

## OF GLOSS, GLITTER AND LIPSTICK: FASHION, FEMININITY AND WEALTH IN POST-SOCIALIST URBAN BULGARIA

*Elitza Ranova*  
*Rice University*

---

### **“The Girl”**

*She doesn't allow anyone to see her without makeup. Personalized for her, hell is a place without a single mirror, but with tons of men, who fail to turn after her, and tons of women, who have the same tube top. Her role models have measures 90-60-90 centimeters and a fine skin. It's very important that everyone notices from what kind of car she gets off and on what model cell phone she SMSs and composes jingles.*

*She reads a lot: magazines about fashion and beauty, and love novels. “Titanic” is in the top-ten of her favorite movies.*

*If the average woman uses three kilos of lipstick for the span of her life, the Girl uses at least six. She repeatedly tells her mother on the phone that she hasn't been born to wash a man's socks. Flirts habitually. Studies foreign languages in order to know what to say if someone asks her ‘Voulez-vous couchez avec moi.’ From the men in her life, she demands huge bouquets of red roses, candle light dinners and their check books.*

*If the movie of her life has a happy ending, it is cocktails, receptions and charity dinners. If the ending is sad, her husband beats her, she washes his socks and sends her daughter to modeling classes.*

**Style:** *Tight fitting jeans with embroideries, shiny threads and sequin, ankle-boots with needle-point heels, short skirts and tank-tops, a small purse and large earrings, perfect makeup, died hair, nail polish with dots, stars or stripes; top achievement: Paola Apsi (an expensive boutique in Sofia). (...)*

**Conversations:** *strictly about consumption; men, cosmetics, who with whom, cellulite, liposuction, silicon implants. (...)*

### **United Colors**

*An alternative young person who manages to find his or her proper place and to be satisfied by life in the present. Practices one of the free professions and several foreign languages with ease. Independent without rubbing this in your eyes, ears, and nose. On a weekend, takes a casual trip to Bansko (a Bulgarian ski resort) or Madrid. In possession of designer furniture and designer juice extractor (noblesse oblige). Works on several projects simultaneously but keeps workaholism*

*under control. Balances between eastern philosophies, western technologies and national identity. Avoids the popular tourist routes and well-traveled life paths. Changes drastically his life course every three years because boredom is worse than a hair in the soup. Capable of creating problems only to assure that he is not bored. Uses his imagination actively and usually profits well from doing it. From time to time allows himself to be a snob. His last will is to spread his ashes over the Indian Ocean.*

**Style:** *Benetton, Sysley, GAP, DKNY, Levy's engineered jeans, invisible makeup, old school running shoes. (...)*

**Conversation:** *media, books, theater, technology, internet, politics, sport.*

---

In April 2002, the new lifestyle magazine *Edno* appeared on the Bulgarian media market. Its first issue contained the article “Civil Society,” from which (with abbreviations) come the above excerpts (Droumeva 2002). The purpose of the text is to describe “the most widely represented urban species, for which style matters.” In addition to the two listed above, it includes three more “species:” “the artist,” “the civil servant,” and “the yuppie.” “Civil Society” illustrates the way in which “fashion others” are used locally to define and redefine identities, whether in terms of gender or of socioeconomic status. The article also suggests the possibility of drawing a map of these contemporary fashion relations that corresponds to local variations in status and values. In this paper, I will argue that the women, who self-identify with the “United Colors” group, support androgynous dress and self-styling as a rejection of traditional women's roles and the dominant post-socialist image of wealth that is associated with the ostentatiousness and criminality of the Bulgarian nouveaux riches. I pay close attention to dress and to the ways in which self-definition and group-definition is carried out through taste and life-style choices. As I will show at the end, an activist engagement with women's issues is not a part of this position in part because the new ideas of womanhood and femininity have not brought about a radical change in sentiment. The “United Colors” model rethinks women's public presence more

radically than it does the emotional dynamic in the privacy of relationships.

At the time I came across the “Civil Society” article, I had been conducting fieldwork among the magazine’s staff for months. When I read the article, I quickly recognized that “United Colors” represents the group I study. The people who self-identify with it are characterized by high levels of education, relatively high incomes, and similar views and opinions. This group includes the people, who make the magazine, their intended readers and the larger social segment to which they belong.

Based on this article, my informants emerge as different from the “civil servant,” who stands for the older generation of Bulgarians now living on small salaries and pensions with little prospects for the future; from the “artist,” who is a “nervous, dark type” that “insists on being intellectual and despises luxury;” and from the “yuppie,” “who’s been taught to exude freshness, fresh breath, and a perfectly calculated smile” and whose main interest is “corporate gossip” (Droumeva 2002).

The female informants from the “United Colors” category spend much time and effort discussing the women from whom they find it most necessary to differentiate themselves: on one hand, the wealthy kept women, *mutressa* (*mutressi*, pl.) and the stars of the popular pop-folk genre *chalga*,<sup>1</sup> and, on the other, their less-wealthy counterparts, “the average women,” as one informant referred to them. “The Girl” represents a composite image of these two groups characterized by similar taste in fashion and cosmetics and by a belief that women find fulfillment chiefly through men and through the family rather than through professional careers and personal development. The female members of the “United Colors” group embody an alternative to this ideal through style. In contrast to the “tight fitting jeans, ankle-boots with needle-point heels, short skirts and tank-tops” considered characteristic of “The Girl,” they prefer “invisible makeup,” “old school running shoes” and clothing that is asexual and sporty. The stylistic preferences of the “United Colors” group also reflect an insistence on a liberal ideal of wealth as a marker of merit and on its redemption from the postsocialist association between affluence and criminality. To an image of women, who chase the checkbooks of men, who have become wealthy illegally, they oppose the image of women, who “work on several projects simultaneously” and finance their trips to Bansko or Madrid alone.

Editorial board meetings, photo-shoots with members of the magazine’s staff as well as freelancers, events such as concerts, casual and formal interviews with staff writers and freelancers, all proved to be valuable sources of insight and personal connections for this ongoing project. The line of investigation in this paper relates style to attitudes and ideas, and corresponds to a well-established understanding in the social sciences that taste is not a trivial matter of personal preference but that it provides means to express and negotiate social identities and worldviews (cf. Ash and Wilson 1992, Miller 1998). Pierre Bourdieu’s pioneering study of taste in France is the best known demonstration of the existence of a relationship between aesthetic preferences and socioeconomic circumstances. In Bulgaria as well, class and status are intertwined with taste as differentiating factors in the social space.

The ideas of the “United Colors” group about femininity, beauty, and gender roles are in conflict with the dominant model in Bulgaria. The end of socialism brought about a turn to patriarchal gender relations in much of Eastern Europe. Since 1989, Bulgaria witnessed a revitalization of the ideal of traditional female beauty, sexualization of the female body and relegation of women to the sphere of domesticity. With variations in intensity and content, this general model dominates the attitudes of both the wealthy *mutressi* and *chalga* stars and of “average women.”

### Money, Women and Style

The first years after 1989 brought to Bulgaria widespread deprivation and poverty. In the murky waters of the transition, well-connected members of the *nomenklatura*, supported by the physical muscle of sportsmen, and wrestlers in particular, and in the company of players from the gray socialist economy, accumulated significant wealth in semi-legal or outright illegal dealings and through organized crime. Racketeering, masked as insurance business, smuggling, drug trade and prostitution are some of the well known sources of this wealth. The nouveaux riches and the members of their entourage are generally referred to as *mutri* (*mutra*, sg.) or ugly faces, a word that conjures the stereotypical image of a man with a short hair and a thick neck, dressed in a brand-name jump suit, leather shoes, and adorned with heavy golden chains. This stereotype refers to the members of the lower ranks in the hierarchy of criminal groups because they were most visible.

Today, the economic situation of many has improved, even though the standard of living in Bulgaria remains one of the lowest among the new

and prospective members of the European Union. According to a recent study, the average income in the country is higher only than Romania's and is six times lower than that in the Czech Republic (Mircheva 2006). More than 49 percent of the population still lives below or just above the poverty line (*Dnevnik* 2006). The minimum salary in Bulgaria is 140 BGN per month (\$86) and the average is about 300 BGN (\$200) (Mediapool 2005). The capital Sofia and a couple of other large cities, such as Varna and Plovdiv, provide significantly better employment opportunities than the rest of the country. Sofia, especially, is the center of attraction for young well-educated men and women because of the quality of the job market and because of its status as a cultural and political center with a vibrant art and entertainment life. The headquarters of many international companies are located in Sofia and offer professional opportunities and attractive pay.

Gradually, the wealth of many of the underground bosses is being laundered and enters legitimate businesses. The image of the stereotypical *mutra* has also largely disappeared from the public space, and has been replaced by new displays of wealth as the jump suits have been traded in for business suits. Nevertheless, Bulgarians continue to witness the violent settling of debts and conflicts between organized crime bosses. Between 1995 and 2005, 50 murders for show took place revealing the forceful struggles between organized crime groups (Netinfo 2005).

The image of the *mutressa*, the beautiful wife or lover of a *mutra*, has not changed significantly over the years. According to the popular stereotype, a *mutressa* has a slim body that struts with a swing on high heels; carefully styled hair that reveals the many hours spent at the hairdresser's studio; and sexy attire that may include tight pants and deep-cut or see-through blouses. Many of the elements listed as preferred by the "The Girl" and, by implication, by *mutressi* are still popular: the jeans with embroideries, the "shiny threads and sequins, ankle-boots with needle-point heels, short skirts and tank-tops, a small purse and large earrings, perfect make up, dyed hair, nail polish" (Droumeva 2002).

In 2005, these were modified in accordance with a style that fashion experts would describe as a mix between the "military" and "ethnic" looks that enjoyed global popularity this season. Variations of this style can be seen in images from recent issues of magazines like *Vogue* and in videos from the seasonal reviews in world fashion centers such as Milan, Paris and New

York. In Bulgaria, women favored brown blouses embroidered with golden sequins, tinsel or other shiny threads creating the impression of traditional ethnic designs. Matching pants visually accentuated the upper part of the leg. A final touch was added by an array of accessories: richly decorated belts that hang low on the hips and large necklaces and earrings in matching colors. The local Bulgarian variation reworks the main characteristics of the military-ethnic look to emphasize the body and sex appeal and foregoes the more subdued alternatives of the style.

Some manage to dress from head to toe in up-to-date outfits. Since it requires a significant financial investment, this opportunity is most accessible to the affluent, among them *mutressi* and *chalga* stars. *Chalga* is the most successful Bulgarian musical genre that enjoys little social prestige but generates enormous popularity and profits. It is the heir of the so-called wedding music, which during socialism entertained guests at many a dinner table and family celebrations, and offered a folk music alternative to the sanitized version of folklore sanctioned by the socialist state (Buchanan 1996). Like its predecessor, *chalga* blends folk music from Bulgaria as well as from other peoples in the Balkans, like Serbs,<sup>2</sup> Turks, Greeks, and Roma, with pop and rock elements.<sup>3</sup> In the first years of the transition, the lyrics were more openly sexual and indiscrete than most of the music that is produced today. The stars of this genre are predominantly women with impeccable appearance styled according to the general characteristics outlined above. As one informant, an established human resource trainer for an international company, put it: "Kitsch and lots of money, this is what makes *mutressi* and *chalga* stars alike."

Other women, who live on far more modest budgets, do what one of my informants did: buy a single accessory, in this particular case, a brown leather purse with strips of fur attached to it, or a couple of garments, which allow them to pay homage to the style without buying an entire outfit. For the low income women, open air markets such as *Zhenskia Pazar* and *Ilientsi* in Sofia offer cheap imports from Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The same kinds of goods at approximately the same or higher prices can also be found in many of the small shops located in garages under living blocks or in modest pavilions off the main streets. For the few rich Bulgarians, the glittery Vitosha Street in Sofia offers high-end garments and accessories.

Still others forego the items in the fashionable trend entirely but adhere to similar

principles of dress and appearance: hair carefully styled, nails polished, lipstick inevitable. Their clothes have a line and color that are not associated strongly with the current fashion and survive the changes of seasonal trends. Nevertheless, the garments accentuate women's femininity and bodily forms in a way that is similar to the looks of the "military-ethnic" style adherents. Some of my informants from this and previous research belong to this category. Many are well-educated and have jobs that pay salaries about or higher than the average for the country. What separates the women from this category from the women from the "United Colors" group is their meticulous attention to appearance, an attraction to a certain amount of glamour in their looks, and a preference for garments that draw attention to the body.

The ideal of beauty that emphasizes femininity has been especially noticeable in the beginning of each of my visits to Sofia, a sentiment documented in my notes:

*When I am in Bulgaria, I find that my wardrobe changes (in comparison with the United States). The slack jeans, plain T-shirts, and my running shoes fall out of favor. The adjustment usually takes a few days. On Tuesday, I walked down Ivan Assen and passed well made-up women, garments carefully chosen; the fashion of the season clearly discernible in most appearances. My clothes dedicated to comfort more than fashion made me feel out of place in the first few days and now have been traded off for a dress and platform shoes. A short green skirt, black deep cut tank top, linen shorts with an elegant line: all of these have risen back from the bottom of my "favorites" list to the top even in the cases when I have no occasion to put additional effort in my appearance. The underlined femininity in women's looks makes me conform to an unspoken standard.*

An emphasis on traditional femininity became apparent in the first years after 1989. Studies of gender relations in Eastern Europe have established the existence of a post-socialist patriarchal turn that relegates women to a sphere of domesticity and privacy rather than to the public sphere (cf. Einhorn 1993, Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000, and Todorova 1993). This constitutes a change from the peculiar role of women under socialism that is well summed up in the idea of the "double burden." Socialism brought women into the domain of wage work and posed on them demands for participation in the state economy similar to those of men. However,

domestic work and care for the children remained women's responsibility. A main source of support in managing the double burden of house work and employment was the state. Kovács and Varadi (2000) point out that during socialism female wage workers depended less on their spouses or other relatives for help with child rearing, personal education and even entertainment than they did on the state. With the demise of the socialist support structures, many working class women were left in a particularly vulnerable position.

Western scholars and feminists saw the end of socialism as an opportunity for women's liberation and the emergence of a strong feminist movement (Einhorn 1993, Watson 1997). However, instead of embracing feminist thought, many Eastern Europeans returned to traditional ideas of femininity prioritizing innate differences between the sexes and the cultivation of attractive personal appearance. In this context, care for the self and a "re-sexualization" of the socialist asexual female body is combined with aspiration to the standards of conventional gender roles.

One of the first examples of this attitude in the Bulgarian context was brought to my attention during the preliminary stages of fieldwork. On a warm summer evening, I was dining in the company of several Bulgarians, when one of the women brought up a book that she had recently read. In the following discussion, both the young woman and her husband defended the book's thesis that there are inherent differences in the hardwiring of women's and men's brains that make them think differently and be better suited for certain kinds of jobs. The woman, who I will call Iskra to protect her anonymity, said that her work for a trade company has forced her to develop personal qualities that she thinks are typically masculine such as decisiveness, quick reactions, and problem solving. She saw this as a positive change but was dissatisfied because it made her feel less feminine and less attractive. To regain her self-confidence, she said that she frequently shops in the cosmetic stores close to the office where she works. She said, "When I buy a lipstick or a new eye shadow and put them on, that makes me happy. Makes me feel more celebratory, more like a woman and helps me get back in a role that fits me better." Despite the financial difficulties of the young family, Iskra's appearance is always well maintained. Her hair is dyed in a shiny black color. It is long, blow dried and styled to form large curls that frame her white skin and green eyes accentuated with pearl eye shadows. A bright lipstick is inevitable as well as shoes with heels.

This appearance reflects the ideal of beauty to which she subscribes.

Iskra and a common friend, whom I will call Natalia, have frequently criticized me for not being feminine enough. In many conversations, they expressed desire to see me with more make up, in skirts, and in heels saying that if I invested more care into my appearance, I would notice a significant difference in the way I would look and feel. Natalia's concern finally convinced me to let her take me shopping and help me select a deep red lipstick and a set of purple shadows that can create the "smoky eyes" look.

Also during a pilot study, I had met another friend of Iskra and Natalia's, whom I will call Boriana. At the time Boriana was undergoing a personal crisis caused by an anxiety that at 26 she still was not married. Similar was Natalia's sentiment, who had a stable relationship but was not married to her partner. I found the intensity of their emotion surprising considering that many of my acquaintances in the United States and in Bulgaria at the same age are also single or live with their partners without marriage. However, I was able to relate better after talking to Iskra and learning that being married and having a child gives her a sense of accomplishment and self-worth that she did not think she could receive from a job. In fact, having left the trade company to be a stay-at-home mom for a year, she said that this was the happiest time of her life and that she was not eager to return to the job market. She would like to find a job that is interesting and pays well (to increase her chances she has signed up as a distance learning master's student in business management) but her priority in life was her family and home. When discussing potential employment abroad, Iskra explained that she would not even consider it, because that would mean either being apart from her family or asking her husband to make a compromise with his job, despite the fact that he earns as much as she does. It became apparent that for Iskra, Natalia and Boriana as well as their friends, all of whom are well-educated and with good jobs, the family precedes professional development in order of importance and is the chief source of a sense of accomplishment.

### **United Colors**

The attitudes to style and accomplishment of the women from the "United Colors" group are diametrically opposed to those outlined above. Their preferred fashion styles are marked by an intentional impression of "carelessness." They generally avoid tight fitting clothes, layered makeup, and the overall impression of glamour.

They favor short hairdos or loose, lightly styled hair in natural colors and prefer running shoes over high-heels, tee-shirts over low-cut blouses, and regular jeans over tight fitting pants. The dominant fashion trend is influenced by an updated interpretation of the late twentieth century. For example, in fashion are variations of 1980s sports tops. They come in solid colors and feature a zipper in the front and three stripes in a contrasting color on the sleeves. The 1980s influence is discernable as well in the preferred hair styles with contrasting layer lengths: bangs and fine layers on top over a single long layer on the bottom. On warmer days, casual boots give way to sport shoes in a style typical of Airwalks or the retro 1970s look that lately has been popular in the United States as well. If vision correction glasses are in order, both men and women give preferences to styles with thick dark frames suggestive of decades passed, the 1960s and 1970s.

Many buy their clothes at second-hand stores, especially at the few shops owned by young people that belong to the group and cater to its tastes. The garments are imported almost exclusively from Western European and North American countries. In addition, some obtain their clothing through travel or in expensive local shops for sports gear or snowboarding and surfing fashion. Generally, the Bulgarian market offers a more limited selection of the styles preferred by these women or at higher prices, compared to the garments in the fashionable mainstream styles.

Beyond their fashion taste, the young people, who belong to the group, are united by similar lifestyles, music preferences and hangout places. Most of them are between 22 and 35 years old, have a bachelor's degree, and are competent in at least one foreign language. They receive incomes above the average with salaries above 500 BGN (\$300) per month. Some are self-employed or belong to the free professions: journalists, artists, and web and graphic designers, among others. My informants live in Sofia, but my travel in the country indicates that similar cliques exist in other large Bulgarian cities.

The existence of particular hang-out places for people from this group was made apparent to me when in several unrelated interviews, informants referred to "the crowd from Shishman" as a shortcut to describe the particular segment of urbanites. Shishman is a well-known street in downtown Sofia. Like many central side streets, it is crowded by pedestrians, cars parked on the sidewalks, and children that pour out of two school buildings straight onto the street during

breaks. Movement is further hindered by the people going in and out from the small stores or standing in line in front of *klekshops*, establishments located in buildings' basements and conducting their business through window openings at the level of pedestrians' feet.<sup>5</sup> The street is also home of the three establishments, *Klub 703*, *Bilkova Apteka* and *Blaze*, whose regular clientele constitutes the "Shishman crowd" mentioned by informants.

*Klub 703* is the quietest among them and with the most distinguished clientele. Here one can come across people who are older, wealthier, and more orderly. It is frequented by local stars such as the actresses Tzetana Maneva and Vessela Kazakova, the singer Doni, and the TV host and producer Georgi Toshev, one of the creators of *Edno* but no longer associated with the magazine. *Blaze* and *Bilkova Apteka* are by comparison noisier, rowdier and patronized by a less distinguished and younger crowd. Quoting from my notes, in *Bilkova Apteka*,

*little black lamps reflect their lights off the red walls. The bar, lined with mirrors reflects more red light and draws one's gaze to the heart of the place. At night, the seats along the bar, along the counters lining the walls, and in the side room with pillows on the floor: all are taken. People chat standing in the middle, letting others pass if pushed aside by arms and elbows. A large crowd for a week night. People eye every newcomer. Many talk first to one group of people, then switch to another: regulars, who know each other.*

### Against the (Fashion) Current

The comments and personal appearance of the women from the "United Colors" group reveal support for a position on women's place in society that is unconventional in the local context. They distance themselves from a sense of female accomplishment as dependent on men, either as a source of financial well-being or as a source of personal fulfillment through the family. Specifically, they oppose the lifestyles and fashion of wealthy kept women, on one hand, and of "the average Bulgarian woman," on the other.

One of the main objections against *mutressi* is based on the perception that their clothing is "tacky," "kitschy," and "lacks individuality." A staff member of the magazine *Edno*, whom I will name Hristina, presented her objections to the fashion and imagined lifestyles of *mutressi* while having coffee in a crowded Sofia

confectionary. With hair casually pulled back in a loose pony tail, wide jeans, a loose gray sweater, and only a hint of make up applied with an eye pencil, Hristina's appearance would be considered "unfeminine" by women like Iskra and Natalia. According to Hristina: "The *mutressi* definitely wear clothing that is more revealing and has lots of lace, flounce, bright colors... I mean a style that I call pseudo-luxury. They always wear something shiny, so you can see them from afar. To be stylish doesn't always mean to be visible from a 100 km distance. Actually, it is just the opposite. They might buy Armani just because it says it's Armani, but not because they appreciate the clothing. (...) Take the Sunny Beach resort (*it's run almost entirely by mutri*): pseudo-luxury made with a lot of money but absolutely no taste."

One of the reasons why *mutressi's* clothing is qualified as "pseudo-luxury" falls in line with common criticism against the nouveaux riches: they can afford expensive garments, like an Armani suit, but they lack the attitude to style that would allow them to dress with taste. According to my informants, one of the markers of good taste is the ability to use clothing to express one's individuality. They appreciate looks that reveal a particular concept, position or attitude. As Hristina put it: "(Mutressi's clothing) is like an assembly line, without any search for individuality or anything like it. They all look the same. For me clothing is to some extent a search for individuality. This is one of the ways in which one can express individuality but these women just don't have it." As this quote demonstrates, the lack of position or "individuality" in dress is seen as a reflection of personal deficiency. Specifically, it denotes the lack of a particular attitude to style and femininity that is valued by Hristina and her friends.

Another female informant, an established magazine writer, whom I will refer to as Nadia, described her friends and the kinds of people she enjoys being around as "curious, open to things that happen outside of Bulgaria, always looking for something new and enthusiastic." For her, respect is due to people who are passionate about what they do, regardless of whether they are a "telecommunications engineer, an artist or a baker." Like Hristina, Nadia pointed out that wealth alone does not constitute success and that it matters how affluence has been achieved. This image is very different from the image of *mutressa* depicted by Hristina:

*If you think about it, the hairstylist, solarium, fitness, manicure, you see the maintenance of the physique is absolutely mandatory for a mutressa since in any case women like her have a lot of money and a lot of free time. But because they are empty headed, the only thing that they know how to do is spend their entire days in gyms and beauty parlors etc. They have made a cult out of taking care for the body, but that's all.*

*Mutressi* are seen as lacking the internal drive to develop themselves, to learn and to grow. Instead they are perceived as immersed in an obsessive and vacuous care for appearance.

Hristina, Nadia and other women that I have talked to insist that success for a woman means something more than a comfortable life and even access to luxury. There is nothing wrong with wealth *per se*, but it is problematic when it does not reflect one's personal abilities and hard work, regardless of whether the person is a man or a woman. Wealth is considered to be the appropriate reward for personal merit. Here is an example of Hristina's comments on this:

*... a girl that is not particularly smart, and there are a lot of girls like that, who only want money. There is an entire group of people who consider themselves successful only if they have money (...) and since the easiest way to have money is to find a wealthy lover and to get what you need, they do it to show to the world that they are successful. I think mutressi are like that too: they don't have any goals in life, they are not asking themselves what is it that I want to do and what is it that I can do, but they simply say, 'I want money, and I want the entire world to know that I have them.' That's why it matters to them what kind of car they ride in, because when you get off, everyone will see.*

Thus, in Hristina's eyes, a woman who "finds a wealthy lover" is not successful, but a woman who does what she "wants to do" and what she "can do," i.e. seeks personal and professional development based on her interests and abilities, can be considered successful. In the vision of female success as outlined by my informants from the "United Colors" group, one recognizes a liberal ideal of wealth as reflecting one's personal merit, including abilities, education and good taste.

Viktoria, an established journalist, a common acquaintance of Hristina and Nadia,

expressed this sentiment most clearly when discussing why many people from her generation have been unable to raise above the poverty of the transition years. Her words also reveal a sense of pride from her own accomplishments:

*"There are poor people, but I think that they don't have the desire, will, enthusiasm, to take care of themselves (...) There are others that when you tell them, 'Okay, so you are looking for a job. Then open the newspaper, make a phone call, go to an interview, do something.' And they get upset and tell you 'But you don't know how it is. It's not as easy as you think. It's easy for you to say.' No it's not easy for me to say. I've been there, I've done that. I've seen that movie. But I didn't give up and made something of myself."*

Several of my informants said that even though they receive comparatively high incomes, they find themselves unable to save. However, they did not consider this particularly bothersome and even spoke with some pride about their spending habits. Victoria explained that initially she was worried that compared to older people she might appear wasteful, but then realized that she had a good justification to dispose of her money freely. According to her, "spending a lot and not saving for the future means that you are confident in your abilities and know that you will be able to earn as much if not more in the future." This statement reveals not only a belief in the financial reward for personal merit, but also conviction that Viktoria, as a woman, can secure a high income in the future based on her abilities as a professional. The idea that a successful woman is not that much different from a successful man is reflected by the androgynous aesthetic styles preferred by the "United Colors" group. This position suggests a redefinition of wealth that contrasts with the image of the *mutra*, as the dominant symbols of postsocialist wealth gained through criminal activities, and of the *mutressi* as dependant on it for their financial well-being.

The "United Colors" women also seek to distance themselves from what Hristina described as the "average woman," perceived as an example of dependence on men and the family for personal accomplishment. The expression refers, on one hand, to women who face significant financial difficulties, as Hristina put it, "women who earn 150 BGN a month and think only how to meet basic needs," and, on the other hand, to women with incomes as high as those of my informants,

but not as high as a *mutressa*'s. Both of these groups are seen as prioritizing the family and children at the expense of personal development. While the figure of the *mutressa* is permeated by implicit references to looks and sexual attraction as a way to get and keep a desirable man, the image of the average woman is associated with an almost claustrophobic care for the family that deprives her from personal pleasures and opportunities.

*For the moment, this is the average woman in Bulgaria. (...) She only thinks about her children. The average man also only goes to work and brings money home to provide for the children and so on. It seems that this is somehow programmed in Bulgarians, to give everything for their children. And perhaps there is too much of an emphasis on the material things. (...) I mean people's lives are just limited. I don't blame them for that.*

Nadia commented that she feels no internal need to have to child, not even a social obligation. She said that she wasn't ready to give up her current lifestyle: "I mean to have a kid would mean to change my life entirely. And my job too. We had an editor, who had a child and came to work from 10 to 6. This just doesn't work for me." Nadia frequently works on weekends, until late at night and sometimes all night. "That would mean no more Red Bull, no coffee, no cigarettes... I might have a kid if I could afford a babysitter, but since I can't, I am not even considering it at this point."

These statements reveal a perspective on the sacrifice of parents and on personal comfort that is new. Many Bulgarian parents are willing to undergo significant personal hardship and deprivation for their children. The trend dates back to a pre-modern dependence between the generations and coincides with a socialist ideal of mothers' and wives' self-sacrifice. Mira Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk (2000) point out with respect to Poland that officially sanctioned sentiment conceived of women's personal fulfillment as the result of self-sacrifice for the good of others, i.e. the state or the family. While this analysis refers to another socialist country, my preliminary research indicates that their general conclusion can also be applied to socialist Bulgaria. Hristina and the other young women like her reject this ideal and oppose it with an image of the woman as an individual, who puts her own needs and personal development first. In their eyes, self-sacrifice for children doesn't have a moral oriole but appears as a deprived and "limited" way of life.

According to Nadia, the ideal relationship would be that in which both the husband and the wife have their own spheres of expression, each pursuing his or her independent professional goals. Housework is to be divided according to preferences: "Each does what he or she cares most to be done. I hate dirty bathrooms, so I would regularly clean that. I don't like to wash dishes, and I don't mind when they pile up in the sink. If my boyfriend minds that, then he would wash them." As evident in this quote, Nadia imagines desirable family life as one in which men and women have similar obligations and rights and no clearly defined male and female domains of work.

Nevertheless, Nadia makes a specific distinction between the kinds of responsibilities between a man and woman in a relationship and those between men and women in general. A further elaboration of her ideal for a relationship reveals the traces of traditional femininity and suggests a hesitation for an embrace of radical feminism. This may explain in part why an openly critical, political and feminist engagement with women's issues is nearly absent from discussions with my female informants from this group. Nadia says that sometimes she dreams of "being a princess."

*I dream that a man would fall in love with me, because he finds me so beautiful. I wouldn't have to do anything, just be there and be admired. He is to fight life on my behalf, face all bad things that might happen. I mean when the woman is alone she copes with everything, no problem, but when she is in the company of her man, he treats her like a princess and takes responsibility for everything. She has her own career and her own field of work and everything, and she is not like that when she deals with other men. But when she is with her man, things are different. He must spoil her.*

This reveals an apparent contradiction between Nadia's views of women's role in the public space and that in the privacy of the relationship. And while it doesn't undermine her belief in women's proper realization as professionals and independent individuals, it suggests the kernel of traditional femininity, of being a passive "princess," at the core of her sensitivity. Other women pursue the image of the princess in their polished looks and ("pseudo-luxurious") dress; Nadia doesn't. Wide jeans, running shoes and "invisible make up" are the mainstays of her appearance. But the androgynous woman is a new overlay over the

nucleus of traditional sensibilities that are inculcated in the family and that presently flourish in Bulgarian society. New ideas of women's independence have not yet penetrated too deep, neither in the attitudes of those who support them, nor in the Bulgarian society as a whole. The sporty, baggy and asexual clothes stand for one aspect of the beliefs of Nadia and women like her: the female public presence. Deeper inside and in private, they pay homage to a traditional emotional dynamic in the relationship, in which the woman is passive, fragile and being "spoiled." This takes shape in Nadia's expectation that, for example, "men hail the taxi and pay the bill" even if the bank account is shared: an expectation for symbolic references to traditional gender relations that make the recipient feel feminine in the traditional sense of the word.

### Conclusion

In a cultural context dominated by a vision of women's fulfillment as achievable chiefly through relationships with men, either as wealthy husbands and lovers or more commonly as heads of the family and fathers, the ideas and values of the "United Colors" group constitute an alternative. Their views set them apart, and their alternative dress serves as a visual marker of ideas. The renegotiation of femininity that they propose is mitigated by the persistence of ideas of traditional expressions of femininity in private and by an adherence to a conventional emotional dynamic in relationships. Nevertheless, women from the "United Colors" group embody one possible current of thought and lifestyle which impacts local definitions of good taste, wealth and womanhood. Iskra would not be as anxious about the role her job was placing her in, if she did not see examples of what can happen to women like Nadia and Hristina, who are drawn into frightening androgynous zones of female empowerment. The "United Colors" group serves as a "fashion other," against which other groups may define themselves, and provides an alternative option for self-identification of young Bulgarian women.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Chalga* enjoys large popularity as evidenced by the existence of two specialized TV channels, a number of magazines about the industry, and enormous profits. According to a special issue about *chalga* of the magazine *Edno*, sociological research indicates that between 45% and 70% of Bulgarians favor the genre (Peev 2005:37). One of its biggest stars, Azis, is the only Bulgarian performer, whose individual concert attracted enough fans to fill up the national stadium *Vassil*

*Levski* (Peev 2005). Still, *chalga* stars and the news about them are conspicuously absent from the programs of the state television and radio stations as well as from the pages of newspapers that target readers of high social standing. *Chalga* still has not received the recognition of entertainment in good taste.

<sup>2</sup> Serbia has its own parallel of (and perhaps an inspiration for) the Bulgarian *chalga* known as *turbo folk*.

<sup>3</sup> Some fans distinguish *chalga* from *pop-folk* based on fine differences in style and music. Usually, as *pop-folk* are classified songs and performers that deemed to be of more refined quality. A sample from the discussions on whether this distinction can be made and, if so, on what grounds can be found in web-forums, for example <http://forum.mp3-bg.com/index.php?showtopic=1740> (accessed 2-22-2006).

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the suitcase trade, through which some of these goods are imported see Konstantinov 1996

<sup>5</sup> One needs to *klechi* or squat in front of them to get served, hence this slang name.

### References

- Ash, J. and E. Wilson, eds. 1992. *Chic Thrills: a Fashion Reader*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Buchanan, D. 1996. "Wedding Musicians, Political Transformations, and National Consciousness in Bulgaria." In *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*. M. Slobin (ed.). Durham, Duke UP: 200-230.
- Dnevnik* 2006. "More than Half of Bulgarians Enter the EU with Less than 80 Euros a Month." In *Dnevnik*. January 23. Sofia.
- Droumeva, E. 2002. "Civil Societies." In *Edno*, 1(1):94-98.
- Einhorn, B. 1993. *Cindarella Goes to the Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in East Central Europe*. London, Verso.
- Konstantinov, Y. 1996. "Patterns of Reinterpretation: Trader-tourism in the Balkans (Bulgaria) as a Picaresque Metaphorical Enactment of Posttotalitarianism," *American Ethnologist* 23(4): 762-782.

- Marody, M. and A. Giza-Poleszczuk 2000. "Changing Images of Identity in Poland: From the Self-Sacrificing to the Self-Investing Woman?" *In Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism*. S. Gal and G. Kligman (eds.). Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Mediapool. 2005. "Corruption Continues To Be a Risk for Investors in Bulgaria." April, 20, 2005. Electronic document, <http://www.mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=99942&srcpos=89>, accessed on March 11, 2006.
- Miller, D. 1998. "Why Some Things Matter." In *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (D. Miller, ed.), pp. 3-21. London: University College Press.
- Mircheva, N. 2006. "The Bulgarian is Six Times Poorer than the Czech." In *Standart*, January 9. Sofia.
- NetInfo. 2005. "A Chronicle of Public Killings and Assassinations for the Period 1995-2005." Electronic document, <http://news.netinfo.bg/index.phtml?tid=40&oid=769870>, accessed on October 17, 2005.
- Peev, T. 2005. "Popfolk Forever." In *Edno* 3(37):52.
- Todorova, M. 1993. "The Bulgarian Case: Women's Issues or Feminist Issues?" *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. N. Funk and M. Mueller (ed.). New York, Routledge: 30-39.
- Watson, P. 1997. "(Anti)Feminism after Communism." In *Who's Afraid of Feminism*. A. Oakley and J. Mitchell (eds.). London, Hamish Hamilton: 144-161.

© 2006 Elitza Ranova All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the Anthropology of East Europe Review is retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights to the text. Please email the managing editor for details on how to contact these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.