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Communist Europe and the Kurdish Question During the Cold War (1940s 1980s)

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Abstract

While abundant scholarship has been produced concerning the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe, little is known about the development of Kurdish communities in Central and Eastern Europe, especially during the Cold War. This paper analyses the specific situation of the Kurds in Communist Europe through the prism of Bulgaria, a frontline country in direct contact with the Middle East from the 1940s until the end of the 1980s. It demonstrates the weight of diplomatic and economic factors in explaining the persistent difficulty faced by Central European regimes in conceiving of the Kurdish issue beyond separate national fighting grounds.

Keywords: Cold War; Kurdish diaspora; East-West contacts; Balkans; Turkish-Bulgarian relations

Abstract in Kurmanji

Ewropaya komunîst û pîrsgirêka kurd li serdema Şerê Sar (salên 1940î-1980î)

Li gel berdariya xebatên akademîk ên li ser diyasporaya kurd li Ewropaya rojava, em xwediyên agahiyên pir kêmtir in li ser pêkhatina civatên kurd li Ewropaya naverrast û rojhilat, nemase li serdema Şerê Sar. Ev nivîsar li renîşa taybet a Kurdên Ewropaya komunîst dikole û bi xusûsî li ser Bulgarîstanê disekîne, ku welatêkê li ser sînor e û, ji salên 1940î ta dawîya salên 1980î, rasterast bi Rojhilata Navîn re di nav têkiliyan de bû. Bi vî hanî, nivîsar giraniya faktorên aborî û dîplomatîk derdixe pêş bo ravekirina zehmetiyên mayînde yê rejîmên Ewropaya naverrast di ponjiya pîrsgirêka kurd li derveyî meydanan ceng ên neteweyên cihê de.

Abstract in Sorani

Ewropay komonîst û dozî Kurdekan le serdemî cengî sarda (sallekanî 1940-1980)

Le katêk da twêjînewey zor le ser Kurdekan le Ewropay rojava, le tarawge berbembênrawe, zanari kem le ser geşesendîni komelgey kurdî le Ewropay naverrast û rojhilatî da heye, be taybetî le serdemî Cengî Sar da. Em twêjînewey şirovey barudoxî taybetî Kurdekanî Ewropay komonîst le rêgay Bulgaryane, ke dewletêkê berey ceng bû û peywendî rastexoy legerl Rojhilatî Naverrast da le sallanî 1940ewe ta 1980ewe hebune. Twêjîneweke qursayî fakere dîplomati û abîriyekan derdexat, be rûnkîrdînewey astengî hevîle berdawemekanî rûberrunî rijemekanî Ewropay naverrast botewe le tîgeystin le dozî Kurdekan be der le kêşeyekî rûberrûbunewey neteweyî serbexo.

Abstract in Zazaki

Ewropaya komunîste û wextê Cengê Serdîni de (1940an-1980an) mesela kurdan

Herqas ke derbeqê dîyasporaya kurdanê Ewropaya Rojawanî de xeylê eserê zanari ameyê dayene kî, derbeqê awerşîyayîşê komelanê kurdanê Ewropaya Mîyanên û Rojhelatî de zanayîş hîna kêmtir yo, bitaybetî demê Cengê Serdîni ser o. No nuşte renîşa taybetî yê kurdanê Ewropaya Komunîste analîz kenê. Analîz pê prîzmaya Bulgarîstanî yeno kerdene: welatêkê serê cebbeyî ke 1940an ra beta peynîya 1980an Rojhelatê Mîyanênî de têkiliya

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xo ya rasteraste estbî. Bi musnayîşê giranîya faktorên ekonomîk û dîplomatîkan ra îzab beno ke rejîmanê Ewropaya Mîyanêne cengehanê neteweyîyanê çyakerdeyan ra teber fehmkerdîşê mesela kurdan de tim zêmetîye antêne.

The public mobilization of Kurdish migrants and exiles in Western Europe has been rightly considered, since its first manifestations in the early 1960s, as a major element in the defence and assertion of Kurdish political demands and cultural identities. The intensified political activism of the late 1970s and the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) increased the attention paid to connections between the Western European diaspora and Kurdish movements in their four home states (Rigoni, 1998; Sirkeci, 2006). By contrast, little is known concerning the role of Kurds that lived on the Eastern side of the Iron curtain, although recent scholarship has emphasized the existence of cross-curtain networks in student activism (Saint Martin, Scarfò Ghellab, Mellakh, 2015; Slobodian, 2015), as illustrated by the geographical span of the Kurdish Students' Society in Europe (KSSE) (Tejel-Gorgas, 2018; Sheikhmous, 2020).

A partial exception to this grey area is the Soviet Union, which has attracted consideration as an important actor and venue in the contemporary history of the Kurds (Bugaj, 2012; Bugaj-Mamaev, 2014). This is connected to the well-known role of Tsarist and Soviet orientalists in the production of Kurdish Studies as a separate field, distinct notably from Iranology, and the translation and publication of classical texts such as the *Sharafnâme* in Saint-Petersburg in the 1860s-1870s (Leezenberg, 2015). This also has to do with the interest for Russian power games in the Near and Middle East since the 19th century and the role they assigned to Kurdish leaders and movements in their forward march in the region, especially in the years preceding the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Lazarev, 1972; Reynolds, 2011), under the Soviet occupation of Northern Iran during the Second World War (Vali, 2011; Gasanly, 2017), and in recent years (Mosaki, 2011). Ultimately, it is also connected with the existence of an autochthonous Kurdish-speaking population settled in the South Caucasus since the early modern period and partially deported to Central Asia under Stalin (Pohl, 2017; Peyrat, 2020). Their intellectual and cultural contribution to a shared Kurdish legacy (Yüksel, 2013) as well as the question of identity rifts between Muslim and Yezidi Kurdish speakers (Dalalyan, 2011: 177-201) have recently drawn increased interest.

While the idea of "perforating the Iron curtain" is now a routine part of political, cultural, and economic analyses of Cold War Europe (Péteri, 2004; Loth, Soutou, 2008), the way such an approach can be used to further an understanding of connections between Kurdish activism and the Eastern bloc still has to be found (Forestier-Peyrat, 2019). Easier access to official and private archives through Central European countries in the last two decades means new possibilities for this study of inter-bloc mobilities and exiles, although the lack of proficiency in Central and Southeastern European languages may continue to be a hindrance. Going beyond the situation of the Kurds in the Soviet Union and a discussion of Soviet international projection is an additional challenge, which means giving more agency simultaneously to Kurdish and Central European players, who were not passive satellites, as amply demonstrated by recent Cold War studies (Marès, 2007). The aim of this paper is thus to make an inroad into the way the Kurdish question was perceived and handled by Central European communist regimes.

Although countries such as Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Hungary featured on maps of Kurdish activism in communist Europe, three locations obviously stood out. East Germany,

a political and economic heavyweight of the bloc, held a prominent position as the shelter of the Turkish and Iranian communist parties in exile and a convenient window on West Berlin, a major venue of student activism since the 1960s (Nûr Mohammadî, 2006). Czechoslovakia and its capital city, Prague, also attracted many communist exiles and reformers, most prominently Abdol Rahman Ghassemlou, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, who married Hélène Krulich, a Czech citizen (Kruclich, 2011). As the headquarters of the *World Marxist Review* (known in Russian and most languages as *Problems of Peace and Socialism*), Prague was the place of a buoyant and sometimes uncontrollable internationalist milieu, a fact characterized by the participation of many of its members in the Prague Spring in 1968 and, later on, the Perestroika (Brown, 2007: 162-163). In each of these countries, Kurdish activities started to grow on an informal basis in the 1960s and were submitted to close intelligence and police monitoring, especially as diplomatic relations with Iran, Iraq, and Turkey were progressively established (Trentin, 2008; Sittman, 2018).

In this paper, we will focus on an apparently less conspicuous case, Bulgaria, a frontline of the communist bloc in Southeastern Europe and a direct neighbour of Turkey as well as an early member of NATO (1952) and the Baghdad Pact (1955). Starting from the late 1950s, the country was home to a tiny but active community of mainly Iraqi Kurds. In many regards, this small group could be compared to other Kurdish microcosms in the East. The ‘Kurdish question’ was, however, perceived in a particular light by a regime that was directly confronted by its multiple facets. Traditionally considered as the most loyal vassal of the USSR – ‘Moscow’s loyal flag-bearer’, a ‘sixteenth republic’, or a ‘branch of the KGB’, as the word goes in contemporary debates in Bulgaria (Baev, 2009: 17) – Bulgaria also had its own interests connected to a special position on the chessboard of the bloc (Dragostinova, 2021) and in the Balkans, a region where binary Cold War divisions were increasingly challenged by countries like Yugoslavia, Romania, and Greece (Rajak, Botsiou, Karamouzi, Hatzivassiliou, 2017).

On the one hand, due to its position on the Black Sea and geographical proximity to the Middle East, Bulgaria quickly developed ties with countries like Syria and Iraq, in manners recently studied by Nadja Filipova (Filipova, 2008; Filipova, 2017). On the other hand, Kurdish affairs were also dealt with in light of the tense relations that existed with Turkey. Although these relations underwent a noticeable improvement in the 1960s-1970s, the 1980s brought about an abrupt deterioration related to the treatment of the Muslim and Turkish communities in Bulgaria and the mass exodus it produced (Neuburger, 2004; Ragaru, 2010). Over time, the Kurdish question was successively framed as an ‘Iranian’, ‘Iraqi’, and ‘Turkish’ issue by the Bulgarian authorities in response to ongoing political and diplomatic events. The recent disclosure of former Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), State security (DS), and diplomatic archives now makes possible a direct study of this intricate relationship and the way Kurdish students and exiles in Bulgaria turned out to be, in Sara Pugach’s phrase, ‘agents of dissent’, endangering the increasingly pragmatic approach of communist bloc diplomacy in the Middle East by their claims and activism (Pugach, 2019).

Enters the Kurdish question

If we except the sporadic coverage of Kurdish revolts by the Bulgarian press in the 1920s, the first contacts of communist Bulgaria with the Kurdish question was the direct product of political and military confrontation in the Black Sea at the end of the Second World War. Irrked by Turkey’s ambiguous neutrality during the war, Stalin and his Minister of Foreign

Affairs, Viacheslav Molotov, pressed for territorial concessions in Eastern Anatolia and a new Straits regime in 1945-1946 (İşçi, 2019). These demands dramatically worsened Soviet-Turkish relations, opening the way for a clear alignment of Ankara along US lines, and even its military participation in the Korean war (Brockett, 2004). Tensions grew on Turkish borders with the USSR and Bulgaria, a country that also shared a frontier with civil war-torn Greece. In the late 1940s, the Southeastern Balkans thus became a place of transit and exile for left-wing activists escaping political repression in these two countries, notably in Turkey where anticommunism became a staple of Cold War politics (Meşe, 2016). Foremost among these exiles was Nâzım Hikmet, who decided to flee Istanbul on a boat, and reached Romania in June 1951 (RGASPI, 82/2/1330/66-70).

A majority of these activists were ethnic Turks, some of whom, like Bilal Şen and Fahri Erdinç, helped Bulgarian authorities in their 'affirmative action' policies directed at the Turkish-speaking and Muslim minorities living in Bulgaria in the 1950s (Tata, 1993; Akpınar & Köksal, 2016). Yet, a lot of them could also have an interest in Kurdish issues as part of a broader criticism of Turkish policies, in the same manner as Iranian exiles to the Soviet Union lambasted Iranian oppression of the Azeri and Kurdish communities. İsmail Bilen – 'Comrade Marat' –, a veteran of the Turkish Communist movement, spoke on Radio Moscow's Turkish-language broadcasts about the mistreatment of national minorities in Turkey in the early 1950s in such a strident tone that Soviet leaders had to ask him to avoid deliberate provocations (RGASPI, 17/137/752/67-71). Initially, though, Bulgaria was not a place of Kurdish exile in the sense the Soviet Union could be for Mustafa Barzani and his associates during this decade (Hevramî, 2002; Udilov, 1994: 54-55).

While Kurdish activists were seen exclusively through the prism of Communist or leftist organizations in the 1950s, an interest in the Kurdish movement per se started in 1959, due to Mustafa Barzani's return to Iraq and an increasing awareness concerning the geopolitical role of the Kurds in the Middle East. First contacts between Bulgaria and the Kurds apparently transited through the Bulgarian embassy in Berlin and the bons offices of the East German ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Communist countries had initially bet on a lasting coalition between Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the new Iraqi regime of Abd al-Karim Qassem, but they instead witnessed the progressive worsening of their relations. Qassem's regime became increasingly weary of the influence of the KDP and of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) after unrest erupted in Kirkuk in July 1959, and Barzani himself had trouble maintaining his control over Kurdish social and political forces (Rubin, 2007: 365-367).

The conflict eventually led to military consequences in September 1961, when violent hostilities started between Barzani's forces and Baghdad. These hostilities did attract attention in Eastern European capitals: starting in early 1961, the KGB toyed with the idea of using the Kurdish operational theatre and other geopolitical hot spots to distract US attention and forces away from the tensions arising from the Berlin Wall crisis (Zubok, 1994: 28-33). During the Autumn of 1961, Iraqi Kurds tried to liaise with Bulgarian diplomats in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to gain financial and political support. Despite a noticeable disillusionment with Qassem, however, communist countries adopted a course of non-interference that looked quite similar to the line they followed when newly independent African regimes displayed increasingly authoritarian features and cracked down on student, trade union, and left-wing activism (Pugach, 2019: 94-96).

While Kurdish ‘dissent’ could still be controlled in 1961, it flared up again after another turn of events – the Baath’s first coming to power in February 1963. Communist and Kurdish Iraqis living in Eastern Europe publicly demonstrated against mass repression and KDP representatives – notably Murad Aziz Barzani and Jalal Talabani – tried to get in touch with Bulgarian authorities to have them join the public denunciation of the Baath regime (van Rooy, 1963; TsDA, 1B/81d/303/30). Their requests now had the advantage of referring to the presence in almost all Central European countries of small groups of Kurdish activists who could promote their cause locally, as Talabani wrote in September 1963 to Bulgarian diplomat Misho Nikolov (TsDA, 1B/33/1128/2).

In Bulgaria, Sabir Khoshnaw, a member of the KDP and head of the local branch of the KSSE, was particularly active, and other Kurds settled in the country could increasingly rely on the cross-bloc networks of the KSSE. Silvio van Rooy’s archives in Amsterdam testify to this new ability to mobilize local figures in defence of the Kurds (Çelik, 2020: 72). For the first time, Khoshnaw and his friends received support from members of the Bulgarian establishment. Boris Temkov, a well-connected journalist and former collaborator of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, had spent two years in Iraq (1960-1961) and became an ardent supporter of the Kurds. His efforts allowed for the publication by a ‘civil society’ organization, the Bulgarian Fatherland Front (Otechestven Front), of a booklet entitled *Kurdistan* (Temkov, 1964). The parallel between the personal experience of many Bulgarian communists and the fight of the Kurds led to a powerful emotional connection. In December 1965, after Temkov had been arrested for his alleged participation in a coup attempt against the new Bulgarian leader, Todor Zhivkov, Temkov’s wife, confirmed in a message to van Rooy that: “The eight years of illegal revolutionary activity at the time of the fascist regime, the participation in the partisan movement in 1944, and in the antifascist war during which he was heavily wounded, all brought him closer to the Kurdish comrades who [were] fighting for the liberty of their people” (IISG, Van Rooy/ISK).

From that moment on, the sympathy that could be expressed for the Kurds in Bulgaria led, at some points, to criticism being raised against Sofia by the Iraqi government. In a pattern that became quite common in later years, Bulgaria became the ideal scapegoat every time Baghdad wanted to condemn the attitude of the communist bloc without attacking the Soviet Union directly (Filipova, 2008: 165-166). Being both perceived as a devotee of the USSR and a minor player, Bulgaria could be bullied without serious diplomatic consequences. This was first directly expressed in 1966, when Bulgaria was severely attacked for allegedly supporting the Kurds with weapons transiting through Beirut and seized by Lebanese authorities (Al-Zahrî, 2012: 59).

Radio politics in the Black Sea space and the Kurds

The growing transnational network of Kurdish activism in the East was not, however, an autonomous structure, and was largely intertwined with other political organizations which enjoyed official support from communist countries beyond the short-lived support for the Kurds in 1963. Many members of the Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi communist parties were ethnic Kurds, and their political activity often involved some interest in the Kurdish question. In the Cold War context, these parties invested in the creation of propaganda radio broadcasting to the Near and Middle East as part of the global rivalry to win hearts and minds (Roth-Ey, 2011). Germany – East and West – was a favourite spot for propaganda broadcasts

in the 1950s. In April 1958, the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) launched Bizim Radyo ('Our Radio', based in Leipzig), and the Iranian Tudeh also established its own radio in the same year (Açıkgöz, 2002). Many Kurds were involved in the activity of these parties, although they were not necessarily identified as such and did not always act out of national concerns. However, archival sources and testimonies increasingly mention nationality as a factor during this period.

Smaller communist countries, such as Bulgaria and Soviet republics like Armenia and Azerbaijan, gained a particular place in the history of Kurdish radio activism. In September 1954, the Communist Party of Armenia decided to add Kurdish-language broadcasts to Radio Yerevan and they soon became a reference for the Kurds of Eastern Anatolia (HAA, 1/34/31/30; İnanç, 2016). Technical as well as symbolic elements shaped the geography of radios and transmitter stations across the region. In January 1961, İraj Eskandari, a prominent member of the Tudeh Central Committee, visited Sofia with a proposal to move the site of the Party's clandestine radio, Peyk-e Iran ('The Courier of Iran'), to Bulgaria. Distance and interference complicated the efficiency of broadcasting from the GDR to the Middle East. The presence in Bulgaria of Iranian exiles would provide local staff for the radio and add Azeri-language and Kurdish-language programs. This initiative, approved by the Politburo of the BKP on 2 March 1961, after a consultation with Moscow, demonstrated a desire to better use national minorities in communist propaganda directed at Iran (TsDA, 1B/64/281/1-2). The first official implantation of Kurdish media propaganda in Bulgaria was thus made under the umbrella of the Tudeh Party, at a moment when its relations with the Azerbaijani Democratic Party and Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) were intensely discussed.

Employment in the radio maintained a steady flow of collaborators and visitors to Sofia, even more so as tensions grew worse in the party. When İraj Eskandari took over as first secretary, a fight ensued for control over the radio – one of the Party's key assets – as its director, Hamid Safari, was transferred to Prague (TsDA, 1B/81g/337/45-48). Because of these inner tensions, one of the members of the Kurdish-language editorial team, Karim Khosami, who had come to Bulgaria from Czechoslovakia in 1965, progressively switched to work for the KDPI. In 1972, he was transferred to Baghdad, where Ghassemlou was trying to develop a basis for action in the immediate neighbourhood of Iran. As part of party cooperation, the BKP continued in the 1970s to pay his family an allowance and Khosami visited Bulgaria several times a year (TsDA, 1B/81d/172/41-43). Khosami was, however, trapped in competing allegiances between the Tudeh and the KDPI, accused of condoning nationalistic tendencies and being disloyal to the Soviet line because of Ghassemlou's critical behaviour during the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 (Prunhuber, 2009: 181).

Tensions between the Tudeh leadership and Kurdish activists who looked for new political opportunities were but one aspect of the overall crisis of the Tudeh Party, which had lost grassroots support in Iran and was deeply divided in the diaspora. From 1969 onwards, Bulgarian authorities suggested Peyk-e Iran be moved to another socialist country. The rising economic difficulties of Eastern European countries raised the stakes of relations with Iran and, when relations soured between Bulgaria and the leaders of Tudeh, Sofia became more clearly intent on getting rid of the radio. After years of resistance, Tudeh leaders had to give in to the pressure and the radio was closed in November 1976. By then, however, the Kurdish question was almost exclusively perceived through the prism of the rapidly evolving political situation in Iraq.

Bulgarian diplomacy in the Middle East and the Kurds

Since the early 1970s, Bulgaria and other communist countries had been put to contribution in order to consolidate the March 1970 autonomy agreement between the Baath and the Iraqi KDP, a major objective of Soviet diplomacy (Smolansky & Smolansky, 1991: 73-75). The agreement laid out a roadmap for improved relations between the Kurds and Baghdad through political, cultural, and economic measures to increase the autonomy and prosperity of the Kurdish provinces. Relations had to be developed with government and Kurdish actors in Iraq in order to promote peace in the country and strengthen the influence of socialism, especially as the USSR signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Iraq in April 1972 (Franzén, 2011: 200-206). Konstantin Tellalov, head of the BKP International Department, reported in May 1970 that contacts were made between the Bulgarian ambassador to Iraq, Nikolaj Bojadzhiev, and the Kurdish state minister Saleh al-Yusef, concerning sponsorship for Kurdish Iraqi students to study in Bulgaria (TsDA, 1B/36/978/2). Financial and humanitarian aid was also provided through different channels to KDP-controlled areas of Iraq as part of an effort to stabilize the situation and get all Iraqi forces to support the Eastern alliance. In order to avoid too strong a commitment of Bulgarian authorities to Kurdish forces, the Bulgarian Fatherland Front was once again made the main interlocutor of the Kurds, as also reported by Tellalov (TsDA, 1B/36/1410/3-4).

The number of Iraqi Kurdish students, while remaining small, grew progressively in the 1970s thanks to appointment quotas from the KDP and ICP. Political and personal reasons could guide their presence in Bulgaria, but economic and professional factors also played a considerable role. Since the 1960s, Bulgaria had clearly become one of the world's largest producers and exporters of tobacco, Bulgartabak – the state tobacco trust – being one of the largest currency-bringers in the country (Neuburger, 2013: 200). Bulgarian agricultural institutes, faculties, and experimental stations were particularly attractive considering Northern Iraq's focus on agricultural development. Iraqi state institutions themselves used nominations to Bulgaria as a way to gain the loyalty of Kurdish students in this field.

However, the increasingly obvious failure of the implementation of the March 1970 agreement led to worsening relations between Iraqi authorities and Kurdish students. The latter overwhelmingly sided with autonomist claims, although not all of them were keen on Mustafa Barzani's leadership and many had sympathies with the ICP. The relationship between Iraqi embassies and Iraqi Kurdish students soured and created diplomatic tensions with the host countries. Bulgaria was submitted to vicious attacks from Baghdad, which implied indirect criticism against the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact. Simultaneously, though, attempts to mend the rift with Baghdad exposed Bulgarian authorities to renewed attacks by Kurdish students who denounced the hypocrisy of Eastern European countries in their relations with authoritarian regimes (Pugach, 2019: 105).

In Bulgaria, the Iraqi embassy sent a series of notes in August-September 1974 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanding the forced repatriation to Iraq of six Iraqi Kurdish students accused of belonging to the KDP (Shirzad Abdul Fatah, Rashid Miran, Azad Mohamed Amin, Talib Rashid Jadkar el-Kakai, Shirko Khamza Rasul, and Ali Mirza Feli) (TsDA, 1477/31/1588/12-13). Iraq's request led to an inquiry into the activities of Kurdish students in Bulgaria who were assembled in a student organization. Their activities did not really extend to publicly reaching out to other foreign students or to Bulgarian citizens, but included numerous contacts with Kurds in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Moreover,

the Kurdish student organization mixed KDP sympathizers and Communist Kurds, giving further legitimacy to its presence on the territory of a socialist country (TsDA, 1477/31/1588/1-2).

Practical problems emerged due to the financial troubles some students experienced with the termination of their stipends by Iraqi authorities, notably the Iraqi state tobacco company. The main difficulty for Bulgarian authorities, though, was the pressure put on them by Iraqi authorities, which threatened in a barely veiled manner political and economic countermeasures if Kurdish and Communist militants were not excluded from public activism. In a moment when economic stagnation and rising energy costs meant increasing tensions in the foreign trade and external debt of Bulgaria, the country could not write off relations with a major oil-producing country (Avramov, 2008).

Some visible aspects of the Kurdish students' activity, such as their relations to the KSSE and a splinter organization, the Association of Kurdistan Students Abroad (AKSA), illustrated by trips to West Germany to take part in the unions' conferences, could be particularly problematic for Bulgarian-Iraqi relations by the late 1970s. This new awareness of East-West connections coincided with the feeling that Eastern Europe could not be hermetically cordoned off from trends unfolding in the West, especially the rise of political violence and terrorism. Traditionally accused of condoning leftist terrorist groups, Central European regimes were actually wary of their potential destabilizing effects – as demonstrated in June 1978 by Bulgarian cooperation with West Germany against Till Meyer's group (Nehring, 2015) – and started to consider the domestic and international consequences the activity of groups such as the KSSE, or another student organization like AKSA, could have for their own interests (Droit, 2019: 182-183).

Tensions culminated in 1978-1979 when, due to deliberately provocative actions on the part of Baath militants, clashes occurred between pro- and anti-Baath activists in Bulgaria. In early December 1979, a few months after Saddam Hussein's definitive consolidation of power, two students – one Baathist and one Communist – were killed in a deadly brawl in Sofia (AMVnR, 35/1544/88-97). The incident was fully instrumentalized by Baathist propaganda in a move to bully Bulgaria to not welcome any more Communist and Kurdish students on its soil. While Iraqi diplomats had been routinely accusing Bulgaria and other communist countries of welcoming Kurdish delegations and selling them arms, the incident brought about a new flare of propaganda. Other people's democracies were alarmed by the incident, which incited them to adopt measures to protect key figures of Kurdish emigration against assassination attempts (BstU/HA-II/23588/27-32; Sassoon, 2014: 9-11).

Bulgarian-Turkish tensions and the Kurds

While Kurdish mobilization had hitherto been approached through the prism of Iranian and Iraqi politics, the 1980s led to its first direct collision with Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Contrary to what occurred for Western Europe, where the September 1980 coup led to mass immigration of Turkish and Kurdish left-wing activists, socialist countries did not become home to large émigré communities. Despite rumours that the Black Sea served as a smuggling hub for weapons sent to the Kurds in Anatolia, Bulgaria was not significantly involved in support to armed resistance against the Turkish authorities (Szatkowski, 2016: 26-28). Since the late 1970s, diplomatic and commercial relations had improved, and Sofia paid more and more attention to trade and maritime and economic cooperation with Turkey as an important

source of currency income. High-level Bulgarian delegations travelled to Turkey in 1983-1984, in an effort to embody a trend that contributed to the Soviet policy of appeased relations in the Black Sea region.

This neglect changed in November 1984 when the BKP decided to launch a mass campaign to change Turkish names in the country, the so-called 'Revival Process' (*Vizroditelnijat Protse*s), in a quest to consolidate the 'unity' of the Bulgarian nation. To this day, the underlying factors of this sudden revival remain disputed. Pressure was put upon populations and 310,000 people had their names changed from December 1984 to January 1985. While Turkey protested these measures in the international arena, Bulgaria immediately looked for side issues that could deflect attention from the policy. On 18 January 1985, Todor Zhivkov mentioned the fact that Turkey could not adopt an overly aggressive attitude and that he thus expected a quick decrease in the anti-Bulgarian media campaign: 'They can make noise, but it's not in their interest, because their entire army is waging a war against the Kurds. We don't wage any war, we just change names' (*Istinata...*, 2003: 27).

Contrary to Zhivkov's expectations, Turkey launched a multifaceted offensive against Bulgarian policies in international organizations (*Şimşir*, 1990). Ankara emphasized Bulgarian human rights violations in the UN, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO. It also played a religious note by mobilizing the Islamic Conference. At a moment when – a few years after the beginning of the Afghanistan war – the Soviet Union was specifically trying to defuse tensions with the Muslim world, this was not welcome in Moscow. Moreover, Turkey harnessed the impact of the crisis in its effort to mend relations with NATO after a few years of cold due to the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974 (Campany, 1986). The Soviet leadership had already been wary of Sofia's chauvinistic disputes with the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the 1960s-1970s, and the Revival Process was perceived as an additional hurdle on the path of peaceful relations in the region (Schönfeld, 1988: 257-258). Gorbachev expressed his misgivings as early as his first encounter with Zhivkov in October 1985, and the campaign was one of the reasons Bulgaria became a burdensome ally (Gruev & Kal'onski, 2008: 149-151; Chakîrov, 2001: 160).

Under the long-standing Minister of Foreign Affairs, Petîr Mladenov, Bulgarian diplomats were immediately mobilized to counter Turkish activities, but could not prevent the passing of many resolutions condemning Bulgarian policies. Among Sofia's few assets, however, were the Kurdish and Armenian questions. While Ankara's stubborn denial of the Armenian genocide had weakened its position internationally, the Kurdish question was seen by Bulgarian diplomats as the 'Achilles' heel' of Turkey, in particular considering the bloody military operations going on in Eastern Anatolia in the mid-1980s (TsDA, 1B/81v/459/73). The embassy in Ankara produced numerous reports that helped fill an international counter-propaganda strategy on human and minority rights in Turkey. In this perspective, Turgut Özal's openings for more recognition of the Kurds in Turkish society in the mid-1980s (Ataman, 2002) were generally seen as a tactical ploy of the military to minimize Turkey's domestic and international vulnerability (TsDA, 1B/81v/459/97-101).

For the Kurds settled in Bulgaria, counter-propaganda measures provided exactly the kind of political and cultural patronage that had cyclically existed in the Soviet Union itself. While the BKP remained one of the most conservative parties in the Eastern Bloc until its very end, the geopolitical factor of confrontation with Turkey led Bulgaria to become a vocal supporter of the Kurdish cause. As Turkish ambassador Ömer Lütem recalls in his memoirs, this

instrumental dimension was quite explicitly acknowledged by Bulgarian statesmen in their efforts to force Ankara's hand (Lütem, 2000: 319-324).

Bulgarian authorities looked for support among the newly established Kurdistan Socialist Party (TSK), a leftist organization established by Zeki Adsız, a proponent of armed struggle against the Turkish state (Jongerden, Akkaya, 2019: 274). They also considered a series of measures such as a common Bloc policy toward the Kurdish issue, official relations with the Kurdish Institute in Paris (and other similar institutes in Western Europe), scholarships for Kurdish activists, and a cultural-political mobilization of Kurdish students in Bulgaria through the Friendship (Druzhiba) organization (TsDA, 174B/2/4067/1-8). Their activism was spurred by a willingness to catch up with mobilization in Western Europe that threatened to annihilate the a priori Marxist orientation of many Kurdish political movements in the 1980s. This brief moment also led to a renewal of publications on the Kurdish issue: after years of unsuccessful attempts, the former diplomat and expert on the Kurds, Radoj Krístev, was finally able to publish his book, *The Kurds in Turkey. Injustice and Terror* (Krístev, 1987).

Conclusion

The fall of Bulgarian communism in late 1989 sealed the fate of the Revival Process and Sofia's tactical support for the Kurds in Turkey. Even before that, however, concerns had been raised about possible disturbances in the relations with Iraq, Iran, and Syria in the event that a strong pro-Kurdish course would be adopted by the BKP. Once again, as the head of the Bulgarian State Television and Radio noted in August, this course would fall prey to the impossibility of segmenting broadcasts and targeting Turkey's Kurds exclusively for this propaganda (TsDA/206/18/31/1-2). This final stage of Bulgarian-Kurdish relations during the Cold War period confirms the overall trend of approaching the Kurdish issue only as part of the three state contexts of Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish politics. The fact that Kurdish militants settled in Bulgaria were overwhelmingly active in non-Kurdish organizations only accentuated this inclination.

Their activities tended to be strongly influenced by their country of origin and their Kurdish identity was maintained and vivified in the eyes of the Bulgarian authorities by two main factors: on the one hand, the influence of and interaction with Kurdish movements in the West and the Soviet Union, where Kurdish diasporas were more numerous and better structured; on the other hand, antagonistic policies led by state authorities in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. Iraqi complaints about 'Kurdish activities' in Bulgaria played a significant role in increasing the awareness of state and security organs concerning the actual scope of such activities.

Central European countries were therefore quite different from the Soviet Union in the sense that, lacking an autochthonous or strong émigré Kurdish community, they did not develop an independent framing of the Kurdish issue and continued to view it as a sub-piece of national chessboards. Successively seen as mainly an 'Iranian', 'Iraqi', or 'Turkish' problem, the Kurdish cause remained subservient to the imperatives of diplomatic and economic relations with these three Middle Eastern countries. For 'Moscow's loyal flag-bearer', the Kurdish issue became one of the bargaining chips that allowed Sofia to increase its independence in the last decades of the Cold War and balance an autonomous political course in Southeastern Europe.

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 HAA = *Hajastan Azgajin Arkhivner* (Yerevan). Fund/inventory/file/pages.
 IISG = *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* (Amsterdam). Collection ISK/Silvio Van Rooy.
 RGASPI = Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoy Istorii (Moscow).
 Fund/inventory/file/pages.
 TsDA = *Tsentrallen Dîrzhaven Arkhiv* (Sofia). Fund/inventory/file/pages.

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CHORDS IN TEMBÛR (DIWAN) – Notation of ten Kurdish songs with their chords

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