines, and we would have spent hundreds of millions if not billions of Leva. And they – [they built it] in 160 days.⁴²

Accordingly, he demanded a change in mentality: Bulgarians should not continue requesting state money for everything, but instead take the initiative themselves. He concluded unambiguously that the Bulgarian economy needed unpaid labour, too.

The hours of unpaid labour exacted by the campaign cannot be quantified, and it is even more difficult to measure what economic gain came of them. Much of the work done was of dubious benefit and many of the projects were met with opposition from experts or workers on the ground. In the end, the practice of using unpaid labour on construction sites was stopped in 1960 because of its economic inefficiency.⁴³ Albeit unsuccessful in result, the initial reasoning behind the mobilisation campaign had been an economic one: tasked with increasing productivity without improved machinery, the campaigners settled on the idea of squeezing as much as possible out of the labour force. The Chinese policy was an explicit example, but it did not preclude the simultaneous application of Soviet models for the same purpose. The ministry of heavy industry, for example, conducted a campaign for the ‘method Mamaï’ and called its workers to emulate the Soviet coal miner’s record-setting shift.⁴⁴

Agricultural Techniques

The Bulgarian leadership’s unambiguous fascination with the Chinese campaign extended beyond labour mobilisation to a second sphere: agricultural techniques. Successes with wheat and cotton farming, ways of constructing terraced fields, means of fighting erosion and creation of irrigation infrastructure were the top issues in reports by the specialists who had travelled to China, and these issues were publicly discussed with reference to China’s campaign.⁴⁵

Soil cultivation and planting techniques were of special interest to Bulgarian planners and agronomists.⁴⁶ Detailed reports addressed features of the Chinese campaign like deep ploughing and close planting, which had also been part of the Lysenkoist agenda for increasing agricultural yields with little investment. Remnants of Lysenko’s ideas, which lost their hegemony in the biology and agronomy of the Soviet Union and China as of 1952 and 1955, respectively, still wandered through the socialist camp and were perpetuated in the Bulgarian Economic Leap campaign, via the example of China.⁴⁷ However, the Bulgarian

⁴²Protocol of the Assembly of the BCP City Committee BCP with Bureaus of Primary Party Organisations from Agricultural Cooperatives in Sofia District, 4 November 1958, Sofia Municipal and District Archive (SGODA), f. 1B, op. 25, a. e. 20, l. 238.

⁴³Migev, ‘Otrazhenieto’, 77.

⁴⁴Decision of the Ministry for Heavy Industry and the Trade Union on the Introduction of the Methods of the Noted Soviet Miner Nikolai Mamaï as a New Form of Competition between Workers, CDA, f. 414, op. 1, a.e. 38.

⁴⁵Taka Kitaiskite kooperatori poluchavat rekordni dobiivi, *Kooperativno Zemedelie* 1959, No. 5, 42–3; Report of the Agricultural Delegation to the PRC and North Korea to the BCP CC, 8 December 1958, CDA, f. 1B, op. 18, a.e. 217, l. 21–7.

⁴⁶Iz opita, *Kooperativno Zemedelie* 1959, No. 5, 42–3; Report of the Agricultural Delegation to the PRC and North Korea to the BCP CC, 8 December 1958, CDA, f. 1B, op. 18, a.e. 217, l. 21–7.

⁴⁷For the significance of Lysenkoism, aka Michurinism, in China, see Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 52–3, 88; Laurence Schneider, ‘Lysenkoism and the Suppression of Genetics in the PRC, 1949–1956,’ in *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present*, ed. Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-yu Li (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 327–58.

emulation of these 'Chinese' methods did not have geopolitical implications. Party officials and agronomists were convinced of the usefulness of deep ploughing in late summer, and had tested the technique in previous years.⁴⁸ Thus, deep ploughing can be understood as part of the 1950s extensivist modernisation of agriculture rather than a Soviet satellite's geopolitical move against Moscow. Furthermore, the campaigners of the agricultural ministry did not impose their idea indiscriminately on all farms but conceded that 'it is above all necessary to start from the local conditions and experience'.⁴⁹

Another field of interest for Bulgarian agricultural specialists comprised forms of *experimenting* in the framework of China's Great Leap Forward. A databased approach to detailed analysis of cultivation methods held the most promise for fast modernisation and planning in agriculture. The expert delegation to China was fascinated by the test fields of the Chinese agronomists, who presented the records of their yields without reservation.⁵⁰ After party leader Todor Zhivkov highlighted Chinese experiences with experimenting on the BCP's Central Committee plenum,⁵¹ agricultural state farms set up new test fields in the Bulgarian countryside. The press reported that several state farms were experimenting in test fields 'following the example of the Chinese villagers'.⁵²

In the Bulgarian specialists' review of Chinese agriculture, cotton farming was one of the most important topics. Upon returning home from China, the agricultural delegation informed the Central Committee of the BCP that China had become the world's biggest cotton producer. Minister of Agriculture Ivan Prămov proclaimed that Bulgarian cotton farms stood to benefit from 'experiences from other countries – Korea and China'.⁵³ Prămov promised that his ministry would take all measures necessary to introduce the methods the delegation had presented as the basis for the proliferation of record-breaking yields in China and Korea, including the infamous deep ploughing, the use of large amounts of fertiliser, and the use of seedlings raised in greenhouses. The ministry issued a directive recommending the seedling method, edited an information brochure, and dispatched two Korean specialists to travel through Bulgaria helping farmers apply the new methods.⁵⁴ That the campaign's results were a complete success is dubious: officials reported to the ministry that the assigned farms had failed to realise a substantial part of the planned planting of cotton according to the new method.⁵⁵ Still, the enthusiasm for China in the higher echelons of party and government had touched the everyday life of Bulgarian villagers.

⁴⁸An agricultural journal quotes Todor Zhivkov: 'Deep ploughing is our greatest water reservoir!' [Dălbokata oran e naj-golemyat naš yazovor!] 'Na dălboka oran!' *Kooperativno Zemedelie* 1959, No. 7, 1–2. For earlier campaigning for, and testing of, deep ploughing, see also 'Na vsichki ploshti za proletниците – dălboka oran,' *Kooperativno Zemedelie* 1958, No. 6, 1.

⁴⁹'Na vsichki ploshti za proletниците – dălboka oran,' *Kooperativno Zemedelie* 1958, No. 6, 1 (author's translation).

⁵⁰Report of the Agricultural Delegation to PRC and North Korea, 8 December 1958, CDA, f. 1, op. 18, a.e. 217, l. 27–37.

⁵¹Zhivkov's speech according to the protocol of the BCP CC plenum, 11 November 1958, CDA, f. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 356, l. 15, <http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2773-----11--1958->.

⁵²Vsenaroden pochod za sâkrashtavane srokovete na petiletkata, *Zemedelsko Zname*, 12 November 1958, 1.

⁵³Protocol BCP CC, 11 November 1958, CDA, f. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 356, l. 118, <http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2773-----11--1958->.

⁵⁴'Ukazaniya na Ministerstvoto na zemedeliето ... za razsadno zasazhdane na pamuka,' *Zemedelsko Zname*, 3 December 1958, 2; Dimităr Yurukov, 'Zasazhdane na pamuka chrez razsad v Kitaiskata Narodna Republika i v Korejskata N-d Republika,' *Kooperativno Selo*, 3 December 1958, 2; Sava Kănev, 'Meropriyatiya za izpălnenieto na tretya petgodishen plan za pamuka,' *Kooperativno Zemedelie*, No. 9 (1959): 20–1.

⁵⁵Instructive Report on Preparations for Planting Cotton, Vegetables, and Tobacco, and Material Supply of TKZS, CDA, f. 89, op. 61, a.e. 138, l. 22.

Without judging the methods, one can say that the goal of this campaign-style transfer of cotton-growing techniques from China was to increase yields of a cash crop that was a crucial raw material for the expanding textile industry. Bulgaria's cotton-growing offensive was not at all a geopolitical move to follow China and turn against the Soviet Union. On the contrary, cotton farming was fully in line with the Soviet leadership's intention to extend the cultivation of cotton in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.⁵⁶ The copying of Chinese agricultural techniques was not due to blind enthusiasm; rather, it was based on an economic rationale.

People's Communes in Bulgaria?

A further sphere of transfer concerned the governance and size of agricultural enterprises. The Bulgarian leadership instructed cooperatives to unify into much bigger farms comprising several villages in the winter of 1958/1959. The enlargement of the single enterprises reduced their number from 3700 to 850.⁵⁷ Whether and how the Chinese concept of the people's commune influenced this reform was a bone of contention in practice as well as in research at the time. Western authors claimed to have identified a people's commune founded by local officials, Chinese brochures happily reported that Bulgaria was experimenting with the model of the commune, and Soviet politicians warned their comrades from Sofia to abstain from this kind of experiment.⁵⁸ Khrushchev himself criticised the Bulgarians for their 'excessively large collective farms', but at the same time admitted that 'in our country too we failed to avoid "gigantomania"'.⁵⁹

In fact, the achievements of the people's communes were praised by the Bulgarian press, by the delegations to China, and prominently discussed by the former party leader Vălko Chervenkov.⁶⁰ Certainly, China's project of people's communes contributed somehow to Bulgarian policymakers' idea to enlarge agricultural enterprises. The agricultural delegation sent to China in autumn 1958 reported in detail on the governance structure in the Chinese communes, issuing a recommendation to examine it further at virtually the moment the Bulgarian leadership announced the enlargement campaign.⁶¹

However, the attempt to measure Chinese influence according to the size of agricultural entities in Bulgaria stands on shaky ground. Whether the size of the enterprises reached the dimensions promoted in China's agricultural policy or remained in the framework favoured by the Soviet Union was not decided by a single policy-making institution that had made

⁵⁶Julia Obertreis, *Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, 1860s–1991* (forthcoming); Julia Obertreis, 'Infrastrukturen im Sozialismus. Das Beispiel der Bewässerungssysteme im sowjetischen Zentralasien', *Saeculum* 58, No. 1 (2007): 157.

⁵⁷Migev, 'Otrazhenieto', 77.

⁵⁸Baev, *Drugata Studena Voïna*, 81–3; Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 88; *Newsletter on the Communist Parties in the World*, Beijing, No. 211, 20 December 1958, 4.

⁵⁹*Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, vol. 2, *Statesman (1953–1964)*, (ed.) Sergei Khrushchev, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 449. In the USSR the number of *kolkhoz* enterprises dropped from 236,900 in 1940 to 93,300 in 1953 and 37,600 in 1964; see Manfred Hildermeier, *Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917–1991. Entstehung und Niedergang des ersten sozialistischen Staates* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 696, 796.

⁶⁰Ivan Grigorov, 'Golemiyat skok', *Narodna Mladezh*, 5 July 1958, 1; 'Narodnite komuni – delo na milionite kitaïski selyani', *Kooperativno Selo*, 1 October 1958, 1; Vălko Chervenkov, 'Narodnite Komuni v Kitaï', *Rabotnicheskoto Delo*, January 15, 1959, 1; 'Informatsiya ot räkoveditelya na delegatsiya v KNR Vălko Chervenkov', *Kooperativno Selo*, 3 February 1959, 3.

⁶¹Report of the Agricultural Delegation to PRC and North Korea, 8 December 1958, CDA, f. 1, op. 18, a.e. 217, l. 4–20, 84–5.

a basic decision to follow either the Great Leap Forward or Khrushchev's reform policies. Rather, the Central Committee of the BCP pushed for a vague unification of cooperatives. It was the local and regional nomenklatura members that hammered out the final composition of the 'united agricultural cooperatives.' Officials from different provincial towns and villages quarrelled over the size and structure of the new enterprises. Local power, posts and property had to be redistributed. Diverging interests led to open conflict about which villages were to be included and what place would become the new centre of the united farm.⁶² The Bulgarian government and party leadership was not in overall control of this process. Thus, conditions were ripe for an occurrence like the establishment of a people's commune by local zealots in contravention of the leadership's policy line, as James Brown and Liliana Brisby thought they had detected in the founding of a giant cooperative in the provincial town of Botevgrad near Sofia. They suggest that local elites had taken the Bulgarian leadership's Economic Leap policies too far without understanding the wider ideological implications and that this local experiment of a *Botevgradska Komuna* was quickly terminated by an intervention from above. In this particular case, however, that just does not seem to be what happened.

The founding of the 'Unified Agricultural Cooperative "Botevgradska Komuna"' was indeed accompanied by many conflicts and a power struggle among local elites. Cadres were shuffled, and the size of the enterprise and municipality was changed several times. Soon after having become the biggest cooperative in Bulgaria, it was split into two. However, the main resultant cooperative kept the name *Botevgradska Komuna*, which remained in use until the privatisation of the enterprise in the early 1990s. The name, which probably helped to inspire the story of a Chinese inspiration of the founding of the enterprise, was anything but alien to the Bulgarian socialist nomenklatura: it was a reference to the Socialist Party's historical victories and local governments in the 1910s and 1920s in several Bulgarian municipalities, like Samokov, Sliven and Botevgrad, which had been called 'Commune' in the tradition of the famous Parisian example. The socialist regime in Bulgaria later made these 'Communes' part of its national narrative with municipalities organising anniversaries and local newspapers as well as several cooperatives being named after them.⁶³ Furthermore, the local files examined for this study contain no indication that a China–Soviet Union dichotomy was used as rhetorical strategy in any of the local elite's disputes, nor any mention that the cadres expressed a conviction that the Chinese People's Communes were the example the district of Botevgrad should follow. Neither did an investigation of the Botevgrad district archive unearth documents revealing a decisive political intervention from above that would have ended a 'Commune' experiment.⁶⁴ The *Botevgradska Komuna* was not a scandal in a geopolitical contradiction between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union but just one (albeit a special one) of many newly formed merged cooperatives.

⁶²See examples among letters from local party officials to the BCP CC in CDA, Fond 1B, op. 18, a. e. 219; l. 6–15; 35–42.

⁶³For example, the town's newspaper and the agricultural cooperative of Samokov were called 'Samokovska Komuna'. For the regime discourse on the Bulgarian Communes, see, e.g. Stoianka Pobornikova, 'Slivenskata Komuna prez 1915–1923 godina', *Izvestija na Instituta po Istorija na BKP* 12 (1964), 405–55.

⁶⁴Protocols of the Sessions of the BCP Primary Organisation at the Botevgrad District Council (SGODA, f. 195, op. 10, a. e. 25; f. 457, op. 1, several files), at the Botevgrad Town Council (f. 185, op. 25, a. e. 5; f. 299, op. 2 and 3, several files), at the Sofia District Council (f. 698, op. 1, a. e. 3), and of the District Council's Department for Agriculture (f. 614, op. 9; op. 6; several files). A town history volume treats the enlargement in a few technical sentences without even mentioning the renaming. Simeonka Vlaikova, *Botevgrad prez godinite*, vol. 2 (Sofia: Zvezdan, 2003), 39.

Thus, although the drive to enlarge the agricultural enterprises to some degree has received inspiration from the Chinese campaign, it was not intended to provoke Moscow by following a 'Chinese' path. The Bulgarian leadership often reiterated this point once Khrushchev had more clearly spoken out against the people's communes.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the idea of enlarging the Bulgarian agricultural enterprises persisted. The 1970s saw the formation of 'agro-industrial complexes' of sizes exceeding those of the unified agricultural cooperatives of the late 1950s. In the eyes of the Bulgarian leadership, enlargement of the country's agricultural enterprises had always been an economic necessity.⁶⁶

Goals and results of the Bulgarian Economic Leap

The Bulgarian Economic Leap campaign was neither an enthusiastic adoption of the Chinese example nor a mere emulation of Khrushchev's economic policy in the Soviet Union. The Bulgarian leadership was committed to the goal of industrialisation, especially to a programme of setting up heavy industry. The moderate bias towards strengthening consumption and agriculture promoted by Soviet economic policies at the time did not seem fully appropriate, nor was it attractive to accept Bulgaria's assigned role in COMECON as a vegetable and fruit supplier. Khrushchev and the CPSU urged the poorer countries in COMECON to concentrate on what they were doing best (agriculture) and supply the socialist market with the resulting goods in exchange for machinery from the more industrialised countries. Thus, the Bulgarians tried to revise their role in the socialist international division of labour. The Bulgarian government was not the only one that acted reluctantly or even opposed Khrushchev's suggestions for deepening the division of labour in COMECON. Even industrialised countries, which supported the general idea, tried to preserve those parts of their industries that did not fit into the specialisation scheme. The most prominent opposition came from the Romanian leadership, which obstructed many projects and measures for a deepened cooperation in the early 1960s.⁶⁷

In the Bulgarian case, a letter of 1955 from Khrushchev to the Central Committee of the BCP stated that the building up of a steel industry in Bulgaria was 'a fantasy', and that the only viable path of economic development was the Soviet-assisted mechanisation of agriculture.⁶⁸ Industrialisation in Bulgaria, he suggested, should not go beyond bicycle production and eventually, at a later stage, assembly of cars from prefabricated components produced in other COMECON states.⁶⁹ The Central Committee sent a very thankful reply expressing full agreement to Moscow's stance, but in fact, the committee's debate revealed divergent opinions on the topic.⁷⁰ In further negotiations on Bulgaria's role in COMECON, the Bulgarian side managed to obtain from the Soviet Union – in clear contradiction to Khrushchev's initial reasoning – considerable credits and support for building up steel and

⁶⁵Baev, *Drugata Studena Voïna*, 82–4.

⁶⁶Lampe, *Bulgarian Economy*, 152–3.

⁶⁷Lee Kendall Metcalf, *The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance. The Failure of Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 57–65; Kaser, *COMECON*, 83–84; André Steiner, 'The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance – An Example of Failed Economic Integration?' *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 39 (2013), 240–58.

⁶⁸Letter from Khrushchev to Praesidium of CC CPSU [which, after approval, was sent to the CC BCP], 27 October 1955, f. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 189, l. 3–9, see l. 6 [<http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2876-----6-7---1955->].

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, l. 7.

⁷⁰Daniel Vachkov and Martin Ivanov, *Bălgarskiyat vānshen dālg 1944–1989. Bankrutāt na komunisticheskata ikonomika* (Sofia: Institut za izuchavane na blizkoto minalo, 2008), 94–102; Protocol of CC BCP Plenary Session, 6–7 December 1955, CDA, f. 1B; op. 5; a.e. 187, <http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2877-----6-7--1955--->.

machine-construction industry complexes.⁷¹ The most prominent of these projects was the giant steel mill in Kremikovci, which indeed was of doubtful use economically, just as Khrushchev had predicted in his 1955 letter.⁷²

Although the Kremikovci steel mill was not the only investment that proved to be inefficient, the results of the Bulgarian campaign were not at all as catastrophic as the outcome of the Chinese Great Leap Forward. No one starved to death, and neither agricultural nor industrial production was substantially diminished. Rather, growth was stable. In view of the ambitious goals, which had been formulated in autumn 1958, this was a disappointing outcome. When announcing the successful completion of the Economic Leap in 1960, the Bulgarian leadership had to cheat. Zhivkov and the State Plan Commission announced happily that *growth rates* had doubled while they originally had promised that the *amount of production* would rise by that factor.⁷³ In general, though, the Bulgarian industrialisation process remained on track. Unemployment was down, and several factories had been modernised and new ones erected. The share of industry in the net material product rose from 23 to 48% from 1948 to 1960, and industrial employment grew by 11.5% annually between 1955 and 1960.⁷⁴

With the rapid industrialisation process the Bulgarian leadership aimed to escape the bad terms of international trade for agricultural products with Western countries and the COMECON states alike.⁷⁵ The long- and short-term goals in the process of transforming Bulgaria from a backward, agricultural country into a developed, industrialised one could not be attained without capital. Technology and raw materials had to be bought on world markets. Yet Bulgaria lacked the capital to do so. To remedy the mismatch between goals and available resources, the Bulgarian economic politicians adopted a double strategy. The means to develop heavy industry had to be borrowed, mainly from the Soviet Union. The other side of the double strategy was a strict policy of cost reduction – a state-socialist form of austerity. For this second part of the development strategy, Bulgarian planners and politicians found inspiring examples in the Great Leap Forward in China.

However, the first line of the double strategy thwarted the second. The erection of Kremikovci and the renovation of other industrial facilities exceeded the financial capacities of the Bulgarian government, because the cost of importing machinery from socialist and Western countries exceeded by far the gains made from exports, mostly of agricultural products. Bulgaria was entering a debt crisis that began to escalate in 1959 as a direct consequence of the industrial investments in the course of the Economic Leap.⁷⁶

⁷¹Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 86–7; Brunnbauer, *Sozialistische Lebensweise*, 172–3; Vachkov and Ivanov, *Bălgarskiyat vānshen dālg*, 94–102; Nikova, *Sāvetāt za Ikonomicheska Vzaimopomosht*, 209–10, 224. Letter from Khrushchev to CC CPSU/CC BCP, 27 October 1955, CDA f. 1B, op. 5, a.e. 189, <http://politburo.archives.bg/bg/2013-04-24-11-09-24/1950-1959/2876-----6-7--1955->.

⁷²Michael Palairt, “‘Lenin’ and ‘Brezhnev’: Steel Making and the Bulgarian Economy, 1956–90,” *Europe Asia Studies* 47, No. 3 (1995), 493–505; Brunnbauer, *Sozialistische Lebensweise*, 184–206. As the exploitation of natural mineral deposits near Kremikovci proved non-viable and inefficient, iron ore and coking coal had to be imported from the Danube and the Black Sea to the steel factory near Sofia. The weak Bulgarian industry was not able to absorb the steel mill’s produce and it had to be dumped on the world market at prices lower than production costs, going primarily to Japan.

⁷³Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 85, 93.

⁷⁴Lampe, *Bulgarian Economy*, 153; Brunnbauer, *Sozialistische Lebensweise*, 179.

⁷⁵For the unfavourable terms of trade for Bulgaria see Vachkov and Ivanov, *Bălgarskiyat vānshen dālg*, 100–5.

⁷⁶Rumen Avramov, *Pari i de/stabilizaciya v Bălgariya, 1948–1989* (Sofia: Institut za izuchavane na blizkoto minalo, 2007), 123–4. Between 1958 and 1962 the foreign debt to capitalist countries grew eightfold. In 1959 alone it rose from slightly more than \$20 million to \$115 million.

Bulgaria's debt problem and the various actors' attempts to mitigate it reveal the extent to which economic processes in the seemingly isolated Soviet bloc were part of the global circulation of capital. In 1959 and 1960, the Bulgarian National Bank had to renegotiate and restructure its debts several times to avoid bankruptcy. As the bank did not possess the means to exercise control over imports (i.e. hard currency outflow) or over the realisation of the export plan (i.e. currency inflow), there was no remedy but recourse to new loans or extension of loan periods. The Bulgarian National Bank had to seek help from Soviet-owned banks in the West – the Moscow Narodny Bank in London and the Banque commerciale pour l'Europe de Nord in Paris.⁷⁷ These banks were in a peculiar position between the Soviet government's political interests and the regulations and conventions of the countries and financial markets they acted in. Because of being part of the international banking system, it was crucial for these banks to preserve their prestige as 'good debtors'. However, they also had the task to support the socialist partners in covering their debt, because the Soviet prestige depended not least on the reliability of the whole bloc. In 1959, their share in Bulgaria's foreign convertible currency debt amounted to 66%, temporarily putting them – or the Soviet state bank, as their owner – in the position of a lender of last resort for the crisis-ridden brother country.⁷⁸ Thus, these banks, because of their intrinsic interest in preventing payment default on the part of the Bulgarian National Bank, displayed a will to impose a strict policy of saving hard currency on the Bulgarian government. 'In a certain sense', writes the Bulgarian economic historian Rumen Avramov, 'they played the same role the IMF would be playing decades later'.⁷⁹

National and supranational institutions in the West were startled by the potential of default on the debts Bulgaria owed to the western-based Soviet banks and, to a limited extent, directly to western banks.⁸⁰ Bulgarian negotiators had to travel to Paris and London (not to Moscow) several times to meet with personnel from the Gosbank-owned banks as well as representatives of the French government and Western banks. The Bank for International Settlements in Basel issued credits for debt restructuring, too. A temporary solution was found in resorting to the Bulgarian gold reserves. With the decision to let the Moscow Narodny Bank sell part of the Bulgarian National Bank's gold reserve on London markets, a taboo was broken. In the following years, the gold reserves were used as an active asset by depositing them in London or Basel as a security for further loans. Until the middle of the 1960s, Bulgaria lost the bulk of its gold reserves but in concurrence with generous trade agreements with the Soviet government, the foreign debt could be reduced to a manageable amount.⁸¹

The debt crisis became the stepping stone for the reforms of the 1960s. Simultaneously with the debt restructuring measures, the National Bank urged the government to

⁷⁷Central Intelligence Agency, 'Soviet-Owned Banks in the West', Intelligence Report, October 1969, available online in CIA Library, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000233857.pdf. These two banks had been Soviet-controlled since the 1920s and gained fame for their early involvement in Eurodollar business in the 1950s.

⁷⁸Avramov, *Pari i De/stabilizaciya*, 135–40, 166.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 185 (author's translation).

⁸⁰Vachkov and Ivanov, *Bälgarskiyat vänshen dälg*, 110. In March 1960 the Bulgarian debt in short-term credits in convertible currency was \$129.4 million, of which \$90 million was owed to socialist banks – including \$76 million to the Soviet-owned banks in London and Paris – and \$39.4 million to Western banks and enterprises, mainly in West Germany and Italy.

⁸¹Avramov, *Pari i De/stabilizaciya*, 196–9; Vachkov and Ivanov, *Bälgarskiyat vänshen dälg*, 104–20. See also: Report of the Ministry for Foreign Trade and the Bulgarian National Bank to the Committee for Currency Questions and Trade Balance, 4 March 1966, CDA, f. 259, op. 28, a.e. 3, l. 1–3.

curtail import, meaning also to temper growth and domestic consumption, and push exports to liquidate the structural deficit.⁸² Ending its leap policies, the Bulgarian leadership substantially lowered the plan goals for 1961.⁸³ In general, the political leadership recurred to a more intensive growth model. This turn from creating growth through greater inputs to a policy of increasing productivity was in line with the reform debates in the other COMECON countries at the time. The crucial questions were at what level decisions on investment and resource allocation should be made, how the outcome of production processes was to be measured and how prices should be determined. In the Bulgarian reforms, to a certain extent, decision-making competences were shifted from the ministerial level to a lower level of enlarged entities of production (above the enterprise level). The fate of the reforms was, not only in Bulgaria, coined by the contradiction of the party and economic bureaucracy's goal to raise efficiency on the one hand and to keep control over the whole process on the other. In a certain sense, the Bulgarian leadership was successful in restructuring the industry and opening it up to new branches during the following decades. Bulgaria was able to, additionally to its role as supplier of fruit, vegetables and forklift trucks, make itself the specialist for computers and data processing devices in the COMECON.⁸⁴ However, the chronic trade balance deficit, which rooted in the bad terms of trade on the world market, in the long run could not be liquidated by these steps, and in the 1980s the socialist regime ran into its next – final – debt crisis.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The Economic Leap campaign in Bulgaria from 1958 to 1960 was not a comprehensive adoption of China's Great Leap Forward. Far from leading to a coherent Chinese-style economic policy, the Chinese campaign's reverberations in Bulgaria were limited to some fragmented inspirations, a curious enthusiasm in certain echelons of the bureaucracy, and transfers of agricultural technologies and methods of temporary labour mobilisation.

Bulgarian planners, economists, politicians and technical experts did see promise in the Chinese Great Leap Forward, but not in the sense of an original Chinese way to be emulated. Rather, they viewed China's leap as a model for cost reduction in a late Stalinist-style industrialisation drive. The parallels between the two countries' industrialisation projects, undertaken in circumstances of prevailingly rural structures, lack of investment resources and abundant labour, made the Great Leap Forward an interesting example to the Bulgarian leadership. The rationale guiding the Economic Leap campaign and the transfers of techniques and technologies from China was primarily economic in nature.

⁸²Avramov, *Pari i De/stabilizaciya*, 180.

⁸³Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 143. The planned growth for industry was lowered from 27.8% for 1960 to 7.8% for 1961.

⁸⁴Brown, *Bulgaria under Communist Rule*, 160–72; Lampe, *Bulgarian Economy*, 199–204; Martin Ivanov, *Reformatorstvo bez reformi. Politicheskata ikonomiya na bălgarskiya komunizăm 1963–1989* (Sofia: Inst. za Izučavane na Blizkoto Minalo, 2008). Victor Petrov is researching the temporarily successful Bulgarian attempts to build up a computer and chip industry in a doctoral project at Columbia University ('A Cyber-Socialism at Home and Abroad: Bulgarian Modernisation, Computers, and the World 1967–1989').

⁸⁵Avramov, *Pari i De/stabilizaciya*, 200–11.

The goal of national industrialisation indeed conflicted with the strategy of division of labour envisaged by the Soviet leadership, though not in the geopolitical sense of a 'Chinese' deviation on Bulgaria's part. Bulgarian planners and politicians sought add-ons to capital-intensive industrialisation on the one hand, and alternatives to Bulgaria's role as a fruit, vegetable and tobacco supplier to COMECON and world markets on the other. The history of the Bulgarian Economic Leap shows that the campaign was not an example of a potential geopolitical breach in the bloc, but evidence that Soviet power was not unlimited in such economic questions. To be sure, Moscow did have a huge influence on Sofia's policies, but it still had to negotiate. It could not simply impose its will. This was all the more so because the socialist states were dependent on the capitalist West's offer of the most modern machinery, certain materials and the convertible 'hard' currency, which was necessary to purchase these.

Instead of having a geopolitical intra-bloc implication, the technological transfers observed here happened in a context of political promotion and extensive realisation of exchanges of technologies, knowledge and ideas. The Bulgarian Economic Leap campaign and the technical transfers from China thus were facilitated by the socialist context. Transfers of technology and models for economic policies did not necessarily have to originate in Moscow and to a certain extent were not controlled and sanctioned by the Soviet leadership.

In the specific case of exchanges between Bulgaria and China, relations changed once Soviet political decisions made the PRC a politically unacceptable outcast in the socialist camp. However, that China would become a sort of internal enemy in the socialist camp was not yet clear at the end of the 1950s. Furthermore it should be noted that Bulgarian foreign trade officials continued attempting to persuade their Chinese business partners to increase trade again after 1960. Trade between the two countries never stopped totally, as was also the case with other Soviet bloc countries. Bulgaria's Economic Leap policy was not a provocation against Soviet leadership, and Bulgaria was not on the brink of becoming a second (or rather first) Albania. It is the Cold War perspective that presents the Bulgarian industrialisation drive of the late 1950s as either Soviet or Chinese, and assigns geopolitical meaning to measures of economic development. The interpretations in Western research from the 1960s and 1970s tend to exaggerate the politicisation of interactions while minimising mercantilist rationales in the state socialist economic and foreign policies.

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