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SITUATION REPORT

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This material was prepared for the use of the staff of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.
1. Private Economic Activities To Be Expanded

Summary: New regulations on private and semiprivate production and services have been issued and apparently include private medical practice. The declared aim is to provide incentives so that more people will engage in such activities and increase the supply of goods and services. It is also presumed that this will provide work for the unemployed and help to control those now engaged in private services, legally or illegally.

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The Bulgarian regime has formally admitted the necessity of private artisans, services, and trade, as well as private plots in agriculture, in order to supplement the poorly functioning, insufficient state enterprises. Private enterprise in the service sector, however, has been causing the regime more problems than in agriculture; and there have been numerous violations of laws and regulations. Many people have been working without a permit or earning more income than is considered permissible under "socialist" standards.

Various official documents have been issued in recent years both to encourage and to control private enterprise.¹ An attempt, for example, to base it on contracts between private persons and state enterprises, seems to have produced few results.²

New Regulations. The Council of Ministers has issued new regulations on "collective and personal labor activities by citizens for the additional production of goods and services,"³ which increase the variety of both the sectors in which private or semiprivate activities are permitted and the organizational forms under which they may be performed.

The aim is to make it possible for "self-managing socialist organizations" (that is, enterprises) to expand their economic activities and for individuals to increase their income by participating in the production of goods and services. The regulations call upon state agencies and enterprises to create the necessary conditions to do this and to encourage "large-scale and active participation in the production of goods and services," as "an inseparable part and continuation of socialist production." As is the case with private plots in agriculture, which are nominally part of the socialist sector, this last provision is intended to eliminate any possible impression at home or abroad that these undertakings are genuine private enterprises. (The word "private" [chasten] is always avoided in favor of "personal" [lichen], which is also used for what are generally known as "private" plots.)
New Sectors Included. In addition to the traditional areas of private enterprise--repair and other services, some production of consumer goods, and small-scale trade--the new regulations provide for "collective and personal labor activity" to include the "production" of raw materials and goods for use in production, as well as a surprisingly large variety of services, including administrative and legal services, accounting, "financial-revision," transport, health care, education, insurance, and "collection of dues." The decree approving the regulations states that separate documents will be issued on transport, education, administrative and legal services, technical design services, and the supply of computer software.

Health Service. In the case of health services, the intention seems to be to provide a viable alternative to private medical practice or even to restore it. (The prohibition of private practice in 1972 has caused serious problems and provoked various attempts to circumvent the law.) Recently, the party daily again discussed the fact that the patient was unable to choose his own doctor and that doctors' were required to see six patients an hour. It called for ways to reintroduce the "family doctor" and told about an experiment in doing this. The weekly Orbita referred to the new regulations when asking readers to write in their opinions about the need for private medical practice. The first answer it received called for the freedom to choose one's doctor.

"Educational services" were included in the regulations in order to put controls on private lessons, which have been growing in demand and have recently been a subject of discussion. Most of the other new areas, however, have no tradition in recent times; and it has not been explained, for example, what administrative or legal services could be provided by private persons or whether private agents will travel about trying to sell insurance.

Private Retail Trade and Catering were not listed among the diverse sectors but were mentioned later on in a different context. As in earlier legislation, this is to be regulated by contract--trade enterprises will assign the management of small facilities to private citizens. Until now the practice has not been very popular, although unauthorized private trade has continued to thrive.

The People Involved. As in earlier regulations, those authorized to engage in private activities include pensioners, housewives, students, and disabled persons. Employees will still be allowed to engage in such activities in their spare time, despite the fact that they often spend too much time and energy on their private business and are tired when they go to their regular work. The new regulations also extend authorization to those living in developing areas and in villages with fewer than
500 inhabitants—a provision that seems superfluous, since almost everyone is included in the other categories.

As in previous regulations, the hiring of workers is forbidden, and only the help of family members may be used.

Types of Activity. The regulations devote separate chapters to the different systems of engaging in private or semiprivate business activities. Some, such as the "labor contracts for additional labor" between enterprises and individuals, do not really have a private character at all. (These workers will have a status and wages similar to those of regular employees.) A more autonomous status is envisaged for individuals who sign contracts with enterprises for the independent production of goods and services.

The "collective" activity in the title of the regulations refers to the possibility for citizens and state agencies or enterprises to "form small labor collectives," which will have the same status as the brigades, teams, bureaus, or workshops attached to the enterprises. These "collectives" will actually be a kind of cooperative. The idea behind this particular form of private enterprise seems to be related to recent suggestions for the proposed restructuring of the cooperative movement.¹⁰

Another kind of semiprivate activity permits individuals to lease small retail trade and catering facilities, service shops, hotel rooms, and other businesses from enterprises for a flat annual rent. The contracts will be awarded at auctions open to everybody.

Private Artisans, Trade, and Services. Finally, the traditional form of private activity is to be performed "independently and by personally owned means of production" on the basis of permits issued by the local government. Six kinds of goods, apparently considered dangerous for various reasons, are prohibited for private production: medicines, narcotics, and poisonous substances; weapons and explosives (as well as repairing weapons); copying equipment and rubber stamps; alcoholic beverages for sale; the production (as well as the repair) of objects made from precious metals and stones; and printed matter.

Separate chapters regulate the supply of material (in general, artisans will have to arrange for their own supplies and will need special authorization to buy certain materials); prices and taxes; social insurance; accounting and control; and administrative penalties and economic liability.

The First Results. Only a few days after publication of the regulations, BTA reported that the first taxicab cooperative had been formed by private individuals in Varna.¹¹ Three weeks later an amendment was made to the traffic code authorizing people to use their private vehicles for transport services.¹²
The taxi cooperative in Varna is an example of what may become the most popular of the various systems of organizing private services. As was already implied last spring, the large variety of organizational form is expected to wipe out the strict delimitation between state and cooperative property. Moreover, including private initiative in cooperative organizations will probably help corroborate the theory that the private sector is "part of the socialist sector."

Individual Activity. The success of the various types of semiprivate and collective activity will depend on how attractive the conditions are in each case and how much the people's mistrust in such state-controlled activity can be overcome. The fate of private initiatives will furthermore depend on the application of existing laws, which until now treats almost every private activity as a criminal act for having produced "unearned income."  

Motives and Goals. In addition to the official aims of the new regulations (increasing the supply of goods and services and the possibilities for people to earn additional income), various other advantages were mentioned in two commentaries in the weekly Ikonomicheski Zhivot: the "inefficient use of labor resources" (there are now 1,800,000 pensioners, 112,000 women, and 120,000 students who do not work; and "considerable reserves" exist in the enterprises); and the labor force would be better used and "the existing tension in the balance of labor resources" reduced. The latter may possibly refer to unemployment, both hidden and official, which could well increase in the near future through technical progress and the restructuring of economic management.

The other article in the same issue of Ikonomicheski Zhivot revealed that it is also hoped to increase production without much capital investment by exploiting the existing "material and financial resources of the public, which until now were used only for private consumption." Private taxis are a typical example of this, although various kinds of machinery and equipment are also meant.

The first article, an editorial, referred to "our bitter experience until now" and said that consideration should be given to ways of avoiding "certain negative phenomena." It called for eliminating "psychological barriers against the individual producers and their treatment, all down the line, as privateers-profiteers." This would be achieved through the strict prevention of "speculative acts" and breaches of the law. The article also said that there must be no drop in labor productivity at regular workplaces and that the minimum leisure time had to be strictly observed. The other article predicted that in implementing the regulations "certain difficulties" and "certain departures from the principles" might occur. It also warned against adopting a negative attitude to the new measures just because of possible violations.
It seems safe to conclude that the new regulations will not transform Bulgaria into a country of flourishing private enterprise, but even a small degree of success would be welcomed.

Rada Nikolaev


6. *Orbita*, nos. 27 and 28, 4 and 11 July 1987, respectively.


2. Glasnost' and Violent Crime

Summary: Although the BCP has declared its support for the Soviet policy of "openness" [glasnost'] on several occasions, the Bulgarian media have only just begun to modify their secretive and uninformative style to the new requirements. A few articles published in recent weeks have reported violent criminal cases, formerly a taboo theme but have avoided disclosing the full details and drawing the obvious and embarrassing conclusions.

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A sensational news story about the kidnapping in northeastern Bulgaria of two children by three men armed with hand grenades has severely tested the Bulgarian media's commitment to "openness" [glasnost']. Although the crime was reported by BTA and Radio Sofia on July 9 and additional details were given in a Ministry of Internal Affairs statement on July 10, these sources all failed to reveal the kidnappers' full names, motives, or personal histories.

The incompleteness of the accounts illustrates the difficulties that Sofia is having in altering its policy on public information. When the BCP Politburo formulated its response to the January 1987 CPSU plenum, it accepted the fact that a more candid expression of public opinion and criticism had to play a central role in "restructuring." The actual implementation of this policy has, however, proved to be a slow, uncomfortable, and often controversial matter.

Glasnost' in Bulgaria. Numerous foreign observers have commented on the ambivalence with which Bulgaria has responded to the innovative policies of CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Although Sofia rapidly and enthusiastically endorsed his economic "restructuring" and introduced a large number of measures to streamline and modernize its own system of management, it has been reluctant to express open approval of the policy of "openness." Earlier this year the BCP Politburo decision and Todor Zhivkov's memorandum on the January CPSU plenum were both replete with newly fashionable phrases but studiously avoided the word glasnost', even though the memorandum did call for a degree of greater openness in the media.

Zhivkov's recommendations were extremely circumspect terms as if he had to take into account a division of opinion within the Bulgarian leadership over the desirability of glasnost'. Zhivkov said that an increase of public information and criticism was desirable, not as an end in itself but to facilitate the fight against "negative phenomena," "weaknesses, and errors" and to promote scientific and technical progress. He
said that more attention had to be paid to complaints from the public and letters to the editor and that all party and government bodies should release information from time to time on how their decisions had been reached and implemented.

Finally, in his memorandum on the CPSU plenum, Zhivkov proposed that the party daily Rabotnichesko Delo "address the main questions . . . [namely,] shortcomings in the work of district party committees, government organizations, and other senior bodies." This recommendation clearly implied that Rabotnichesko Delo alone was to assume this powerful role and that the highest party and state bodies—the BCP Central Committee and Politburo and the Ministerial and State Councils—were to be exempt from scrutiny. Rabotnichesko Delo, however, took little advantage of this enviable licence to criticize, even after Radoslav Radev replaced Politburo member and CC Secretary Yordan Yotov as editor-in-chief on March 17.

The CC Secretariat issued a statement on "openness" on April 24, reiterating Zhivkov's demand for a more rigorous public examination of the work of party committees, government bodies, and economic associations and stressing the importance of a more open information policy for economic and technical development. Rabotnichesko Delo's sole response to date has been to support a local newspaper, Komsomoletz, in its criticism of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Stara Zagora BCP District Committee and the manager and party secretary of the Stara Zagora Chemical Combine.

It would, however, be misleading to infer that the Bulgarian media had entirely ignored the challenge of "openness" in the year-and-a-half before the January 1987 CPSU plenum. A few accidents and natural disasters, such as the explosion in the Devnya Chemical Combine on 1 November 1986 and the earthquake in Strazhitsa on 7 December 1986, were reported with an unusual degree of promptness and candor. A number of cases of corruption and abuse of party membership were made public as part of the campaign against "negative tendencies"; and the daily Otechestven Front began publishing a larger and more representative selection of readers' letters on a regular feature page entitled "The Openness of Readers' Letters."

The Bulgarian media were, however, inconsistent in their attitude toward releasing information to the public. They failed, for instance, to report promptly and accurately on the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in April 1986 and continue to gloss over its long-term environmental consequences and implications for Bulgaria's own nuclear energy program. There has been no attempt to challenge the strict censorship of military information in the last year and a half, nor has economic reporting improved. Indeed, PlanEcon Report concluded its analysis of Bulgaria's economic performance in 1986 by saying, "To put it bluntly, Bulgarian economic information policy is an unmitigated disaster."
Perhaps the most telling indication of the seriousness of the resistance to "openness" was given in March, when Politburo member and CC Secretary Chudomir Aleksandrov (who is often thought likely to succeed Zhivkov as party leader) told the Financial Times that Bulgaria had nothing to learn from this aspect of Gorbachev's program, because "We think there is enough "openness" as it is."8

Glasnost' and Crime. One subject broached in the more open reporting of social problems in the Soviet media since the accession of Gorbachev has been the increase in violent crime. In recent months a number of Bulgarian newspapers have responded to the Soviet lead and begun to write more openly about armed burglary, assault, rape, and murder--subjects that are traditionally taboo in the Bulgarian communist press. These few sensational reports appear to have been written not for their shock effect but to express concern at the failure of the police to halt the increase of such crimes in recent years.

Indeed, even before the advent of "openness," Lieutenant General Dimitar Kapitanov, the Deputy Chief Prosecutor of Bulgaria, had confessed to Rabotnichesko Delo: "Once we lived with the hope that there would be no crime in a socialist society. These illusions have disappeared."9 Very occasionally, of course, newspapers did acknowledge that violent crimes had been committed in Bulgaria; on 11 January 1984, for instance, the weekly Anteni commented on the increase in break-ins and armed burglaries in major cities. The few articles that were authorized, however, tended to avoid details and limited themselves to uninformative abstract reflection.

It was normal practice for the Bulgarian media to ignore completely all uncomfortable subjects. The wave of terrorist bombings in 1984 and 1985, for example, received scant attention in the press and on television and radio. The first explosions in Plovdiv railway station and Varna airport in the summer of 1984 came to the attention of Western newspapers solely because of eye-witness accounts and reports from the French news agency, AFP.10

The Case of Georgi Halachev. Two national newspapers have turned to a new style in reporting the recent criminal case of a traffic policeman, Georgi Halachev, who is the son of the much-decorated BCP member and former partisan commander Dimitar Halachev-Kalacha. On 2 November 1986, Halachev shot the 23-year-old Tsvetan Paraliyski to death, apparently without a motive, in the village of Valchitran in Pleven district. Anteni and Rabotnichesko Delo published long accounts of the case in May, describing the protected life of violence that Georgi Halachev had pursued since his school-days.11

Both reports showed that his unstable personality and persistent bullying of defenseless citizens had made him unsuited for a responsible post and caused him to be feared in
his locality. By using his father's influence, Halachev had managed to retain his job as Chief of Traffic Control in Pordim, Pleven district, even after the Lovech district court had suspended his driver's license in 1984 on account of drunkenness; and by a similar means he had retained his membership on the Valchitran village BCP committee for nine years (from 1977 to 1986), even though he was prosecuted in Varna in 1983 on charges of assault and illegal possession of a firearm. Not only had Dimitar Halachev failed to check his son's behavior, he had actually given him the pistol with which he shot Paraliyiski. Rabotnicheskho Delo concluded by saying that more than 2,000 residents of Pleven district had signed a letter to the Supreme Court demanding that it confirm the death sentence handed down by the district court.

The Halachev case gave Rabotnicheskho Delo and Anteni the opportunity to write about a scandalous crime with some degree of frankness, but neither newspaper drew the obvious conclusions or fully exploited the possibilities of "openness." Neither explicitly criticized Halachev's father or the local BCP committee, which had obviously protected Georgi Halachev throughout his years of misused power. By seeking to transfer the blame onto society, both reports attempted to obfuscate the issue and minimize the public controversy over the case.

The Rapes in Radnevo Power Plant. A second sensational criminal case, involving Mihail Starchev, the manager of the Parva Komsomolska thermoelectric power plant in Radnevo (Stara Zagora district) was reviewed by Otechestven Front on June 18. Earlier in 1987 Starchev had been convicted on two charges of rape and sentenced to two years in prison. The newspaper implied that his treatment had been too lenient and opened its own enquiry, which rapidly revealed extreme irregularities witnesses had been manipulated; and the doctor who had examined the victim had submitted a falsified report that deliberately minimized her injuries. The defense had attempted to base its case on two arguments, that the victim had been a willing sexual partner and that a manager of Starchev's competence was too valuable an economic asset to be jailed. As with the Halachev controversy, there was a reluctance to exploit the full possibilities of "openness" and criticize those who had protected Starchev. It did succeed, however, in drawing public attention to an important case.

The Golden Sands Kidnapping. Although reports in the Bulgarian media on the kidnapping on July 8 were fuller than might have been expected, they still omitted important details that would have been made public in the West. The names of the two abducted boys were not revealed until July 10, when the Ministry of Internal Affairs' spokesman, Yordan Ormankov, told BTA that Darin Hristov and Nikolay Petkov had been kidnapped near Tolbuhin at 3.40 P.M. on July 8 and driven to the Golden Sands Black Sea resort near Varna, where they were held in a car in front of the Hotel International for more than 24 hours.
Ormankov did not give the boys' ages but said that they were schoolchildren. He also did not disclose the three kidnappers' demands, which must have been revealed in the negotiations during the day-long siege of the stolen car.

BTA's first statement, on July 9, called the crime "a brutal terrorist act . . . committed with criminal and adventurist motives," which suggests that the Bulgarian authorities knew the kidnappers' demands but did not reveal them. Bulgarian Turkish emigre sources in West Germany have claimed that this official reticence was an attempt to conceal the fact that the kidnapping was effectively a protest against Bulgaria's minority policies and that the three criminals were ethnic Turks from Dulovo (Silistra district) who were trying to escape from Bulgaria. BTA was uncommunicative about the kidnappers' identities, giving only their first initial and their family names—N. Nikolov, O. Nikolov, and N. Asenov—perhaps because the names were typical of those chosen by Turks during the renaming campaign of 1984 and 1985.

Another important detail that was not reported until July 10 was that the three kidnappers were killed in a shoot-out with antiterrorist forces that had been called in to end the siege. The first BTA press release had incorrectly stated that "the criminals were arrested." The same release also failed to report that the left leg of Darin Hristov, one of the hostages, had been seriously injured by a kidnapper's hand grenade and might have to be amputated.

BTA's failure to report the affair until late on July 9, after the siege had ended, the boys had been released, and the kidnappers killed, was presumably a result of the authorities' desire to first ensure that the outcome was favorable and to portray their security forces as efficient. One suspects, however, that BTA might have been forced into disclosure by the fact that a French tourist returning from Varna had reported the attack to the AFP offices in Paris on July 8. BTA presumably published the story only when it was clear that that it could not be concealed.12

Conclusion. Thus, despite public statements of support for the policy of "openness," the Bulgarian media have been reluctant to take on the potentially hazardous task of reporting social problems more openly. Opposing views within the party itself have made the media inconsistent and unpredictable in their own policies. On the few occasions on which BTA or the newspapers have written about formerly taboo subjects, such as violent crimes, they have done so in such a circumspect way that their reticence could not but provoke a host of uncomfortable questions among their readers. There are a few signs of a change of style, but the old approaches continue to dominate.

Stephen Ashley
1 BTA (Sofia), 10 July 1987.

2 Rabotnichesko Delo, 11 February 1987.

3 Ibid., 19 February 1987.


5 Ibid., 22 June and 2 July 1987.


8 Financial Times, 10 March 1987.

9 Rabotnichesko Delo, 28 October 1984.

10 Bulgarian SR/14, RFER, 23 October 1984, item 1.


12 AP (Vienna), 10 July 1987.
3. More Questions Than Answers About AIDS

Summary: In a recent interview a Deputy Minister of Public Health disclosed some new facts about the spread of AIDS in Bulgaria. The trade union daily Trud, in a two-page supplement, contested almost every point of the interview and exposed a number of deficiencies, some of them bordering on criminal negligence, in the nation's public health service. The supplement was a courageous example of journalistic "openness."

* * *

Until recently AIDS, like sex education, was discussed only with reluctance in Bulgaria. It appears that virtually the only person, authorized by the government to give official information on the subject is Deputy Minister of Public Health Lyubomir Shindarov. In a cautious, selective, and often contradictory interview with the trade union daily Trud, Shindarov recently repeated some facts that were already known and disclosed others for the first time. His interview was, however, not particularly informative.

Moreover, it clearly caused some frustration, to put it mildly, among Trud's editorial staff, who issued a two-page supplement alongside the interview raising a great number of awkward and unanswered questions about AIDS. This appeared to be the first serious attempt in the Bulgarian press to deal thoroughly and professionally with problems related to AIDS, which could have a devastating effect in the country.

The Interview. Shindarov began with the political claim that "the spread of AIDS is limited in the socialist countries" but ended the interview with the more sober assessment that "there are no state, social, racial, or religious boundaries for AIDS." The Bulgarian media have frequently said that AIDS is "a disease typical of capitalist societies."

The Deputy Minister said that at present all foreigners staying for more than a month in Bulgaria were being screened for the AIDS virus and that screening was also being conducted among blood donors and high-risk groups (hemophiliacs, homosexuals, prostitutes, and intravenous drug abusers). A total of 42,172 people had been tested for AIDS, he said, including 17,591 foreign students and workers and 24,591 Bulgarians. (The individual categories add up, in fact to 24,581.) The Bulgarians who had been tested were said to include 6,944 people from high-risk groups, as well as an additional 400 hemophiliacs, and 17,237 blood donors.

The testing showed that 24 foreigners and 10 Bulgarians had been exposed to the AIDS virus. Seven of the tested Bulgarians were hemophiliacs, one was the wife of an infected hemophiliac,
and two (a homosexual and a prostitute) belonged to other high-risk groups. All remain "clinically healthy," according to Shindarov. The homosexual and prostitute were said to be in hospital isolation, while the hemophiliacs were in a clinic. It is claimed that no virus carrier was found among the tested blood donors in Sofia (in the provinces blood donors have not been tested yet).

Shindarov also said that all foreigners found to have been infected with the virus had "left the country." This contradicts a statement by the chief epidemiologist of Plovdiv District, Evgeni Dimitrov, who said that at present "there are three or four infected foreigners" in his region but "they are isolated and under surveillance." Under existing laws, all foreigners found to be infected with AIDS face mandatory expulsion from Bulgaria.²

According to Shindarov, a center for voluntary AIDS testing and a special telephone service for consultations will be set up "within two months." Blood donors had been tested in Sofia since the end of 1986, and Shindarov claimed that testing would be introduced nationwide by the end of July or early August.

Shindarov said that since the beginning of 1987 there had been "an interbranch group for coordinating activities aimed at fighting AIDS." The group included some 15 ministries and other agencies, he said, and operated according to a plan approved by the Social Council at the Council of Ministers. These activities concentrated on providing information through the media and educating people, primarily the younger generation, about the danger of contracting AIDS. A non-Bulgarian source has claimed that last June "the Bulgarian authorities started distributing leaflets on AIDS to homes in Sofia,"² but no other independent source (including Shindarov) has confirmed this. Shindarov failed to name other ways in which the public was being informed, probably because they are impeded or nonexistent (see below).

Finally, Shindarov claimed that only epidemiological institutions were engaged in tracing the contacts of those infected with AIDS. Trud, however, appearing to doubt the Deputy Minister's words, said that the entire campaign might turn into "a witch hunt," if other agencies (presumably the militia and other bodies of the Ministry of the Interior) were to be assigned a role.

Trud's Reaction. An editorial postscript criticized and contested almost every one of Shindarov's comments during the interview. Trud asked, among many other things, why testing equipment had not been imported earlier, when blood and sperm banks would finally be screened for the AIDS virus, and why nobody in the Komsomol or the Ministry of Education knew anything about the existence of "a coordinated program for struggle against AIDS."
The main challenge, however, came in the form of a two-page supplement raising a lot more questions about AIDS in Bulgaria and exposing an even greater number of errors and shortcomings not only in the anti-AIDS campaign but also in the regime's entire public health service and policy. Dozens of authors raised medical, psychological, moral, legal, and social issues, demanding prompt and effective measures to set matters right.

Mistrust and Panic About AIDS. Ridiculing a "prominent expert" who had given a television "interview bursting with optimism," the Trud journalist Kalcho Ivanov said that he had asked hundreds of people whether they had been reassured by what they had heard. The answer, he said, had been a categorical "No!" Ivanov's unidentified "expert" was clearly Professor Lyubomir Shindarov; indeed, it could not have been any one else, since he is apparently the only person authorized by the regime to speak officially on AIDS and is known to have given a television interview on March 14 of this year.

Ivanov said that the claim that all blood donors in Sofia were being tested for AIDS was untrue, since the number said to have been tested was smaller than the number of donors. He went on to question the competence of medical practices that had infected seven hemophiliacs.

Shindarov claimed during the Trud interview that 59 AIDS testing laboratories had been set up throughout the country. Ivanov pointed to the "suspicious contradiction," however, that a day earlier an agency of the Ministry of Public Health had said that these laboratories "would be set up in the near future."

Ivanov's article said that such suspicious contradictions had fueled widespread rumors, general mistrust in official statements, and widespread panic about AIDS. The number of blood donors had dropped considerably; and dentists were not prepared against the disease and were generally lacking instruments, masks, gloves, medicines, sterilizing machines, and so forth. Until mid-June no one had bothered to instruct dentists, students, and other dental personnel about AIDS. The same was also true of obstetric hospitals. There was said to be a particularly high risk of contamination during illegal abortions. Several of the articles disclosed an appalling fact bordering on criminal negligence: the shortage of sterilizing machines, disposable syringes, and, above all, low professional standards had caused a great number of Bulgarians to be infected with hepatitis B.

Ivanov warned against the "politically slanted labeling" of those who spoke out on the issue of AIDS. He also warned against accusations of "pessimism" coming from "those who prefer to close their eyes to the truth .... Our society has the right to know the whole truth" about AIDS.

Another journalist, Petko Simeonov, blamed the public
health authorities for their attempts to "sterilize information on AIDS," which was part of a policy that had given birth to "rumors about the new disease and about the radiation" after Chernobyl. He concluded that "pretending to be innocent and surprised" was of little help to the public.

The Mistrust in Government Information. The government's monopoly of information has already generated widespread waves of panic. For example, the number of blood donors in Sofia's Student Town, which has a population of over 27,000 young people, has dropped drastically. A lack of information about AIDS compounding popular fears about infection is the apparent cause; and the Ministry of Public Health was responsible for this, Trud said, because it was slow to provide information. The same ignorance of the facts about AIDS has apparently made students reluctant to eat at the canteen in the Student Town and, to some degree, even to visit the students' medical facilities.

The dearth of information has bred alarm and even panic in Ruse and Pleven, where there are large contingents of foreign students. The only foreigner said to have died from AIDS in Bulgaria—he died last December—had had contacts with four Bulgarian women in these cities and their names and identities remain unknown to the medical authorities.

Ignorance and mistrust seem to be widespread among not only the general public but also medical personnel. Scores of individuals were interviewed by Trud and some of the answers are quite revealing:

Without a scientific explanation I cannot believe any of the statements, even if they come from the President of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences... I don't know what I should believe or what I should not; that is why I don't believe anyone.

Trud said that
dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Public Health's information policy is growing among medical personnel... Even leading specialists are given contradictory information, while the doctors know no more than their patients do about AIDS.

The Trud journalist Stefka Mateeva wrote that Shindarov was responsible for "the information vacuum" created by the Ministry of Public Health. A great number of medical experts refused to contribute articles on AIDS to the press, Mateeva said, because they could appear only with prior permission and after Shindarov had censored them. For instance, 300,000 copies of a leaflet on AIDS had not been distributed on the supposed grounds that "a non-Bulgarian word was used." No lectures, no posters, no literature, nothing was available, Mateeva said. The only exception was the US television documentary Beyond Fear, which
had been shown several times on Bulgarian Television as well as to various public groups.

Mateeva said that the so-called "interbranch group for the struggle against AIDS," which was headed by Shindarov and had held only two meetings (on March 31 and on June 17), was unable to cope with the problem. Mateeva did, however, have a few words of praise for the the Defense Ministry for its competent education campaign among youth in the army.

High-risk groups and "socialist legality" were discussed by high-ranking officials from the Ministry for Internal Affairs and a legal expert. Their statements indirectly refuted Shindarov's allegation that only the health agencies were engaged in tracing the contacts of those infected with AIDS. Colonel Hristo Velichkov, head of the Criminal Department at the People's Militia Directorate, said that his office had prepared lists of names of those assumed to belong to some of the high-risk groups and had given them to the Ministry of Public Health. Velichkov made the highly unusual admission that "the number of homosexuals, prostitutes, and drug addicts must be in thousands and is constantly growing" and that "homosexuality, prostitution, and drug addiction are spreading more and more among minors and the young." Until then, the regime's media had invariably claimed that there were only "isolated cases" of these three groups in Bulgaria. Even a recent article on drug abuse, which also dealt with the problem among children and youth, the Ministry for Internal Affairs presented the problem in somewhat vague terms, which contradicted the Colonel's revelations. Velichkov refused, however, to give specific figures, saying that "there are subjects in our judicial statistics that for various reasons cannot yet be made public in full."

Colonel Velichkov and Zhivko Nikolov, head of the Department of Prisons at the Ministry of the Interior, failed to see the social and medical aspects of the connection between AIDS and the three aforementioned high-risk groups, viewing it solely as a criminal matter. It is perhaps this attitude that made Trud warn against turning the entire anti-AIDS campaign into "a witch hunt."

Todor Todorov, a lecturer on International Law at Sofia University, commented on the latest amendments of legislation providing for the quarantine and expulsion of infected foreigners; but he rejected the idea of introducing AIDS tests for foreign tourists, saying that "there are no such measures anywhere in the world, and I do not see why we should be the pioneers."

Trud's recommendations were succinct and to the point:

The "interbranch group" must speed up its activities and should be put under the political and efficient management "on the highest possible level."
A thorough control is essential over donors of blood, sperm, and mother's milk.

The importing of medical instruments, disposable syringes, and diagnostic equipment, as well as the setting up of telephone and consultation services, must be accelerated.

Research groups should be established to deal with the medical, psychological, moral, legal, social, and other aspects of AIDS.

The monopoly of information must be eliminated in order to calm the public and restore trust in the medical system.

Trud urged its readers

To be sexually monogamous.

To demand absolutely hygienic and sterile conditions when undergoing medical tests.

To support actively and steadfastly public organizations in the anti-AIDS campaign.

To write letters to the editor on all AIDS-related issues, with the promise that Trud would supply competent answers.

Conclusion. In the Bulgarian context, Trud's outspoken words were an act of great civic courage. The paper did not shy away from identifying a serious flaw in the nation's health service, a service that is stifled by absurd bureaucracy. Trud recommended a calm and efficient approach to the problem of AIDS, saying that it was necessary to make up for lost time. It warned against arbitrary interpretations of the law that might lead to witch hunts against those infected with the AIDS virus. A mishandling of the matter could lead to irreparable damage with unforeseeable consequences, the paper said.

One can only hope that the authorities will not resort to "politically slanted labels" with which to dismiss Trud's praiseworthy initiative.

G. S.

1 See Bulgarian Situation Report/3, Radio Free Europe Research, 20 May 1987, item 8 and all references mentioned therein.

2 Trud, 1 July 1987, p. 1.

3 Cf., Darzhaven Vestnik, no. 17, 3 March 1987.

4 AP (Sofia), 4 July 1987.

5 Anteni, no. 26, 1 July 1987.

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