Subcultural Identities – Styles and Ideologies
Subcultural Ways of Life of the Post-Transitional Generation in Bulgaria

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Abstract *This paper is dedicated to an "angry minority" as determined by one of my respondents. This "minority" includes representatives from several subcultural styles (punk, skinhead, hardcore, metal, casual), who are interdependent through their personal informal relations and characterized by strong opposition to various dominant cultural norms. The age group is in the range of 15 to 30 years, and the most active at present is the generation born between 1986 and 1990. The subcultural unit under examination is united by yet another common name - "the underground". This unit brings together young people from different styles, who are aware of their different-mindedness and also of the fact that their chosen style is not just fashion, but a way of life.*

Pic. 1 Street protests against Shale gas extraction on January 14, 2012 (author's archive)

The East entering the West (the year 1989)

Striving to catch up with the West as a lifestyle was characteristic for all the Bulgarian youth subcultures in the years after 1989. Some of them were defined as westernized (or pro-Western), i.e. imported from the West in an attempt at non-socialist modernization (including hippie, punk, new/dark wave, gothic, heavy metal, bikers, skaters) and the attitude of society towards them was ambiguous. On the one hand, they were seen as the embodiment of the democratic process and as a desire for pluralism, and on the other hand were considered as anti-social movements that have little cultural value, as reflected in the superficial imitation of Western subcultural styles. However, in the context of increasing globalization we cannot speak of imitation, but of intentional selection and synthesis of the old and the new. The local groups build their subcultural identities in a dual process of acceptance and rejection of Western ideas and cultural messages.

The interest of the Western writers in the post-socialist youth is sporadic and unevenly distributed among the regions of Eastern Europe. The interest in Russia and former Soviet republics prevails (see Habeck 2009, Pilkington 1994, 2002), while other countries in the periphery (including Bulgaria) remain less studied. In turn, local academics from the fields of sociology, political science, social and cultural anthropology and ethnology have contributed to the exploration of the issue. The topics are diverse, but the common lynch pin is the role of youth in political protests (pic. 2) and social changes since 1989 (Barova 2011;

Pic. 2 Street protests against Shale gas extraction (author's archive)

M. Ivanova2005; R. Ivanova [1997] 2000; Mitev 1988; Mitev, Riordan 1996; Mitev 1999), youth and nationalism (see the "Challenges of nationalisms" - http://www.seal-sofia.org/bg/projects/completed/FCN/CaseStudies),and alsocultural studies on the subcultural styles and their new development (Dichev, 2010 Koleva; Dichev, Rone 2012).

Goals and Objectives

The post-socialist period in Bulgaria is characterized by radical political, economic and social changes that give rise to a number of new social phenomena and problems. Hence, the main interest of the study here is focused on young people in their search for identity and social status within the newly built post-socialist society, even in those cases where the society's core values are rejected by the alternative sub-groups to which individuals are assigned. The study focuses on the changing identity of the countercultural subcultures in

Bulgaria. Their identity is formed by the contradiction between old (before 1989) and new concepts (since 1989) for the West. A variety of subcultural lifestyles, which were the products of long and well-differentiated historical processes in the West, were imported into Bulgaria all at once within a very short timespan. Transplanted into Bulgaria, these subcultural identities took on rather different meanings for Bulgarian youth. With regard to the transition, two periods of subcultural identity construction can be distinguished, representing two generations of youth. Members of the first group were socialised under late socialism in the 1980s; members of the second group have no memory of socialism at all. The first period (which lasted into the mid-90s) was characterised by vague images of the 'decaying West', the emulation of Western models, and a general attitude of protest against the disintegrating socialist system. In the second period (since the mid-1990s), young people have faced the real effects of a market economy and are becoming increasingly acquainted with the actual western world (in particular through labour migration). This has given rise to new 'class' patterns of subcultural identity.

This article aims to present the first results of the field work carried out based on methods of participant observation in the town of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Among the observed sub-

cultures, the informal groups of punk, skin-head and hardcore movements stand out. The main carrier of the subculture nowadays is the generation of those born in the late 80's and early 90's. This generation builds its identity in the years of political and economic transi-tion and faces problems unfamiliar to the pre-vious generations. The main research interest is focused on the stylistic orientations, ideolo-gies, norms of behavior, and political beliefs of the post-transitional generation.

Methodology
Participant observation

In this particular study, participant obser-vation is mainly used in those social situations in which the respondents act as one and may be placed under a single category as members of the subculture to which they belong. The participants in the study can be further differ-entiated by their gender, age, education and occupation, but at the observation stage they are the same and equal under the unifying social situation and due to shared action and shared space. For example, the football fans heading to the stadium at this point are only fans of a particular team (pic. 3). The group of young people that shocks passers-by with their brightly painted mohawks standing on the street corner or in front of the station at this point are only members of the punk sub-culture. Similarly, the participants in an online forum at a particular time can be seen as a sep-arate subcultural group defined by its tastes and ideology.

Each group of participants in the observed social situation performs specific actions that identify it as a recognizable group. For exam-ple, punks "make pogo" and beg for money from the passers-by.These are practices that are part of their identity and should first be identified by the social researcher, before being

Pic. 3 Logo „Lokomotiv" FC - graffiti.
(author's archive)

studied in detail. It should be noted that the above examples are slowly disappearing from the contemporary Bulgarian context, although they have existed in the past. However, there are new subcultural social situations in which participants are likely to change their identity in one direction or another.

Notes from the Underground (ethnography)

This material does not claim to be a com-prehensive description, rather a precise and sensitive ethnography, which seeks truthful reflection of the fluid and fragile nature of the youth's subculturalidentity. This is built on specific kind of clothing, music, ideology, presence in a real or virtual space, practicing a certain type of action (including tattooing, going to concerts and/or football games, street protests). The ethnographic material is based on field research conducted in the town of Plovdiv in the period January-October 2012.

The selection of the fieldwork site is not random, rather is related to my search for a city with a developed urban culture in which I, as of the researchers, but also a follower of a subculture, remain an outsider. This ensured the necessary distance for ethnographic work. For two months I was devoted entirely to participant observation, while sharing a flat in Plovdiv with two of my respondents (a subcultural couple) and participating in the daily life of the subcultural groups.After that period I visited the town only during specific events (concerts, games, processions). As already noted, participant observation required the occurence of certain social situations to be observed. Several situations stood out: first, my life together with two of the respondents, second, the place of work (fast food shop) of one of the key informers, and the third - the concerts and parades where various subcultural groups met, mingled, and in some cases opposed each other. Apart from this, I conducted biographical interviews with key representatives of the groups of both sexes (n = 14). I chose them for being strict followers of the subcultural style they have chosen, and due to the influence they had in their group.

Subcultural groups and styles

The main unit of research actually consists of representatives from several subcultural styles (punk, hardcore, skinhead, metal, casual), who are interdependent through their personal informal relations. These informal youth groups are relatively small and probably have little impact on the prevailing lifestyle in the city. Thanks to the internet though, the subcultural groups are related to all other similar units in Bulgaria and abroad, and thus manage to create and maintain their unique group identity. This identity is very dynamic. Young people are enter and leave the groups very fre-

quently. They quickly switch from one style to another in search for their individual identity. Every subculture has its core though. The core members of the subcultural groups are usually 10-20 people (predominantly boys) with strong beliefs and a deep knowledge about the origins, music, style, and ideology of their subculture. Their age varies from 15 to 30 years, and presently most active generation is the one born between 1986 and 1990. Male predominance in the study (27 young men and boys and only 11 young women/girls) reveals the actual gender interrelation in the examined subcultural styles (punk, skinhead, hardcore), whose norms and practices often turn out to be an obstacle to the entry of girls into the groups, or are the cause for girls' exit from the groups. The numerical superiority of the boys does not, however, detract from the value of the data collected by and for the girls participating in the subcultural groups. This data can often serve as a corrective to the qualitative information given by the representatives of the male sex.

Group affiliations

The main identity tag – the group affiliation - includes three major subcategories - punk, skinhead, and hardcore, which are interconnected in many ways (through the friendly relations of the participants in the informal groups as well as their physical presence in one and the same place), even though each still constitutes a distinct subculture, with its own history, discernible practices, and life-styles. They form distinct subcultural groups, but are at the same time part of the larger informal group of the "street culture" set up in opposition to the dominant values in society. Finally, it is important to note that the chosen tags (punk, skinhead, and hardcore) reflect the subjective self-identification of the

respondents and are not the result of external systematization. More than 50% of the respondents identified themselves as punks (n = 22), including four "former"-punks and another five who have switched to another subcultural style and self-identification.

In the beginning of the 1990's these youths were always together. They visited and stayed at the same places and dressed and behaved similarly, but most importantly, they were all friends and shared both a desire for greater freedom and a feeling of superiority in relation to other young people. In the early 1990s, 'old school' punks became favourites of the media, and such publications were common. Punks were treated like dissidents more in tune with an unknown western lifestyle. The outward appearance of punks provided their main avenue of opposition to the imposed official culture. They wore safety pins on their clothes, in their ears, and even under their skin. Bushy hair was dyed the most unnatural of colours. The preferred hair-style was the 'comb' (i.e., the 'mohawk' in English). Chains hung over their torn and hand-made clothes. Jeans were cut under the knee. They wore black leather jackets and raincoats, the surfaces of which were decorated with buttons of their favourite bands. Whether male or female, their outward appearance was more or less the same. Female punks cut their hair short and wore the same kind of army boots as the boys. Nowadays the large group of punks has split into various factions. Some are indifferent to social reality while others are socially critical, and there is fighting between these groups. Thus, the punk culture has given birth to new groups of punks, skinheads (red and right-wing), and hardcore fans. It is important to note that in the post-transitional period, punk (politically on the left) and skinhead movements turned out to be strongly politicized (in contrast to

the prior period), while the hardcore scene has managed to stay away from politics. Punk and skinhead movements have accepted political identifications commonly linked to anarchism and nationalism, respectively. The punk 'mohawk' is no longer raised. It usually remains hidden under a baseball cap or a hood. Thus, the opposing left- and right-wing groups still look much alike (both 'combs' and shaved heads remain hidden). Outsiders refer to them in a derogatory way as 'the hooded.' Hardcore and metal movements are most often apolitical, but socially enagaged, and casual movement is mainly focused on football, ideology and style, and less focused on music as a distinctive feature of their identity.

Subcultural divisions - ideologies

Subcultural life in the town of Plovdiv is divided into many factions and is subject to various divisions, which set boundaries between the groups. I can outline several ideological strands that have become an integral part of the current subcultural identity. These are anarchism (it rejects religious, liberal and communist ideas and is typical of punk), anarcho-communism (it rejects religion, fascism and liberalism and accepts the communist ideas, and is typical of the left-wing part of punk and skinhead cultures), patriotism (it rejects liberalism and stands closer to the conservative ideas and Christian values, and is typical of skinhead and metal movements), and nationalism (it rejects religion, liberalism and communism and is typical of the right-wing movements of skinheads, punks, and other subcultures). The politicized division of "left" and "right" wings is very noticeable, even though all these young people know each other and often visit the same places and events, but in the end, "left" and "right" wings are not friends and are filled with mu-

tual suspicion towards each other. There are, of course, a sufficient number of members of the subcultures, who insist on being apolitical ("I'm just an underground person! Don't want to be labeled in any way!" A.V., 21-year old girl, hardcore punk), and also there are many members, who are engaged in "green" movements. They occupy a neutral position and are more into the subcultural style itself, rather than being ideologically engaged. True music fans are probably more likely to be classified as apolitical, while ideologically committed fans of the "left" and "right" demonstrate their preferences only in the politicized musical styles of their subculture, which musically are often similar, but with politically engaged-lyrics.

UNIFYING TRAITS OF THE SUBCULTURE - DRESSING AND TATTOOING

The subcultural unit brings together young people from different styles, who are aware of their different-mindedness and also of the fact that their chosen style is not just a fashion ("but someone else tries to make it fashionable," A.L., 25-yr., punk), but a way of life that includes both practice and ideology (pic. 4), and possesses some countercultural-

Pic. 4 Punk's not dead - graffiti. (author's archive)

characteristics associated with various forms of protest against the existing social order and cultural norms.

Despite the numerous divisions among the informal groups, there are several similarities that deserve attention. Tattooing stands as a major unifying practice - one lasting act of devotion in the subcultural way of life, which also proves that not everything is just fashion. The fact that many of my respondents cannot find jobs or are forced to quit their jobs and accommodations because of their tattoos and body piercings is enough evidence that the act of tattooing goes beyond fashion and enters into more intimate zones. Here the individual is aware and takes the risk of his/her action, especially as some of the tattooed symbols (connected to the far-left and far-right subculture symbols) bear the risk of a wider marginalization or possible physical violence.

After the "spectacular" subcultures of the 70s and 80s (see Hebdige 1979), unification in clothing comes to replace the spectacular subculture looks, but nevertheless some specific clothing brands and accessories remain within the subcultural styles under examination. One particular case is the British brand "Fred Perry"(pic. 5), which is an integral part of the clothing of the examined subcultural groups in all their politicized and apolitical varieties. For example, a single polo of "Fred Perry" may pass from person to person as a gift or in exchange and thus be worn by people with different musical and ideological biases. The same practice applies to the British shoe-brand "Dr. Martens". In general, sportswear dominates as certain clothing brands attain certain hidden messages. The basic idea is for a "hidden", sometimes esoteric culture, whose signs are recognizable only from a limited number of people with some knowledge about a particular subculture. Knowing the symbolic

Pic. 5 A "Fred Perry" store in Plovdiv, a "Fred Perry" polo. (author's archive)

meaning of certain clothing remains important for all the movements I have explored. Therefore, "dressed punk" (to wear punk clothes) and "being punk" (to be punk) are defined as two different concepts (see Rothaus 1984), which have class character (because "any rich boy or girl at a certain point tries to prove himself in a foreign environment for him, „A.T., 22 years old girl, sXe hardcore). In all cases, the clothes are just a tool to express inner convictions. Punk represents the most prominent example in this respect, for it aims to provoke public and make fun of the "elites":

„My interpretation of punk as a way of life, because most of all punk is a way of life for me, and I think it is the idea that you're free to do what you want, in the way you want it, and I think that all these clothes, these styles, they are just a tool to provoke society. Perhaps that is how the style has appeared at first. The main question was to hold up to ridicule the society by saying "Look, I can do it, despite your beliefs and expectations of the world", for some

people are very narrow-minded and they think the way they live is the way it should be and that things cannot be done otherwise, and suddenly some different people show up and tell them "Here, look, I'm not afraid of being ugly" (L.A., 25-year-old punk)

With the above examples of tattoos and clothing I tried to describe the outward expression of the subcultures, in these cases where they really have become ways of life. This process of "becoming", of taking the risk, however, does not happen to all members of the subculture groups. Each group has a "core" and "periphery", as the peripheral members periodically change, moving from one movement to another or completely leaving the subculture. With a short story from the field I would like to describe this difference.

When I went to my first meeting with the punks in their neighbourhood in Plovdiv, I met a classic-looking punk-rocker waiting for me at the bus stop. He was dressed "full-dress" - a leather jacket adorned with studs, patches and badges of punk and oi!bands (Oi! is a subgenre of punk rock that originated in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s. The music and its associated subculture had the goal of bringing together punks, skinheads and other working-class youths), a handmade back engraved with "Chaos UK", rolled up white jeans, army boots with one yellow and one red tie. Only the "mohawk" was missing and was replaced by very short hair. We went for a beer to the nearby off-license and then sat down near the tower-block he lived. This evening the group of punks included two more boys. One of them was also wearing a leather jacket and bleached jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and army boots with red ties. The other was wearing a black sweatshirt with a classic German punk band logo. Both of them had short hair as well. They said

they were "anti-star". Politically they were all "leftists",and listened to anarcho-punk and generally less known punk bands from all over the world. Later on several other boys and girls with "non-punk" looks joined our company. Their presence gave me a good example on the existence of "core" and "periphery" in the subcultural milleu. The "core" (the three punks, in this case) states its class affiliation in outspoken terms, i.e.the "working class" affiliation (interestingly, the term is used mainly in English) and tends towards political orientation. Highlighting the subcultural style by appearance is also typical of the "core", though even the core memebers tend to "hide" and go "casual", when they go downtown on order to avoid any trouble with the police or with another opposing group. That is the reason why the "core" prefers the territory of the neighbourhood, while the periphery members more easily go the the central parts of town. For the "core" people, punk clothing cannot be bought from the shops, and they do not accept the existence of "punk" brands, which are too commercialized for them. As "good" brands (i.e. those who are 'working class' and not expensive) are considered "Lonsdale" and "Dr. Martens ", which are actually iconic for the skinhead movement, too. In practice, this seems to reflect a current symbiosis between the two classical styles (punk and skinhead) on the basis of "working class" ideology, but nowadays political divisions often make these two incompatible. This incompatibility is somewhat solved by the stylistic solutions of the newly aroused subcultures of the casuals and the hardcore movements.

Girls and subcultures

The internal dynamics between "core" and "periphery",which are related to the constant fluctuation of their participants, contribute to the flow of information between the groups. This statement applies much more to the girls, who have been identified by some scholars from The Birmingham School (The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) as peripheral to the subcultures themselves (McRobbie, Graber 1976). The girls make the communication between the groups possible. However, in most cases their mobility is not highly appreciated among the core members of the group (and therefore control over girls' friendships outside the group is very strong), but it facilitates the knowledge about the Other.

A girl entering a subcultural group runs the risk of being perceived as an almost impersonal gadget attributed to her partner or as a "light woman" that only "creates conflicts within the group and ruins friendships between boys" (P.S., 22-year-old casual). On the other hand, a girl that is continuing her education after highschool secures greater freedom for herself and a justexcuse for leaving the parental home without entering into a new one and raising a family. Higher education certainly has a much more decisive meaning for the girls than for the boys in these groups and often leads to a certain rethinking of the subcultural identity, which does not necessarily mean its total rejection. For example, more than half of the respondents (n = 21) have finished secondary schools or are vocationally trained. Two of the respondents have finished elementary schools only. Graduates represent approximately one third of the respondents (n = 14). Before making any conclusions on this matter, it should be remembered that the overwhelming proportion of those who have only completed secondary school is related to one fundamental value, which is shared among the studied subcultures: Climbing the social ladder is in fact not a priority, and indiffer-

ence to the basic social institutions is the norm of behavior in the informal groups. However, this fundamental value is not shared to the same extent among the girls in the groups. I argue that girls in these groups are in search for a solution, which will be able to moderate the above-mentioned extreme rules and values of the examined subcultures. I argue that the "pin-up" girl's style represents a kind of moderate solution, which successfully combines tattoos with challenging vintage femininity, and cooking and other typically female skills that in the end do not conflict with the emancipated image of the modern woman:"This is my new religion (the pin-up style). I mean, I found it on the Web and gradually began to gather some more information, right, about the transition, right, how the hostess appears not only as a woman who do some things at home, but that actually in this way she may look a lot better and very attractive and free",(I.V., 23-year-old pin-up). "Pin-up" girls are not necessarily politically engaged, in contrast to their boyfriends, but their style also combines the nostalgia of the past (the swing culture, the

Pic. 6 Girls and subculture. (author's archive)

image of Marilyn Monroe, the pop icons of the 50s and 60s) and the protest against the loss of femininity in the modern world, which is expressed by the eccentric aesthetics of their style(pic. 6).

Besides the pin-up trend, girls in the groups often follow the style chosen by their partners because the external expression of this style appears to be the main reason for choosing a particular partner. In a nutshell, subcultures are attractive - "I always dreamed of this. A tough and tattooed guy with piercings, who likes everything I like, and goes to the same places I go, mate!"(A.V., 22 years old, hardcore punk). A boy with tattoos on his arms and legs is more desirable than a boy with none, that's the reality. It is the subcultural capital that brings prestige and popularity. There are cases in which both partners have different ideological views, but are stylistically similar and thus attracted to each other. Subcultural capital is important for both sexes to develop a subcultural career (through their appearance, knowledge and practices),which is supposed to compensate for the existing social problems and losses in their everyday life. For example, the large number of unemployed in the survey is immediately striking (n = 10). Their education, however, ranges from the lowest to the highest degree. This trend is associated with real economic conditions in Bulgaria, but it is also related to a typical subcultural trait, which Sarah Thornton calls "economic indiscipline" (Thornton: 1997).

Conclusions

The post-subculture theory assumes a considerable blurring of the boundaries between the subcultural styles and also the rise of newly formed fluid groups that are rather called "scenes" and "tribes", as some scholars even question the very existence of the sub-

cultures and their norms and values (Bennet, Kahn-Harris 2004, Bennet 2002 ; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Hodkinson 2007). However, I argue that such a denial of the subcultures' potential is not fully applicable to the model of development of the subcultural styles in Eastern Europe, where the political transition went hand-in-hand with the active participation of various dissident minded and pro-Western (at the time) subcultural heroes. The generation of transition was engaged in various forms of political protest, including subcultural ones. However, the subcultural appearance and behavior in the present is as fashion and provocation as a protective reaction that has a different colored class and political expression because the subcultures seek solutions to current rather than past problems. Nowadays the "spectacular"subcultural challenge (see Hebdige: 1979) with open Western bias directed at the socialist system is already replaced with another form of reaction, by the confession of far left and far right ideologies that deny many of the neo-liberal characteristics of the post-socialist society from which many young people feel excluded and disadvantaged.

That is why every subcultural analysis must take into account the conversion of the individual into a member of a particular subculture. When the connection between education and further professional development is interrupted and/or superseded, the identification with a subculture appears to replace the missing link in the socialization of the individual. Therefore, the classical authors in the subculture theory (Clarke 1973; Cohen 1972; Hall, Jefferson 1976; Willis 1977) highlight the connection of the most radical subcultures with the working class origin of their members. Is this class model applicable to the social structure of post-socialist societies,

though? According to the ethnographic data of my research, becoming "working class" (a term used quite often among the respondents) is not related to the diploma you may hold because the economic restrictions are greater than was foreseen. Youth subcultural styles inherited from the "transition" period as pro-Western and somewhat "elitist" because of their prevalence in the cities, the capital, and elite high-schools, are undergoing rapid transformation and taking on new forms, embracing ideologies characteristic of the working class, and accordingly changing their modes of expression and symbols. The subcultures of the "ghetto", the suburbs, and the small town's periphery come to take their place with new imagery, ideology and symbols and insist on being heard.

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