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SITUATION REPORT

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1. Artist from Sofia Interviewed by Polish Independent Journal

Summary: A Bulgarian has been interviewed for the first time by the Polish independent press. The Bulgarian Politburo, the Committee for the Defense of Ruse, and the minorities issue were some of the subjects discussed.

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The most recent issue of the Polish independent journal Oboz [The Camp], which specializes in covering developments in other East European countries, has published an interview that it conducted in the spring of 1988 with an unnamed Bulgarian artist from Sofia. The interview, entitled "Bulgarian-Style Perestroika," contained information and comments on the rift within the Bulgarian Politburo over the issue of the Independent Committee for the Defense of Ruse; the problem of minorities and emigration; the movement for independent activities; "blank spots" in Bulgarian history; and attitudes toward Mikhail Gorbachev's policies.

It would appear that the interview took place in Poland, and that the artist was sympathetic to the aims of the independent Committee for the Defense of Ruse. The circumstances of his leaving Bulgaria were not given. Some of his statements, particularly those about the Bulgarian Central Committee, contained new information; but most of his comments only confirmed Western opinion on recent developments in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria in the Polish Independent Press. Prior to this interview there had been minimal coverage of Bulgaria in the Polish independent press; an editorial article written in 1988 in Nowa Koalicja [New Coalition], which had analyzed the situation in the East-bloc countries, explained that it was unable to present an extended report on Bulgaria because it lacked sufficient information "and not because we consider Bulgaria to be any less valuable an ally of ours."

A short item in the Cracow youth publication Promienisci reported on the expulsion of the human rights activist Eduard Genov from Bulgaria in October 1988 and speculated that four other activists from the Independent Association for the Defense of Human Rights would also be expelled. The article claimed that Bulgaria had about 1,000 political prisoners, including "several hundred Turks who are opposed to forced assimilation."

Three short items that appeared in 1985 and early 1986 had mentioned the energy crisis in Bulgaria. A more detailed article written in 1986 described the forcible assimilation of Turks in the context of similarly repressive policies against minorities in Romania, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Albania.
Comments on the Bulgarian Leadership. The latest comment on Bulgaria appeared in the Warsaw Solidarity weekly Przegląd Wiadomości Agencyjnych [Press Agency Survey], which commented on the futile attempts at reform: "the young apparatchiks who had viewed perestroika as a chance to remove senile geriatrics from power overestimated their own strength." The article claimed that

Their representative, Chudomir Aleksandrov, popularly known as the "Bulgarian Gorbachev" and [at one time] almost certainly the successor to Zhivkov, was not only removed from the Politburo but was also thrown out of the Central Committee for "maliciously criticizing the leadership." All those who have criticized the slow pace of reforms have met a similar fate.

The article noted that the prominent artist Svetlin Rusev was also purged from the BCP Central Committee and added that

even worse treatment was meted out to Sonya Bakish Todorova for participating in the May demonstration [against environmental pollution in Ruse]: as punishment, she was purged from the party in July; and Zhivkov did not even spare her husband Stanko Todorov, who was his oldest associate, who later lost his position in the Politburo. [A later text from Oboz suggests that, in fact, Todorov, resigned of his own volition.] No wonder, then, that Bulgarian perestroika has returned to a familiar course.

Further comments on the Bulgarian leadership were made in the interview in Oboz: commenting on the administrative reform carried out in 1987, the artist claimed that "according to confidential sources, 54,000 apparatchiks who had hoped for promotion were deceived. They were not promoted." Moreover, he said, the administrative changes had brought chaos to the country:

Total anarchy ensued. For six months the country was without an administration. For a centralized economy, such a reform is [like] an earthquake. This year [1988], we are already suffering from its consequences.

Perestroika had, however, created a new situation: "Members of the apparatus now have a more revolutionary outlook, since any change increases their chances for advancement." This was illustrated by increased polarization within the Politburo: the Bulgarian claimed that a split had taken place during the Politburo's debate over the Committee for the Defense of Ruse:

Todor Zhivkov, Grisha Filipov, and Milko Balev demanded that all members of the Founding Committee be expelled from the CP and dismissed from their place of employment. They were opposed by the Ministers of Internal Affairs and of National Defense. [At that time, Dimitar Stoyanov and
Dobri Dzurov, respectively.] This did not happen by chance. These are the ministries that are most closely connected to Moscow. 'This lack of unanimity in the Politburo is significant. Many people became frightened, of course; but at the same time, [as recently as] three years ago the matters that were raised and the facts that were brought to light during the meetings held to discuss [Zhivkov's] statements would have warranted dismissal from the CP for whoever had uttered them. This did not happen. That is also significant.

"Blank Spots" in Bulgarian History. The Bulgarian artist considered the question of "blank spots" in light of the new openness of the Soviet press. He noted that the most interesting items from the Soviet press had been immediately translated and that as a result, papers like Literaturen Front, "which nobody used to read before, disappeared from kiosks by 8:00 A.M." This openness ceased with the resignation of the editor of Literaturen Front. The artist attributed the restriction of information from the USSR to the fact that "the opening of the Soviet archives would have resulted in revelations about the history of the BCP."

Examples of these "blank spots" included Georgi Dimitrov's performance at the Leipzig trial in 1933 and his servility toward Stalin ("the lion of the Leipzig trial behaved like an angora cat toward Stalin"); the mass deportations to prison camps ordered by Vasil Kolarov; the Comintern's influence on the September 1923 uprising; and how Dimitrov and Kolarov "had fled to exile in Vienna from where they encouraged their compatriots not to give up hope" in contrast to people like Petko Enev and Hristo Mihaylov, who had led their people to safety and had then surrendered "taking all the blame themselves." The Bulgarian artist concluded that "if we were to reprint the Soviet press in its entirety, we would immediately have to give up many myths."

The Independent Committee for the Defense of Ruse. "It all started with the appeal by the Artists' Union published in the weekly Narodna Kultura": as the Committee for the Defense of Ruse began to extend its activities, "the reaction of Zhivkov and the Politburo was drastic. It surpassed all expectations." Members of the founding committee were summoned to the Politburo for talks, "and it is said that there was a considerable feeling of fear among those in the upper echelons." The artist claimed that three founding committee members--the writer Georgi Mishev, the young philosopher Hristo Smolenov, and the journalist Sonya Bakish Todorova--had been expelled from the BCP; Todorova's husband, Stanko Todorov, reportedly tendered his resignation as Chairman of the National Assembly "as a sign of protest." It was apparently not accepted.

The security forces increased their vigilance after the establishment of the organization, and a decree was passed to encourage informers (the decree has not been published in
Darzhaven Vestnik, the weekly that normally carries the details of new legislation; the Bulgarian wondered "how the Minister felt when the USSR passed a law toward the end of last year against informing." He also said that a list had been circulated of some 12 committee members who were prohibited from appearing in public or on television and radio. The list included Svetlin Rusev, Neshka Robeva, and Hristo Goranov.

Writers and Artists. When asked to describe the Writers' Union's reaction to the repression of the Committee for the Defense of Ruse, the Bulgarian noted that

The Politburo replied by exerting pressure from below and repression from above. Zhivkov prepared statements that had to be read out and discussed at the meetings of all CP organizations at universities and artists' unions in the presence of a secretary or member of the Politburo. So far as I know, the meeting that took place in the Writers' Union was the calmest of all.

Films on ecology could no longer be shown in cinemas, and journalists had reportedly been forbidden from publishing data on environmental pollution in Sofia. The only gesture of support to date had been an exhibition organized by artists to support the Committee for the Defense of Ruse.

Ethnic Minorities. In the interview, the artist said that Todor Zhivkov's policy toward the minorities was the result of "monarchical fanaticism" and his desire to be remembered by posterity as "the man who 'baptized' the Turks." The consequences of this policy were incalculable. The Turks themselves, he said, had "so far shown passive resistance. About 350 villages from the Haskovo region refused to take part in this year's local government elections. Quite simply, nobody turned up to vote." He said that there were also other forms of protest but did not elaborate. He added that since most Turks were prosperous they were not prepared to emigrate; the majority of those who had emigrated found conditions difficult: "some even want to return to Bulgaria, but the authorities do not allow this."

The Gypsies' situation was different: they were reportedly uninterested in politics and not affected "by the schizophrenic habit of using one language at home and another outside." They did, however, object to the fact that they were prohibited from playing oriental music during weddings: "this may be funny, but it is true."

International Affairs. Official relations between Bulgaria and Romania were described as "extremely cordial." It should be noted, however, that the interview was given in early 1988 and that the situation has since changed. The artist claimed that the main source of information on events in other East bloc countries and the USSR was Soviet television, which had supplied
most of the information on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Commenting on the strikes in Poland, he noted that "People usually want to see the economic consequences of strikes; the political factor does not interest them. That is why they think that Walesa suffered a defeat."

Toward Pluralism. The interview concluded with an assessment of current changes:

There is no doubt that we are moving toward pluralism. Years ago, this concept was derided. Today it is no longer censored. Even Zhivkov is trying to use it, qualifying it by the adjective "socialist." The only question is how we are to attain this pluralism.

Any changes that took place should be directed primarily "toward the restoration of moral values, which have sunk to an unimaginably low level."

Finally, the artist was asked whether his views differed from those of his compatriots. His answer was a further indication of the hope that appeared to be spreading through parts of Bulgarian society:

It is easy to fall into the delusion that only my friends and I think like this; the lack of open political life and of freedom of expression serve to strengthen this impression. That is why I doubt that I am the only one. Widespread support for the Committee for the Defense of Ruse proves that we are not alone; there are many of us, except that we are not yet together.

Conclusion. The political significance of the interview with the Bulgarian artist should not be overestimated. Although Oboz is generally considered to have high academic standards and is one of the few sources of information available in Poland on developments in other East-bloc countries, it does not appear to be associated with the mainstream of the opposition movement, and its readership is probably limited to intellectuals and specialists.

This was the first time that detailed information on Bulgaria, some of it previously unknown even in the West, was published by Poland's independent press. The emergence of a Bulgarian dissident movement seems to be the main reason for publishing the interview, which testifies to the increasing growth in awareness and communications between opposition activists throughout Eastern Europe.

Anna Pomian
2 No. 3 (114), 3 November 1988.


5 No. 16, 1989. Oboz first appeared in September 1981 during Solidarity's legal existence. The editorial preface to the first issue stated that the journal intended to "inform the Polish reader of the views held by members and leaders of the democratic opposition in [other] communist countries and of the history, traditions, and culture of those nations." The publication of such information was intended to promote the "establishment of good-neighborly relations with other countries in the communist bloc."
2. Pluralism, Bulgarian Style

Summary: Professing political pluralism, the BCP has chosen the Bulgarian Agrarian Union (BAU) to demonstrate that a tradition of pluralism exists in Bulgaria. The history and present position of the BAU, however, which has no policy of its own, make it totally unsuitable as an example. Some new organizations have been or are expected to be authorized, but with the understanding that they must be based on "socialist principles." The truly independent groups are meanwhile still banned and persecuted. A new committee is being created on the national, regional, and municipal levels to exercise strict control over the organizations that allegedly represent pluralism.

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At his meeting with selected members of the intelligentsia on February 20, BCP party and state leader Todor Zhivkov referred to the Bulgarian Agrarian Union (BAU) as an example of pluralism and a model of what "the new type of democracy" would look like in the "civil society of a socialist type" that he has set as the goal of political reform." On March 31 the BCP Politburo and the BAU Standing Committee held a meeting at which they elaborated on this alleged model of political pluralism. The official report on the meeting, however, did little more than reinforce the well-worn image of the BAU as an organization that is totally unsuitable as an example of pluralism, because of its complete subordination to—and identification with—the BCP and its lack of political independence or a program of its own.

The holding of a meeting of these two very small top bodies—the BCP Politburo has 10 members and 6 candidate members, while the BAU is headed by 4 secretaries and has a Standing Committee of 7—seems to be another example of the party leadership's apparent reluctance in the past few months to convene a CC plenum or face any other larger forum. The meeting was addressed by the two bodies' top leaders, Zhivkov and Petar Tanchev; and the official report quoted only what "they" said, implying that Tanchev was in full agreement with Zhivkov.

The Role of the BAU. In their statement, the two leaders briefly examined the two organizations' past cooperation, which was said to have increased after the April 1956 plenum of the BCP CC. Nowhere, not even in the context of the union's alleged pluralism, was the BAU referred to as a party.

Indeed, the present BAU is simply a rump of what in the first half of this century was the largest political party in
Bulgaria. The BAU, which was represented in the first post-1944 parliament as the mainstay of the opposition to the communist-dominated Fatherland Front government, disappeared in 1947 after its leader, Nikola Petkov, had been executed following a show trial and many of its other leaders had been jailed. A faction of the BAU that had already been cooperating with the BCP claimed to be the legitimate heir and continuation of the great party of the 1920s. As early as 1948 this faction recognized the BCP's leading role and adopted its program on the "building of socialism." Since then, it has stuck to this role of complete subordination, making repeated statements to this effect and willingly carrying out the two main tasks assigned to it: to promote "the monolithic unity of the nation around the BCP" among the rural population and to maintain contacts with agrarian, centrist, and leftist parties in the West, promoting the image of Bulgaria as a democratic state that is not ruled by a single party.

The very strict framework prescribed for the BAU in its role and activities is illustrated by the fact that its membership is constantly kept at 120,000 and its representation in the National Assembly is fixed at 100, or 25%, of the deputies. During the latest elections for local administrative bodies in February 1988, when multiple candidacies were allowed for the first time, there was no known case of a BAU member having stood for election against a BCP member.

Present Tasks of the BAU. The statement on the March 31 meeting, commenting briefly on topical issues of the day, stressed the role to be played by the BAU in the current move toward perestroika. The spheres of activity mentioned included economic reform, agrarian policy and the development of rural areas, environmental policy, and local administration. As a major sphere of joint BCP-BAU activities the statement cited the "further cohesion of the Bulgarian socialist nation" and added a demand for "direct, concrete, and efficient work" for the "strengthening of the Bulgarian socialist national consciousness." This last reference is an indirect admission that the forced assimilation of the Turkish ethnic minority, which began in 1984, is still considered to be a major unsolved problem and that the BCP is facing major difficulties in getting ordinary Bulgarians to support and participate in the implementation of the policy.

Pluralism. The main subject of the joint session, however, was the professed policy of pluralism, a field in which the regime is still far from having gained credibility. The official statement introduced this issue with the unconvincing allegation that a tradition of political pluralism already existed based on the unity of action (which, logically, means lack of pluralism) between the BCP and the BAU. This tradition, according to the statement, was now acquiring a new quality that was expressed in the fact that the existing bodies in
Bulgaria—the BCP, the BAU, and the mass organizations—were to be restructured to achieve a greater measure of differentiation, to the extent that they would adopt separate approaches and tactics in their respective spheres and introduce greater structural and organizational idiosyncrasies. Their politics, however, would continue to be identical and in accordance with "the principles of socialism."

A similar, highly tendentious, and unconvincing reference to the existence of the BAU as an expression of political pluralism can be found in Zhivkov's report to intellectuals on February 20. He also spoke of policies that were allegedly different but based on the "principles of socialism." It was in this context that Zhivkov spoke of the various truly independent organizations and associations that had been formed in late 1988 and early 1989, attacking those that had failed to request, or obtain, formal registration.8 (In fact, nearly all the newly-founded independent associations have sought official registration.) The aim is obvious: in an attempt at a compromise, under the pressure of public opinion both in the country and abroad, the regime has opted for allowing a number of selected new public organizations to be created. They must, however, be based on "socialist principles" and will be kept under strict control. All truly independent organizations continue to be banned and their members are harassed and persecuted; some have even been expelled from the country.

Committee To Be Set Up. At his meeting with intellectuals, Zhivkov had announced that the creation of a committee under the National Council of the Fatherland Front was being considered. It would be "a new type of political structure set up on a coalition basis." The BCP, the BAU, public organizations, the religious communities, "and others" would be represented in the new body. At the joint meeting on March 31, there were demands that the committee be set up soon. It was described as a "committee of political and public organizations and movements." Its backbone would be the BCP and the BAU, while the public organizations and movements, religious communities, and independent associations would find in it "a place for the realization of their duty to the nation." In addition to the nationwide committee, such committees would also be set up on the regional and municipal levels.

Conclusion. Until now most of the existing, relatively few public organizations had been attached to, and supervised by, the National Council of the Fatherland Front. At first glance, setting up a separate committee under it does not make much sense. Obviously, however, the purpose is to create an apparatus for closer control of all organizations at all levels. The goal described in the joint statement, that it would "raise to a new level the moral and political unity of all public forces and will develop and enrich socialist pluralism," is ambiguous. In fact, like the scheme itself, the phrase implies that the
professed "socialist pluralism" is at great risk of losing most of its pluralistic elements and being transformed into a gray mass of uniformity.

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1  See Bulgarian Situation Report/2, Radio Free Europe Research, 9 March 1989, item 1.

2  For details on the BAU, see ibid., no. 6, 7 July 1986, item 4.

3  See ibid., no. 2, 9 March 1989, item 3.
3. Journalists and the Government's Information Policy

Summary: The Eighth Congress of the Union of Bulgarian Journalists and the congresses of the other creative unions held in the last week of February and first half of March took place in an atmosphere of ferment among Bulgarian intellectuals. The proceedings of the journalists' congress seem to have been much more democratic than in the past, but the information provided by the media on the event was limited and gave only a few examples of increased openness.

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The Bulgarian government's policy on providing information through the media has shown signs of a deepening dilemma in the last year or so. The regime is well aware that under present conditions, particularly in the face of competition from a lively Soviet press, a degree of glasnost' has become vital in the Bulgarian media. The regime fluctuates, however, between decisions to grant more information, improve the quality of the press, and so forth, while setting limits to the freedom of publication out of a concern not to weaken party control.

The main accent of the regime's policy has recently been on economic restructuring, because of the urgent need to bring about an improvement in the poor state of the national economy and the standard of living. Meanwhile, a clearly increasing ferment among the intellectuals and other strata of the population, with open calls for more democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights, has characterized the political situation in the country, especially during the last few months of 1988 and the beginning of 1989. To deal with this state of things, Todor Zhivkov held a two-day meeting with selected representatives of the intelligentsia on February 20 and 21, at which he "suggested" that the creative unions go ahead with their repeatedly postponed congresses, so that a general "congress of culture" could be held by the end of March."

Against this political background and complying with Zhivkov's "suggestion," all creative unions hurried to hold their congresses, almost all of which took place in the second week of March. The incomplete coverage by the media gave the impression that some of these gatherings had proceeded in more or less the usual staled and formal way, while others were more strongly influenced by the trend toward open and frank discussion and the "pluralism and clash of opinions" that the regime professes to support. The most genuinely open exchanges of opinion seem to have taken place at the congress of the Union of Bulgarian Writers from March 9 and 10² and also the Union of Bulgarian Journalists' congress, whose members are the most directly involved in the policy of glasnost'.
Coverage of the Journalists' Congress. The coverage in the media of the proceedings at the various congresses was itself some measure of the extent of openness. For some time now most papers have shown increased reliance on their own reporters rather than on the colorless and formal information issued by BTA, and the fact was apparent in the coverage of such congresses as the Union of Bulgarian Journalists' (UBJ). Disappointingly, however, the most detailed report, in the UBJ's own weekly, Pogled, was very uninformative and so were the reports in several other dailies that did not provide much more than a summary of the main speech by the union's outgoing Chairman, Boyan Traykov. More colorful and revealing were the reports by the journalists Valeri Todorov and Aleksandar Nachev who covered the congress for Radio Sofia and the daily Otechestven Front, respectively.

The Congress Proceedings. The 4,860 members of the UBJ were represented by 628 delegates. After the introductory speech by Chairman Boyan Traykov a lively debate seems to have followed, especially on the second day. As revealed in an interview by the new Chairman, Lalyo Dimitrov, as many as 84 people had asked to speak and as many as 50 had taken the floor before a decision was taken to end the discussion because the scheduled time had been far exceeded. It was midnight before the congress could end. The speeches included several routine ones by people who did not have anything useful to say, or, according to Aleksandar Nachev in Otechestven Front, "speeches that did not make any impression." Both Valeri Todorov of Radio Sofia and the radio's correspondent in Moscow Borislav Dzhamdzhiev (the latter during an interview with Pogled) said that there had been "impatient hand clapping, urging the speakers to leave the floor." Dzhamdzhiev also complained that too many of the speakers had been "from editors in chief upward," and this had not benefited the discussion. Valeri Todorov mentioned "vacated seats," implying that some delegates might have left the congress hall in protest.

The congress was attended by Politburo members and CC Secretaries Yordan Yotov and Milko Balev and by Politburo candidate member and Minister of the Economy and Planning Stoyan Ovcharov. Ovcharov, who urged the congress to promote more committed reporting on his economic reforms, also had to take the floor to answer questions addressed to him on such issues as the financing of the creative unions and social security provisions for their members. The chairman of the Union's Control Council, who presented a report about its financial situation, had to give an additional account on the second day, apparently because the delegates had found some gaps or inaccuracies in it.

The very brief quotations from the speeches at the congress suggest that more attention was paid to the social and professional problems of journalists than to the political aspects of their work. The fate of staff on publications that
had to be closed down was repeatedly mentioned. (The BCP Politburo's resolution of 5 August 1988 on the restructuring of the press had urged that journals with very low readerships or that duplicated the work of others be closed down for financial reasons and to save paper and newsprint.)

Results of the Congress. One major issue that appears to have been the subject of genuine discussion was the party's intention to restructure the creative unions into creative-professional unions, a design aimed at bringing into them elements of a trade union character. The congress did approve, as scheduled, new statutes for the UBJ (in contrast to the congresses of the Writers' and Film Workers' Unions, which put off approval of their new bylaws); but the approved statutes appear to have been something of a compromise, for the UBJ also passed a resolution calling upon the new administrative council to continue discussions of the union's tasks, character, and activities and to prepare a document on the basic guidelines for its restructuring. It will be recalled that Todor Zhivkov at his recent meeting with intellectuals suggested that the different union congresses be held, without accelerating the adoption of the relevant "concepts."7

The election of the new administrative council of the UBJ seems to have been the subject of considerable discussion. The candidacies had been discussed "in an atmosphere of full democracy," said Pogled, and the elections had been carried out through secret balloting. Suggestions that the council be numerically reduced were only partly implemented. The new body numbers 100, while the old one had 713 members; it had, however, also 41 candidate members, a category that now does not exist. The new list is interesting because of its heterogeneity. It includes a very large number of old and very old journalists who have been on the board for years on end, but not all of them are necessarily very conservative. Surprisingly, two of the journalists sanctioned last year, Damyan Obreshkov and Sonya Bakish Todorova, were re-elected.8 Among the newcomers are some very outspoken and reform-minded names, such as Velislava Dareva, from Plovdiv.

The New Chairman. The new administrative council elected only a chairman and no deputy chairmen and secretaries, an approach followed by the other creative unions as well. Boyan Traykov, the 57-year-old director general of BTA who had been Chairman of the UBJ only since October 1986, was not re-elected and is not even a member of the new administrative council. The fact that he made the main speech, however, and was thanked for his work by his successor does not point to any real disfavor. Possibly, he simply had to give way to Lalyo Dimitrov (aged 60) as the party's choice for this post. Dimitrov is known to have links with both State Security and the Military Intelligence, which is unusual, and to be closely connected with the increasingly strong man in the BCP, Politburo member and CC Secretary Dimitar Stoyanov, who until recently was Minister of
the Interior. Dimitrov's career has been in the media but even more in the apparatus of the BCP CC; and he is known as a flexible man, who can adapt to changing circumstances and policies.

Conclusion. There can be no doubt that, compared with earlier congresses (its previous one was in December 1986), the latest congress of the UBJ was marked by relatively open discussion and the expression of diverse opinions. Very little of the proceedings, however, became known to the general public, which is proof that glasnost' still has its limits. More information can be expected in the union's monthly, Bulgarski Zhurnalist, which is not a publication that will receive wide publicity.

The new leadership of the UBJ and rank-and-file journalists will still have to face a wide range of fundamental problems regarding their work. Their solution, however, is beyond the reach of the union as a creative, professional organization and depends entirely on the party information policy, which has been rather inconsistent recently and can be expected to undergo still more changes without necessarily showing a visible trend toward either increased or reduced democratization.

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2 See item 4, below.

3 Pogled no. 11, 13 March 1989.

4 Some sources claimed a membership of 6,000 (for example, BTA, 9 March 1989).


6 Radio Sofia, 7 March 1989; Otechestven Front, 8 March 1989; and Pogled, no. 11, 13 March 1989.

7 Bulgarian SR/2, RFER, 9 March 1989, item 1.

8 Ibid., no. 5, 27 May 1988, item 1.
4. Reformist Ferment in the Writers' Union

Summary: Despite strenuous efforts by the Bulgarian media to disguise what happened at the Sixth Writers' Union Congress, held on March 9 and 10, it has become clear that the debates were outspoken and the union's leadership came in for strong criticism, especially over its failure to campaign for glasnost'. Chairman Lyubomir Levchev was replaced by a compromise candidate, Pavel Matev; and a significant number of members and supporters of the independent Discussion Club for the Support of Glasnost' and Perestroika were elected to the governing body. The congress also refused to approve the new statutes submitted by a special commission.

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The Sixth Congress of the Bulgarian Writers' Union, held in Sofia on March 9 and 10, was one of 11 union congresses that followed Todor Zhivkov's speech to "representatives of the intelligentsia" on February 20.1 Its main aims, like those of the other congresses in late February and early March, appeared to be to rally support among writers for the official program of perestroika (known as the July Concept) and to curb the growth of independent and dissident political activity. The congress was also intended to expedite the restructuring of the union along less rigidly centralized lines and to further preparations for a general Congress of Culture. This cultural congress was provisionally scheduled for the end of March and was to have dealt with reforming the entire "intellectual sphere," an issue that had been deferred at the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee plenum of July 1988 partly because of disagreement in the top party leadership over the extent of liberalization that should be tolerated in Bulgaria. (At the time of writing, the Congress of Culture had apparently been postponed without any new date being announced.)

The Writers' Union congress did not seem to succeed in any of its objectives. The scant and heavily censored reports that appeared in the Bulgarian press and eyewitness accounts that were telephoned to Radio Free Europe (RFE) agreed that the two-day debate had been extremely animated and featured extensive criticism of official policy, particularly on such sensitive issues as glasnost' in the media and "blank spots" in postwar history. Far from issuing a warning to supporters of independent groups, the congress was unable to prevent a number of members and supporters of the Discussion Club for the Support of Perestroika and Glasnost' from speaking and being elected to the union's governing body. The congress rejected the draft statutes that had been submitted for ratification but voted that the special commission that had prepared them should revise its proposal for reconsideration at a future conference. The
writers' congress also failed to elect delegates to the impending Congress of Culture or to discuss the approach to be taken at that crucial meeting.

The Lack of Glasnost'. A serious analysis of the congress's proceedings is extremely difficult in light of the stunning lack of openness in the Bulgarian media. Radio Sofia carried a number of reports on both days' discussions but confined itself to a bland resume of outgoing Chairman Lyubomir Levchev's report and the most cursory synopses of the ensuing debates. The BCP daily Rabotnichesko Delo, the Agrarian Union daily Zemedelsko Zname, and the Writers' Union weekly Literaturen Front also concentrated on Levchev's statement (Literaturen Front printed the text in full). The party daily noted that the speeches from the floor had been lively, but it gave almost no indication of their content. Zemedelsko Zname reported that the topics discussed at the congress had included glasnost' in the media, the "democratization" of the union, writers' pensions and welfare benefits, and the draft statutes; but the newspaper avoided giving details and made no attribution of opinions.

Literaturen Front, as the union's own publication, might have been expected to carry the fullest reports; but since Lilyana Stefanova, a staunch supporter of the regime, assumed its editorship in July 1988, the weekly has tightened its censorship and emerged as a blatant opponent of glasnost'. Literaturen Front did, of course, devote most of its March 16 issue to the congress; but its summary of delegates' contributions studiously avoided an exact account of what had been said and failed to identify the speakers on particular topics. The newspaper's report on the debate about the new statutes was similarly uninformative; it said that "a number of recommendations" had been made but did not indicate what they were.

RFE was told by one of its contacts in Sofia that Stefanova had originally pledged to publish the full texts of all the congress speeches in a special issue of Literaturen Front. When the congress turned out to be livelier and more critical than the authorities had anticipated, she said that there was too little space in the weekly to go ahead with the plan and that only resumes could be printed. As a compromise, however, she agreed that the speakers could prepare the summaries themselves. For reasons that RFE has been unable to ascertain, even this small concession to glasnost' was quickly rescinded. After the March 16 issue of Literaturen Front had failed to publish anything more than Levchev's address and a muddled synopsis of the rest of the proceedings, Stefanova told her contributors that she had decided to prepare a special brochure on the congress with lengthier accounts of individual speeches. RFE's contacts assumed that the brochure would have a small print run and might only be sent to the weekly's subscribers. Meanwhile it had still not appeared by the time of writing, a full month after the congress.
The New Governing Body. What RFE has been able to discover about the election procedures at the congress and the composition of the union's new governing body indicates the true depth of reformist ferment among Bulgarian writers. As Zemedelsko Zname reported, the three main proposals by Slav H. Karaslavov, the Chairman of the Commission on Amending the Statutes, were accepted without opposition. These introduced a system of limited tenure for the post of chairman, abolished the post of deputy chairman, and drastically reduced the size of the governing body. What the daily failed to report—and Literaturen Front mentioned only in passing so that it would all but escape notice—was that the floor of the congress refused to accept the list of candidates for the governing body that the outgoing leadership put forward and insisted on a fresh list of 50 names, including many critics of the regime and members of the independent Discussion Club for the Support of Glasnost' and Perestroika. The session at which the congress voted on the list was presided over by Blaga Dimitrova, one of the most prominent members of the discussion club, after she had declined to run for election to the governing body.

RFE learned that the five candidates who received the most votes were the playwright Kolyo Georgiev, who is also the director of the Sofia Theater, one of the capital's most experimental theaters; Ivaylo Petrov, the author of the acclaimed novel Hayka za Valtsi [A Wolf Hunt], which passionately opposes the Bulgarian collectivization of agriculture; the popular novelist and poet Yordan Radichkov, who has been criticized several times by the party establishment; the satirical playwright Ivan Radoev, the author of the hugely popular Chovekoyadkata [The Cannibal Woman] and Sam [A Dream], who is another favored target of conformist critics; and the former Editor in Chief of the weekly Narodna Kultura, Stefan Prodev, who was dismissed in November 1988 for supporting glasnost' and reprinting controversial historical and literary pieces from the Soviet press. The other controversial figures among the 41 writers elected to the new governing body included Georgi Mishev, the Chairman of the Committee for the Defense of Ruse; Toncho Zhechev, the author of Mitat za Odisey [The Myth of Odysseus], a book that was the focus of a hot dispute in the more liberal Literaturen Front under former Editor in Chief Evtim Evtimov in early 1987; and a leading member of the discussion club, Marko Ganchev. All of them finished among the 20 candidates with the most votes. It is interesting to note that outgoing Chairman Lyubomir Levchev finished only in 22nd place.

Among those who failed to win election were the proregime writers Orlin Orlinov, Atanas Nakovski, and Bogomil Raynov, who had all been members of the old governing body. Other regime figures, such as the poet Mladen Isaev and Literaturen Front Editor Liliyana Stefanova, withdrew when they saw the reformist complexion of the revised list of candidates. A third nominee who withdrew was BCP CC member Dimitar Metodiev, the author of
the verse novel Dimitrovsko Pleme [Dimitrov's Tribe] and the anthology Pesen za Rusya [A Song for Russia]. He was allegedly heard to say that the Writers' Union was going to be led by the correspondents of RFE editor Romina Usunoff.4

The failure of Nikolay Petev to win re-election was perhaps the most revealing. He had been denounced in an open letter signed by more than 40 union members and read to the congress by the writer Dimitar Korudzhiev. The letter alleged that Petev had been placed on the Writers' Union governing body under Levchev because of his connections with the military and the State Security and that he lacked "the necessary literary accomplishments to represent the union." (It is worth noting that Petev was not mentioned in the extremely exhaustive, three-volume Rechnik na Bulgarskata Literatura [Dictionary of Bulgarian Literature] published between 1976 and 1982.)

The New Union Chairman. The congress did not elect a secretary, a new post that will involve responsibility for the day-to-day running of the union. (RFE has heard that several writers were approached but declined to be nominated for the post. Subsequently, however, Petar Karaangov accepted.) It did, however, approve a compromise candidate, Pavel Matev, to succeed Levchev as the Writers' Union chairman. Matev, who is 64, has a decent reputation as a poet, with an inclination toward lyrical romanticism, and has published prolifically since his literary debut in 1951. After serving as Deputy Editor in Chief of Plamak and Editor in Chief of Septemvri, Bulgaria's two major literary journals, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Matev moved into the government and party administration, working as Chairman of the Committee on the Arts and Culture from 1966 to 1975 and as Head of the BCP CC Arts and Culture Department from 1975 to 1977. Since 1977 he has been chairman of the officially sponsored Committee for Bulgarians Abroad (originally the Slavonic Committee), which is particularly active among Bulgarian emigres in the West. He was made a candidate member of the BCP CC in 1971 and became a full member in 1988.

According to RFE's informants, Matev is considered to be significantly more liberal in his views than Levchev, who is widely regarded as a spokesman for the "conservative right" in the union. It is expected that Matev will use his influence within the CC apparatus to argue for a more tolerant approach toward critics of the regime and for greater freedom for publishing houses and newspaper editors.

A major factor in Levchev's failure to win re-election as union chairman was undoubtedly his opening speech to the congress, in which took an extremely orthodox line and was full of praise for Todor Zhivkov's leadership of Bulgaria. After repeating Zhivkov's own absurd claim that Bulgaria's perestroika had begun at the April 1956 BCP CC plenum, Levchev made a strong appeal for continuity, saying that "the real achievements of the April period [that is, the years since the April 1956 plenum]"
had to be defended "against compromise, tendentious
depreciation, demagogic interpretation, or appropriation by
other parties:" Levchev stressed that the ideals of socialism
remained valid and rejected any suggestion of a crisis in "the
literature of socialism." His defense of socialist realism as a
literary method rooted in "the idealism of those who sought to
synthesize the dialectic and materialism" can hardly have
impressed a congress that was evidently more interested in
hearing an espousal of glasnost.

Levchev also repeated Zhivkov’s claim that Western radio
stations were waging an "anti-Bulgarian campaign" by
broadcasting interviews with dissidents and independently minded
intellectuals. His ensuing appeal for "ideological and creative
unity" must have struck delegates as not merely anachronistic
but inconsistent in view of the fact that earlier in his speech
he had stated his support for the "pluralism of opinion."
Levchev renewed his appeal for unity at the end of the speech
after having voiced routine criticism of the overcentralization
and excessive bureaucracy of the union. He also admitted that
the organization had disregarded writers’ real material and
professional problems and that it was estranged from the
concerns of the ordinary reading public.

The Discussion. Even the unsatisfactory accounts published
by the central press conceded that during the congressional
debates speakers had frequently raised the subject of writers’
material problems, such as housing and pension arrangements and
the lack of jobs in the provinces. Apparently, some speakers
attacked the perquisites and favors that, they said, were used
to reward loyalists of the regime at the expense of writers of
merit. These included junkets, merit awards, official
recommendations, and extensive republishing of previously
published works. Criticism was also made of the state of
literary periodicals, literary criticism, and children’s
literature, as well as the adverse consequences of Bulgarian
literature’s relative isolation from the noncommunist world.
Speakers expressed strong criticism of writers’ reluctance to
address contemporary issues, which, they alleged, was leading to
"the readers’ declining confidence in the social mission of
literature."

Conclusion. At one point in its otherwise bland summary of
the proceedings, Literaturen Front came close to conveying the
real extent of the ferment among the Bulgarian intelligentsia.
Its summary of the second day’s debate mentioned that one
speaker had complained of the "tendency toward extremism" in
certain speeches and "the immoderation" of many statements about
the outgoing union leadership. Literaturen Front had to
concede, however, that there had been a great deal of justified
criticism of Levchev:
The work of the congress would have been made considerably easier if the incumbent leadership had presented the main strengths and weaknesses in its performance in a more modest and significantly more self-critical manner.\(^5\)

Stephen Ashley


2 Radio Sofia, 9 March 1989, 11:00 A.M., and 10 March 1989, 6:30 P.M.

3 *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 10 and 11 March 1989; *Zemedelsko Zname*, 10 March 1989; *Literaturen Front*, nos. 10, 11, and 12, 9, 16, and 23 March 1989, respectively.

4 In the past four months Romina Usunoff of RFE's Bulgarian Service has conducted many interviews with members of the Discussion Club for the Support of Glasnost' and Perestroika as well as with other critics of the current BCP leadership.

5 *Literaturen Front*, no. 11, 16 March 1989.
5. An Independent Committee on Religious Freedom Founded

Summary: Radio Free Europe recently heard about the founding of another independent association, a committee to campaign for religious freedom and toleration. Led by a relatively young group of priests and laymen, mainly from northeastern Bulgaria, it has set itself a number of ambitious aims and has applied with the local magistrate for official registration.

* * *

On March 17 Father Hristofor Sabev, a 42-year-old Orthodox priest from Veliko Tarnovo, told Radio Free Europe (RFE) that an independent committee on religious freedom had been founded in Bulgaria. The Committee for Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience, and Spiritual Values had, he said, applied for legal registration with the Veliko Tarnovo area court in accordance with the requirements for independent groups reiterated by Todor Zhivkov at his meeting with "representatives of the intelligentsia" in Sofia on February 20.

The Committee's Aims. The committee was formally established on March 9, the Feast of the 40 Holy Martyrs, a date that was deliberately selected in anticipation of a hostile response by the authorities. Its founding meeting, on the historic site of Trapezitsa Hill in Veliko Tarnovo (the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire from 1182 to 1393), was preceded by a blessing and a reading of the liturgy in honor of Saint Ivan Rilski, one of Bulgaria's greatest medieval Church leaders.

The committee adopted five main aims, which it set out at length in a founding document and in its statutes and more briefly in its appeal for registration. The three documents were read by Sabev in his interview with RFE on March 17. He stressed that the committee intended to be an independent, nonpolitical organization of clerics and lay people, representing the different religious faiths and denominations in Bulgaria (including Islam and Judaism). Its activities would, he said, be strictly in line with the prescriptions of the Bulgarian Constitution, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the Helsinki and Vienna CSCE final accords, as well as with the words and spirit of holy scripture.

The committee's first and most basic aim is to campaign for an end to the secular and political authorities' systematic interference in Church affairs and religious life. At present, the affairs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church are supervised by a subordinate committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which controls the Church's contacts with foreign Churches and governments and exerts enormous influence on the selection, training, and ordination of priests and the election of bishops and metropolitans.
In an interview with RFE on March 18, Father Blagoy Topuzliev, the human rights activist who was expelled from Bulgaria on March 11 and has now become the foreign representative of the committee on religious freedom, gave several examples of state interference that he considered intolerable. Article 15 of the Orthodox Church's constitution, he said, stipulated that several secular officials, such as the Secretary of the Fatherland Front and the President of the Academy of Sciences (who are of necessity atheists), had to participate in the election of the patriarch. He also criticized Article 12, which allows the secular authorities to punish and even defrock priests who offend the BCP and its allied organizations, and Article 40, which obliges the Church to preach loyalty toward the government.

**The Freedom of Conscience.** According to Sabev, the committee's second aim will be to promote freedom of conscience by protesting discrimination against believers in public and professional life and campaigning for the legalization of religious instruction for the young. The committee's statutes call for religious courses to be set up for Christians, Moslems, and Jews in every school and college and for religious youth groups to be granted legal status. It advocates establishing Sunday schools in every parish and seminaries in every bishopric. In his interview on RFE Father Topuzliev emphasized the need for proper religious education in Bulgaria, stressing that it was essential both for the individual's moral foundations and for understanding and appreciating the Christian cultural heritage of Europe.

**The committee's third aim is to campaign for freedom of religious information.** Its statutes call for the introduction of religious programs on Bulgarian radio and television and for the transmission of services on major holy days. They propose that the Bible be published in a mass edition and be made freely available to everyone and that religious publishing houses be allowed to operate without hindrance. At present, all religious publications must receive approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Bible, which was printed in 1982 for the first time since the communist takeover, is published in such small quantities that it is almost impossible to find even in the Holy Synod's bookstore in Sofia.

**Promoting Charitable Work.** As a more long-term objective, the committee has called for the full legalization of religious charitable work, which, it suggests, should take the form of running hospitals, hostels, shelters, and old people's homes. In his interview with RFE, Topuzliev regretted that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was far behind the Roman Catholic Church in such pastoral activities but stressed that it was essential for Bulgarian Christians to become involved in order to demonstrate the caring nature of their faith and challenge the materialism of the communist regime.
Promoting Religious Tolerance. The committee's fifth aim is to promote understanding and tolerance among the different religious faiths in Bulgaria. Topuzliev said that this meant that the committee would oppose the forcible assimilation of national minorities and defend the rights of Moslems to practice their religion freely. He lamented the fact that the number of functioning mosques in Bulgaria had been reduced from 1,400 in 1966 to 550 in 1988 and charged Grand Mufti Nedyo Gendzhev with being a State Security agent who had trained as a cleric on orders from the party.  

The Committee's Leadership. One of the striking features of the leadership of the Committee for Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience, and Spiritual Values is its relative youth. Its Chairman, Hristofo Sabev, who is a former atomic physicist, is 42 years old. Its Secretary is the 43-year-old Archdeacon Petar Kanev Petrov, from Shumen. Its Chief Inspector is 29-year-old Petar Georgiev Penkov, from Ovcha Mogila village in the Lovech region. Its Arbiter-Censor (responsible for promoting tolerance among the different faiths and denominations) is the 26-year-old Vasil Velkov Tsvetkov, from Plovdiv, who is currently in his fourth year at the Theological Academy; and its Representative on Church-State Relations is the 25-year-old Deacon Stiliyan Nikolov Nikolov, from Shumen, who is currently training as a priest at the Holy Seminary in Chepish. The other members of the leadership also include a representative of the older generation, the 71-year-old Dechka Petrova Trifonova, from Shumen, who is to lead the campaign for legalizing religious instruction of the young; Nadezhsa Yordanova Ilieva, from Veliko Tarnovo, who is to take up the issue of the freedom of religious information; and the 21-year-old Stefan Ivanov Hristov, who is to assume responsibility for religious youth groups. Father Blagoy Topuzliev is the committee's foreign representative.

Relations with the Authorities. As Sabev mentioned in his interview, Topuzliev has already been a victim of official repression on account of his membership in the Independent Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Bulgaria. He was subjected to an abusive personal attack in Rabotnichesko Delo on 19 January 1989; his son, who was studying at the Holy Seminary, was refused recognition of his examination grades; and finally, the family was expelled from Bulgaria on March 11 to Vienna, where they are now residing in a Catholic hostel.

Sabev was himself at the center of a storm in the Veliko Tarnovo eparchy in January over his reviving traditional Bulgarian Christian customs, organizing processions with icons, and holding religious education classes for children. RFE was told by Nadezhsa Ilieva that after he had organized a traditional throwing of the Cross on Jordan Day [Yordanovden], January 6, he was sent into forced internal exile in Chepish Monastery near Vratsa, some 300 kilometers from his parish. Father Sabev's parishioners responded by collecting over 1,000 signatures on a petition, and within a month he was allowed to return to Veliko Tarnovo. The religious freedom committee seems to have been founded very soon afterward.
The official Holy Synod responded quickly to the committee's implicit challenge to its leadership of the Church. At a meeting on March 28 the Synod requested that the judicial authorities refuse to register the committee on the grounds that it was "completely inconsistent with the canons and traditions of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, with the statutes of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and with the established ecclesiastical structure" in Bulgaria. The Synod also said that it would issue an order to all its clergy and congregations "not to yield to the false and deceitful words" of the independent religious rights activists. Subsequently, on April 4, Patriarch Maksim met with Todor Zhivkov, allegedly to discuss government reforms and the situation of the Church; but the two men also undoubtedly compared their reactions to the committee. Radio Sofia's report on the meeting omitted all mention of this issue, however, in order to focus on Maksim's support for the BCP's programs of perestroika and developing the "moral and patriotic unity of the Bulgarian nation."

RFE learned from Sabev on March 29 that, as he had predicted, the Veliko Tarnovo area court had rejected the independent religious committee's appeal for registration. He said that the court had ruled that the committee's objectives of promoting the religious education of children and charitable work had been deemed contrary to national law. Sabev said that he would appeal the court's decision.

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2 See Bulgarian Situation Report/12, Radio Free Europe Research, 20 December 1988, item 4. Topuzliev also alleged that the recently appointed Mufti of Shumen Sergey Zlatev was a State Security agent.

3 The traditional Jordan Day rite, which is performed on the eve of Saint John the Baptist's feast day on January 7, begins with the throwing of a wooden cross into ice-covered water. The strongest and fittest men of the parish compete in diving for it. The first to retrieve it is rewarded and joins a parade through the parish with the local priest, who blesses his congregation by making the sign of the cross with a box-tree branch dipped in holy water. Like many of Bulgaria's indigenous Christian customs, the Jordan Day celebration has evident pagan origins. It has been discouraged and in effect banned since the late 1940s.


5 Radio Sofia, 4 April 1989, 17:00 P.M.