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Research Article

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From Socialist Amazons to Bodies on Full Display: Gender Stereotypes in Bulgarian Advertising during Socialism and the Post-Socialist Transition

Elza Ibroscheva*

This essay offers a critical analysis of the changing images of women in Bulgarian advertising during socialism and in the process of the post-socialist transition. During socialism, images of women, dressed in white lab coats, wearing construction hats, and lacking any sense of sexuality were on prominent display, created the most visually recognizable and ubiquitous symbols of communism—the frumpy babushka. Today, the babushka is an image of the past as Eastern European women have adopted a new highly sexualized identity. Advertising, which boomed during the transition, has become the primary cultural arena for the social engineering of a new, highly sexualized identity, quickly becoming a “normalized” trend in Eastern Europe with potentially dangerous consequences.

Keywords: advertising, gender, post-socialism, Eastern Europe

Introduction

There is now a commonly circulating anecdote that humorously demonstrates the peculiarities of women’s understanding of sex, and the stereotypes surrounding it, in the East and West during the Cold War. As part of the thawing of the communication between the two ideological rivals, in 1986 a video-link between female audiences from Boston and Leningrad was widely publicized as a great example of soft power at work. During this exchange, women on both sides were encouraged to ask each other questions about their respective way of life. When a member of the American audience asked whether Soviet advertising was too preoccupied with sex like it is in the United States, Lyudmila Ivanova, a member of the audience in Leningrad quickly blurted out in response, “there is no sex in the USSR.”¹ While Mrs. Ivanova meant to say “there was no sex on Soviet television,” her blunt statement was also quite true about advertising.

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¹ Ghodsee, Kristen. 2018. [What the Socialist Kama Sutra Tells Us About Sex behind the Iron Curtain: The Story Behind the Eastern Bloc’s Most Popular Socialist Sex Manual](#). *Washington Post*, 20 November 2018 (accessed: 15 June 2020).

This anecdote also captured the stark differences between the work, lives, and pressing concerns of women across the span of 50 years and across the metaphorical length of the Berlin Wall. In fact, during the years of ideological division between East and West, the East was frequently envied for the enhanced status of women in the Soviet world. Women from the former Soviet bloc enjoyed rights and privileges that Western women could only dare to imagine. Laws that provided three years of maternity leave, widely available state-sponsored childcare, and secure abortion rights were just key “protectionist” rights established by the socialist states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in their attempts to resolve what they termed the “women’s question” in a truly Marxist fashion.² To support these ideas, the powerful propaganda machine of the communist state promoted images of women in hard hats, female technicians, and female doctors, images which widely supported the illusion that women in the Communist countries had indeed been liberated and had found the perfect balance between handling a professional career and raising a family, thus becoming the object of envy of Western feminists. This was also the case in the Soviet version of advertising; there, the only goal guiding the promotion of goods and services was not to advance cultural notions or elevate lifestyle, rather, as Elza Ibroscheva³ pointed out in her study of advertising in Bulgaria, “While American and Western advertising was deemed distasteful and morally corrupt, the Bulgarian version of advertising was meant to cultivate “good taste” and “socialist consumer habits,” which in turn were to guide, properly domesticate, and channel consumers’ desires, therefore, helping to harmonize production and consumption, supply and demand.”

This has been a particularly fascinating trend considering the fact that nowhere else is the cultural identity of gender more contested than in the visuals of advertising. As Katherine Sender⁴ pointed out, advertising serves a two-fold function – “to provide role models with whom we can identify and through whom we can aspire to appropriate constructions of ourselves as social beings, and to guide us towards what the marketplace considers to be desirable kinds and quantities of purchasing in an increasingly commodified social environment.” As Jonathan Schroeder and Detlev Zwick pointed out, “advertising representations influence cultural and individual conceptions of identity, and must be understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices.”⁵ Therefore, because advertising is one of the major “factories” of visual images and has been seen as reflecting the social and cultural norms of a given society, studying the evolution of portrayals of women in advertising will present a revealing look in how post-communist female identities are being engendered and constructed. In addition, advertising becomes an extremely interesting media arena to study as it only made its first major appearance as a powerful cultural force in Bulgaria after the sweeping economic and social changes following the collapse of

² LaFont, Suzanne. 1998. *Women in Transition: Voices from Lithuania*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

³ Ibroscheva, Elza. 2013a. *Advertising, Sex and Post-Socialism: Women, Media and Femininity in the Balkans*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 69.

⁴ Sender, Katherine. 1999. Selling sexual subjectivities: Audiences respond to gay window advertising. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16, 172.

⁵ Schroeder, Jonathan E. and Detlev Zwick. 2004. Mirrors of Masculinity: Representation and Identity in Advertising Images. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 7, 24.

communism in Eastern Europe. Prior to that, advertising was seen as unnecessary and unhealthy promotion of commercialism and decadent social values. As a commercially motivated enterprise, advertising was thought to be “a particularly capitalist phenomenon incompatible with socialism,”⁶ and therefore, was used scarcely, only in its propaganda function, promoting a very deliberate and engineered view of the Soviet society that had no bearing on the reality of daily life. Arguably, the need for consumption, underlining the very essence of advertising, along with the “queues, Trabants, lacks of bananas, and frumpy women,” led to the collapse of the popular support for the socialist project.⁷

Today, the Eastern European woman is anything but the imagined “babushka” of the communist propaganda. Eastern European women have adapted a new, highly sexual identity—one that allows them to occupy both the position of the consumer, but more importantly, to occupy the position of the “consumed,” widely and readily offering their sexualized body for consumption. This essay aims to explore the current trends of “sexing” the look of women in Bulgarian advertising in an attempt to analyze the gender identity transformation that has taken place in the years of the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe and has fundamentally affected the social, economic, and political positions of women in the former Soviet bloc. This essay is important because it addresses an area of international media and cultural studies, which has been largely overlooked in academic research and which offers a critical dissection of the process of establishing and constructing gender identities in a unique set of social, economic, and cultural conditions as witnessed in the countries of Eastern Europe. While there have been studies discussing the economic conditions and the burden of the social roles and stereotypes of Eastern European women,⁸ very few studies⁹ have looked at the specific gender sexual stereotypes and sexualized portrayals in advertising.

⁶ Markham, James W. 1964. Is Advertising Important in the Soviet Economy? *Journal of Marketing* 28, 31.

⁷ Reid, Susan. 2002. Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the de-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev. *Slavic Review* 61(2), 212.

⁸ Einhorn, Barbara. 1993. *Cinderella goes to market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in East Central Europe*. London and New York: Verso Publishers; Roman, Denise. 2001. Gendering Eastern Europe: Pre-Feminism, Prejudice, and East-West Dialogues in Post-Communist Romania. *Women's Studies International Forum* 24(1), 53-65; Roman, Denise. 2003. *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Post-Communist Romania*. Lanham: Lexington books; Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller. (eds.). 1993. *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Post-Communism and the former Soviet Union*. London and New York: Routledge; Corrin, Chris. (ed.). 1992. *Superwomen and the Double Burden. Women's Experience of Change in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*. London: Scarlet Press.

⁹ Azhikhina, Nadezhda. 1995. *Women as presented by the Russian Media. A Report for the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)* (accessed: 13 July 2008); Ibroscheva, Elza. 2006. *The New Eastern European Woman: A Gold Digger or an Independent Spirit?* *Global Media Journal* 5(9) (accessed: 15 June 2020); Ibroscheva, Elza. 2007. Caught between East and West? Portrayals of Gender in Bulgarian Television Advertisements. *Sex Roles* 57(5/6), 409-18; Skoric, Marko and Adrian F. Furnham. 2003. *Gender Role Stereotyping in Television Advertisements: A Comparative Study of British and Serbian Television*, in *Trends in Social Psychology*, edited by Arsdale, John Z. Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 73-89; Kotseva, Maria and Nedyalka Videva. 2014. *TV Commercial Representation of Women in Italy and Bulgaria in View of the EU Fight Against Gender Stereotypes*. *Quaderni di Donne & Ricerca* 33-34 (accessed: 15 June 2020).

Communism and the Images of Women in Eastern Europe

For the longest time, the status of women in the Soviet bloc presented a unique mix of cultural, political, and social conditions that fascinated western scholars and provided fruitful grounds for feminist studies. Among those scholars, Einhorn,¹⁰ in perhaps the most widely read and cited book on the issue of Eastern European women, writing about the expectations of western feminist scholars for the future development of the women in Eastern Europe, put it succinctly: “[...] [I]n the short run, at least, women in East Central Europe stand to lose economic [status], social welfare, and reproductive rights. The image of the female tractor driver is out, as is Superwoman wearing hard-hat on a building site.” Here, Einhorn successfully describes the stage in reconstructing and defining the female imagery in mass media in the countries of Eastern Europe.

Tatyana Kotzeva¹¹ explored the images of women in Bulgaria to conclude that while Bulgarian society was under communist rule, two conflicting images of women were constructed—the socialist Amazon—a woman-android, the mechanical woman, woman heroine of a socialist modernization projects—and woman as mother and caregiver of children. Kotzeva’s investigation reveals a higher degree of convergence in the self-identification strategies pursued by Bulgarian women. Her study demonstrated that despite general abstract approval of gender equality and emancipation, women predominantly identify themselves with motherhood and caring for the family, and women’s perception of self-esteem, sense of dignity, individual emancipation, or unfair treatments get passed over in silence by an overwhelming number of Bulgarian women.

Tatyana Mamonova¹² offers yet another interesting look at the sexual identity and objectification of the Soviet and Eastern European woman. The eroticization of the female body by men has become the patriarchy’s international norm, the author argued, and the opening of the former communist society for this kind of expression of male dominance has allowed sexism to move on to a more blatant, visual form. Beauty contests, Mamonova asserted, are the ultimate testimony to this change. She provided an excellent example to support her argument—the budget for the final contest of Miss Russia was around 1.5 million rubles. The organizers, naturally, were counting on a substantial return. “They planned to use the winners of the show for commercial purposes, which means good money, including hard currency.”¹³ Thus, men have transformed the female body into immovable—or movable—property and have objectified it in the most obtrusive and materialistic manner.

Denise Roman¹⁴ also offers a compelling look at the post-communist developments in theories of gender and representation in Eastern Europe. Roman describes the complex and often contradictory myriad of influences that

¹⁰ Einhorn, *Cindarella*, 1.

¹¹ Kotzeva, Tatyana. 1999. *Reimagining Bulgarian Women: The Marxist Legacy and Women’s Self-Identity*, in *Gender and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Corrin, Chris. London: Frank Cass Publishers, 83-99.

¹² Mamonova, Tatyana. 1994. *Russian Women’s Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Culture*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

¹³ Mamonova, *Russian Women’s Studies*, 161.

¹⁴ Roman, *Gendering Eastern Europe*.

women in Eastern Europe become exposed to—such as the rise in traditional Orthodoxy, pre-communist village values, and more importantly, “a provocative *feminine mystique* of Western origins stressing beauty as a paramount goal” (emphasis by the author).¹⁵ These conflicting factors of influence, Roman argues, have led Eastern European women to a rather unexpected turn—the women of post-communism have adopted a new understanding of being feminine and that includes rejection of modernization and all the turmoil that it brings, and with it, rejecting the ideas of Western feminism. “If, for feminists following the Western model, emancipation means autonomy and taking a public job, for the average woman emancipation means dependency and the right to be a housewife, thus return to the private sphere.”¹⁶

The main argument so far appears to be that the historical circumstances that determine the image and the identity of the Eastern European woman are dramatically different from those that determine the lives and sense of self-worth of women in the West. In this vein, a number of Eastern European gender scholars have argued that the social and cultural identity of Eastern European women is drastically different from that of Western women since feminism is the product of a particular culture, of a particular country, and of a particular social system. Thus, for example, women’s return to domesticity observed during the transition, should not be interpreted as a backlash against feminism and emancipation, but as a response to a regained sense of liberation and personal choice. As Jiřina Šiklová,¹⁷ a well-known Czech dissident and a women’s rights advocate, said: “As the enforced false ideology breaks down, many people welcome the freedom to return to traditions once forbidden. Young girls and boys are becoming nuns and monks, women are opting to stay at home. Freedom takes on different forms. This may give the impression that we are returning to patriarchy, but it is more a reaction to our recent past.”

Parallel to their tendency to return to the home, women in Eastern Europe have also found a new sense of empowerment through embracing sexuality as an expression of femininity, which departs from the traditions of patriarchy and Soviet ideology. Here, the work of Mette Svendsen¹⁸ examining the relationship of beauty and aerobics in post-communist Romania is particularly illuminating. In her ethnographic study of how Romanian women construct their identity through the investment in body care and the consumption of Western practices such as that of aerobics exercise, Svendsen explored the presentational status of the body in the post-communist transition. In doing so, the author argues that for Romanian women, and by extension, for other Eastern European women, “beauty operates as a moral imperative, as a defining feature of femininity, as a dream and a necessity. Taken together, these functions make beautification (or body care) an essential field of activity for women.”¹⁹ In her analysis of the changes in gender discourses in the Bulgarian post-communist transition,

¹⁵ Roman, *Gendering Eastern Europe*, 56.

¹⁶ Roman, *Gendering Eastern Europe*, 56.

¹⁷ Šiklová, Jiřina. 1993. Are Women in Central and Eastern Europe Conservative? in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*, edited by Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller. London and New York: Routledge, 76.

¹⁸ Svendsen, Mette Nordahl. 1996. The Post-Communist Body: Beauty and Aerobics in Romania. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 14 (1), 8-15.

¹⁹ Svendsen, *The post-communist body*, 10.

Krassimira Daskalova²⁰ noted a similar trend, closely related to the rapid proliferation of women-oriented magazines. While she acknowledged that most of these publications focused narrowly on tips on style and fashion and preoccupied the attention of their female readers with advertisements for products that improve one's body image, including medical procedures such as plastic surgery, she also pointed out that "one message conveyed is that beauty is a woman's most valuable asset, and every woman should try to make herself sexually attractive to men."²¹ Simultaneously, Daskalova herself recognized that the complexity of the cultural climate of the transition cannot be reduced to a simple count of the number of beauty magazines in wide circulation and the messages they convey, but she also noted that since consumerism (as an ideology rather than an actual practice) is only now openly advertised in Bulgarian society, it is hard to ignore the curious convergence of growing consumer awareness, a heightened interest in beauty as a paramount goal, and the advertising that engenders these ideas.

This has been further demonstrated in the predominance of sexualized images of women in visual media, and specifically, in advertising. In fact, as another well-known Czech social scientist, Jiřina Šmejkalová noted, the asexual nature of the Soviet woman was seen by women in Eastern Europe as just another oppressive social restriction of the communist ideology. To explain the trend of hypersexualization of women in the Eastern European media, Šmejkalová contended:

"Shall we call for censorship of pornography in a country whose entire modern history is built on an excessive fight for freedom of expression? Could anyone that at least once opened a fashion journal issue in Prague in the 1970s filled with sex-less figures wrapped in colorless fabric seriously mobilize against abuse of women's bodies in the fashion industry and advertising?"²²

While the literature suggests a variety of important factors influencing the image and character of the Eastern European woman, it seems apparent that her sense of self-identity was suppressed and constrained by the limits of quasi-Marxist feminism and solid Orthodox and Oriental patriarchy. As Dimitrina Petrova²³ argued, "the everyday life of women was furrowed with ripples of formal equality and emancipation in a seemingly endless patriarchal ocean." What is even more, the revolution of 1989 left the patriarchal system of power intact, transforming its more superficial manifestations from bad to worse and leaving the post-Soviet woman lost in the search for a meaningful and useful balance of social propensity and adequacy. How this crisis is reflected in the visual representations of advertising defines the focus of this research.

²⁰ Daskalova, Krassimira. 2000. *Women's Problems, Women's Discourses in Bulgaria*, in *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life After Socialism*, edited by Gal, Susan and Gail Kligman. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 337-69.

²¹ Daskalova, *Women's Problems*, 349.

²² Šmejkalová, Jiřina. 1996. On the Road: Smuggling Feminism Across the Post-Iron Curtain. *Replika*, special issue, 98.

²³ Petrova, Dimitrina. 1993. *The Winding Road to Emancipation in Bulgaria*, in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*, edited by Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller. London and New York: Routledge, 22.

Advertising and the Sexing of Bulgarian Women

Commercial advertising is a fairly new phenomenon in Bulgaria and in most eastern European countries. During the decades of central planning prior to the collapse of communism, the role of advertising in Bulgaria, as in most of the countries of Eastern Europe, was very limited because for the most part, demand significantly exceeded supply.²⁴ In fact, the Soviet approach to advertising was clearly a result of the ideological incongruity of a planned socialist economy and a consumption-based, capitalist free market. In the large *Soviet Encyclopedia*, for instance, it was stated that advertising in capitalist countries was caused by unrestrained competition; and the conclusion is that “the huge sums spent on advertising in these countries become a burden on the consumer.”²⁵ In fact, following communist directives, until WWII, advertising was rejected as “bourgeoisie capitalist excrement which artificially stimulates the economy by forcing people to buy what they don’t need and what they can’t afford.”²⁶

Western style advertising was understood only as reflected through the lens of the class struggle and was considered to be one of the major tools enabling the unbridled growth of conspicuous consumption and the very foundation of capitalism. However, non-commercial forms of advertising were widely employed in the Soviet world. Some of these advertisements were concerned with publicizing important cultural events, such as theater performance, radio shows, etc., while others were used to encourage savings in the state banks, the production of more crops, and generally, all economic activities that would benefit the society at large. More importantly, most advertising that was non-political in nature was predominantly oriented towards the woman. In fact, as Susan Reid²⁷ contended, because women were seen both as the main decision makers in the household and the most active users of goods and consumer products, “construed as both housewives and consumers, women were ascribed the leading role in the production of aesthetics value and social meaning.”

With the transition to democracy and a free market economy, advertising debuted in its purely commercial revenue-driven form on the Bulgarian market, introduced mainly by international companies looking for profit opportunities in newly emerging markets. This, in turn, led to fundamental changes in the advertising landscape. As Elena Millan and Richard Elliot²⁸ point out, during the formative years of the commercialization of the economy immediately following the opening of the post-Soviet markets, advertising in Bulgaria developed under conditions of general institutional instability and lack of regulations.

Bulgarian advertising expenditure has risen from \$4.3 million in 1996 to \$322 million in 2006, with the latest numbers indicating Bulgaria’s advertising market was worth BGN 415 million (\$240.7 million) in 2018.²⁹ More importantly,

²⁴ Millan, Elena and Richard Elliot. 2004. Offensive Advertising, Public Policy and the Law: The Rulings on the *Zagorka* Case. *Journal of Consumer Policy* 27, 475-93.

²⁵ Markham, *Is Advertising Important*, 31.

²⁶ Markham, *Is Advertising Important*, 31.

²⁷ Reid, *Cold War*, 245.

²⁸ Millan and Elliot, *Offensive Advertising*, 476.

²⁹ Penkova, Sirma. 2019. *The Advertising Market in Bulgaria Reached 415 Million in 2018*. *Kapital*, 25 June 2019 (accessed: 15 June 2020).

the fundamental shift in the consumer mentality of the socialist citizen, which was intrinsically tied to the penetration of capitalism on the local scene, brought along with advertising very deliberate images of gender, class, and social status, which were seen by the majority of men and women both as a sign of westernization and breaking away from the past. In this sense, advertising became not only a vehicle of commercial success, but also a forum for cultural pedagogy, where new ideas of what it means to be a “modern” woman, what it means to be a successful businessman, and many other new cultural symbols could be learned. This pedagogical aspect of advertising has become particularly gendered and alluring with images of beauty, luxury, and social norms often in direct clash with established cultural traditions of the past. This cultural shift in identity formation, triggered by advertising images and messages and combined with the economic hardships and social pressures of the transition, has resulted in what Donna M. Hughes³⁰ argues are profound psychological changes in the self-esteem and self-worth of women across the former Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern bloc. Combined with the growing sexualization of Eastern European women, seen by many women as an empowering rejection of the “frumpy babushka” image of the communist part, Eastern European women are certainly caught amidst an identity crisis—between the communist ideals and the capitalist realities, between the exploitive sexuality of today and the asexual aesthetic of the communist past.

Today, the frumpy image of the Soviet woman is nothing more than a remnant of the communist past. The visual space of Bulgarian media, and specifically so, Bulgarian advertising, is populated with sexualized depiction of womanhood. Women’s bodies have indeed become commodified and transformed into valuable currency, which can be used to sell virtually any product. The majority of outdoor advertisements, for example, adorning the road arteries of the country, featured endless array of women’s sexualized bodies, selling anything from latex paint, hunting accessories and weaponry, and of course, alcohol. Staring from the billboards are the confident looks of young Bulgarian women, who daringly display their well-cultivated bodies. It is important to note that the paradox of this heightened sexuality on display stems not only from the collapse of the cultural and moral norms that characterized the post-communist transition, but also from the fact that Bulgarian women, and perhaps, most women in Eastern Europe, found a new form of rebellion against the established, artificial aesthetic norms and stagnant gender roles prescribed by the communist ideology. Women’s bodies became a site for contesting the gender norms of the past and for demonstrating new ways of visualizing what self-expression and individuality looked like. And while this rebellious spirit of what some called “the new sexual revolution” might have been a refreshing way to face the challenges of the disintegration of the communist ideology, the new sexual mores of the post-communist transition were quickly politicized and the sexual liberation of women was “highjacked” and used as a visual token of the new anti-authoritarian spirit ready for social change. Examples of this trend early in the transition include political protests accompanied by beauty contests and wet t-shirt competitions while the opening of the first striptease bar in town was

³⁰ Hughes, Donna M. 2005. *Supplying Women for the Sex industry: Trafficking from the Russian Federation*, in *Sexuality and Gender in Post-Communist Eastern Europe and Russia*, edited by Stulhofer, Aleksandar and Theo Sanfort. New York: The Haworth Press, 209-26.

celebrated as important cultural news.

The sexing of women could indeed be seen as a reaction, albeit a fairly drastic one, to the failing sexual politics of the communist past. However, it is also important to note that the market economy emerged at the time when female images turned out to provide a most profitable commodity in the conditions of unbridled capitalism. One obvious example which well demonstrates the profitability of the sexing of Bulgarian media is the fact that newspapers covering the first ever beauty contest in the country sold better than the others. Additionally, borrowing models from the British tabloids, Bulgarian newspapers began publishing erotic photos of girls on the back pages of their print edition, making the sale of papers a profitable business at the dawn of democracy. After 1991, the image of the fashion model and the beauty queen came to reign supreme in the mass media, successfully replacing the politicized woman functionary. The interesting fact is that this change, as Nadezhda Azhgikhina³¹ points out, occurred very smoothly, “since the consciousness fostered in the totalitarian system, as well as the surreal view of the world previously offered had prepared the audience to accept yet another stereotype, instead of any real heroine of the time.” Beauties in bikinis, their interviews, and press coverage of beauty contests started to appear not only in “lightweight” publications, but also in “respectable” ones and soon enough became the standard for publications with financial viability and business savvy.

The advertising industry was quick to take notice of this opportunity, which was further aided by the opportunities and incentives for western investments in Eastern Europe for companies who saw the profit potential in the newly emerging markets of the former Soviet bloc. Among those western companies, advertising media conglomerates were among the first to take advantage of this profitable proposition, which in turn, triggered an exponential growth of domestic ad and print agencies, needed to meet growing demand for marketing and advertising services. And while the production value of print and outdoor advertisements at the onset of the transition was questionable, ads did not shy away from featuring sexualized females aimed to grab the attention of the eager consumers, selling anything and everything—from air-conditioners, construction materials, and computers—with a sexy twist (Figure 1). The very idea of promoting goods for the sake of consuming out of pleasure and choice, rather than out of necessity and force, posed a novel challenge to Bulgarian advertising companies, which had a lot to learn from their Western counterparts. In this vein, it is important to note that at the initial stages of introducing advertising to the Bulgarian market, there was a general void of creative approaches to promote consumer goods; thus the use of a sexy female model, which dovetailed with the presence of many eager young women who wanted to see their faces on public display, was the simplest, cheapest, and most immediate solution. Coupled with the heavily gendered notion of Western advertising where women’s bodies were seen as tokens for consumption—to be consumed or used to stand for a consumable object—as Ibroscheva³² argued, Bulgarian advertising approached the commercial portrayal of women and women’s roles by stressing

³¹ Azhgikhina, Nadezhda. 1995. *Women as Presented by the Russian Media*, 10.

³² Ibroscheva, 2013a. *Advertising, Sex and Post-Socialism*, 156.

individuality rather than collectivity, beauty and sexuality rather than character and substance, and social status rather than professional success, therefore fundamentally transforming women's aspirations and their ability to imagine their new place in the post-socialist reality.

Figure 1. Advertisement for Bulgarian computer Pravetz.



Source: Author

With the passage of time, however, the production quality in the advertising industry markedly improved; and with it, so grew the level of sexualization of the woman's body. Today, sexualization of Bulgarian women is common in all forms of advertising and for all consumer needs—a trend that very quickly became accepted as the norm of the advertising business. For example, some of the most popular ads featuring female models are ads for alcoholic beverages and liquor. Frequent billboard ads feature attractive young girls, posing topless, whose essential body parts are covered by succulent pieces of exotic fruit, seductively offering the consumer a shot of vodka or gin. Other advertising campaigns took on an even more daring spin on the theme of risqué sexual adventures and women's bodies. An advertising campaign for Vodka Xtaz (in

Bulgarian, shortened for Ecstasy) featured both a controversial TV spot and multiple print ads, resembling scenes from Stanley Kubrick's sexually charged drama *Eyes Wide Shut* (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Print ad for Vodka Xtaz: Turn me into a drop of your blood.



Source: Author

Removed from the context of the dramatic dialogue and character development of the original movie, the 30-second TV commercial was nothing more than a highly stylized “sexploitation” of the female body, which promised wild adventures and bloodthirsty temptresses if you chose this vodka brand over others. The ad was indeed so controversial that it triggered one of the first complaints to the Council of Electronic Media from the Trade and Consumer Protection Commission and the Bulgarian Parents Association. According to the Trade Commission, the commercial contained pornographic elements and incited people to violence—a claim that was dismissed by the director of the video Georgi Markov, who argued in a *Sofiaecho* article from 8 January 2003 that the real problem is the timing of the broadcasts. “If the advertisement were aired during a night show, no one would be shocked,” he said. Taking the focus away from the portrayed sexual violence and exploitation of women featured in the video,

Grisha Ganchev, the owner of the company which produced the vodka, also stated in the same report that the main purpose of any ad is to booster publicity, and whether it is good or bad does not matter when everyone is talking about the brand.

The sexing of the Bulgarian woman took on an even higher degree of commodification when a printing company that offered design and publicity services advertises its own business by sending its customers Christmas cards featuring a young woman posing seductively in black lace lingerie and wishing everyone “Happy Holidays!” (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Christmas Card.



Source: Author

Here, advertising creativity takes on a whole different level—to beat the competition, and perhaps to create a new sense of fascination with the concept of alluring propositions, the Christmas wishes take on a whole new, and very sexy, meaning. Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the degree to which this sexualization has captured the public imagination of Bulgarians is the fact that a campaign initiated by the online publication *Vagabond* to elect the cultural

symbols that truly represent contemporary Bulgaria includes the following category: “Thousands of stunning babes dressed in clothing that leaves nothing to the imagination—all whilst working as lawyers, doctors and managers. You wouldn’t find that even in Venezuela!”

The result is a commodification of women’s bodies and female sexualities unseen in this scope and scale during the communist regime. This is perhaps best exemplified in a 2013 TV ad for a Bulgarian cheese-like product conspicuously named “bulka” (the Bulgarian word for bride). In the commercial, a young woman, dressed in a tight, low-cut red dress carries around a tray of cheese treats when she is confronted by a male “Romeo,” in the ambiance of the *chalga* club music. “Julietta” leans forward and drops a cheese cube in between her breast, teasing her male admirer in a highly sexualized way. The ad continues on in a “cheesy,” equally crass dialogue between the two, essentially putting the man in control of getting what he wants—the dairy treat—while reducing the young woman to nothing more than a milk-producing pair of breasts. The tagline at the end of the 30-second commercial reveals the woman’s response to the young man’s inquiry: “It’s not cheese, it’s a delicacy,” playing a pun on both the ingredients of the product (not real cheese) and the nature of her bosoms (as tasty as the real cheese would be). The TV commercial caused a wave of criticism among Bulgarian viewing audiences; however, the discontent and much of the debate surrounding the ad were not about the crass treatment of women, but about the misleading product information. To them, trivializing women as domestic cattle and domestic servers was not the problem—paying for cheese that isn’t real cheese seemed much more problematic.

Conclusions

Gender identities in the countries under post-communist transition are in a state of flux. In the atmosphere of confusion and political disarray which characterized the collapse of the communist system, gender identities were caught in a crisis. This crisis, while clearly serving as a new source of empowered sexuality, is also an indication of the consequences of the penetration of global capitalism in the region. With the growing influx of capital in the media and with multinational corporate investment in advertising, women become the prime target as both models and consumers of goods advertised in a hypersexual fashion. In fact, scholars argue that along the sweeping media reform that opened Eastern Europe to the West, providing millions in market shares and advertising revenues, prostitution and the sex trade can perhaps be defined as the other economic “boom” that has brought Eastern Europe into the global economy.³³ “The body is a profitable commodity which satisfies all manner of fantasies in all manner of ways.”³⁴ The marketing of the body, prior to democracy, a hidden and often condemned currency, characteristic of the decadent commercial West, now

³³ Kligman, Gail and Stephanie Limoncelli. 2005. Trafficking Women After Socialism: From, to, and through Eastern Europe. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 12(1), 118-40.

³⁴ Kligman, Gail. 1996. *Women and the Negotiation of Identity in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, in *Identities in Transition: Eastern Europe and Russia after the Collapse of Communism*, edited by University of California Press/University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection 93, 68-91.

easily translates into a legitimate “labor value,” reinvigorating a new sexual revolution now categorized as a “sexploitation.”³⁵

More importantly, this sexploitation is frequently a leading factor, I would argue, in the sweeping trend for young women in Bulgaria to engage in self-objectification. Stemming from the theory of objectification,³⁶ which argues that females are subject to sexual objectification in a variety of cultural contexts, one of which is indeed the media, and as such, are prone to be perceived as bodies or only in their sexual function, comes the idea of self-objectification. According to objectification theory, recurring experiences of sexual objectification may socialize girls and women to view themselves as objects intended for the visual pleasure of men. Consequently, females may internalize an observer’s perspective on their physical self, thereby becoming preoccupied with their physical appearance, a process labeled *self-objectification*. That is, the individual places greater emphasis on observable attributes of their body (e.g., “How do I look?”), rather than on privileged or non-observable attributes (e.g., “What am I capable of?” or “How do I feel?”³⁷).

The problem of gender stereotypes has been recognized as of particular importance for the EU, and in support of this we can cite the opinion of the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for women and men to the European Commission on “breaking gender stereotypes in the media”:

*“In the present context, it is important to address the fact that gender stereotypes not only contribute to the status quo in terms of women’s and men’s roles, but also promote an asymmetrical vision of women and men in society. Furthermore, they are one of the most persistent causes of inequality between women and men in all spheres and at all stages of life, influencing their choices in education, profession, and private life.”*³⁸

The problem is compounded further when we consider that eighty-one percent of Bulgarians think that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family—the highest rate in the European Union, according to the 2018 Eurobarometer survey.³⁹ Respondents in Bulgaria were the most likely to stereotype based on gender, followed by those in Hungary and Lithuania, according to the report, clearly demonstrating the lack of nuanced understanding of the complex cultural and social influence of decades of steady media diets that portrayed women’s roles confined to narrowly defined, predictable and ideologically contrived notions of femininity. In the same year, Bulgaria also failed to ratify the Istanbul Convention, condemning violence against women. The homegrown campaign against the ratification of the

³⁵ Shreeves, Rosamund. 1992. *Sexual Revolution or Sexploitation: The Pornography and Erotica Debate in the Soviet Union*, in *Women in the Face of Change: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China*, edited by Rai, Shirin / Pilkington, Hilary and Annie Phizacklea. New York: Routledge, 130-46.

³⁶ Fredrickson, Barbara L. and Tomi-Ann Roberts. 1997. Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, 173-206.

³⁷ Fredrickson, Barbara L. / Roberts, Tomi-Ann / Noll, Stephanie M. / Quinn, Diane M. and Jean M. Twenge. 1998. That Swimsuit Becomes You: Sex Differences in Self-Objectification, Restrained Eating, and Math Performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 269-84.

³⁸ European Commission. 2010. Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men: [Opinion on Breaking Gender Stereotypes in the Media](#) (accessed: 15 June 2020).

³⁹ [European Commission Eurobarometer Surveys. 2018](#) (accessed: 15 June 2020).

Convention led to the creation of an “anti-gender movement” that resulted in attacks on women and on all those providing services to victims of violence. This was partially due to misinterpretation and to the translation into Bulgarian of the term “gender” contained in the Convention, inconsistent with the translation of the same term in other regional and international instruments, including the EU Victim’s Rights Directive. Yet, the campaign also succeeded in creating widespread suspicion towards European norms of intolerance towards discrimination and gender-based violence, pushing the opponents of women’s rights to coin derogatory terms such as “genderism” to describe what is now deemed by the public as outside meddling with Bulgarian’s strong national values, including those defining gender norms, and an attempt to push homosexuality and lesbianism upon Bulgarian society.

These series of anti-women actions signal a particularly dangerous trend in post-communist Bulgaria, and perhaps in the rest of the post-communist societies of the Eastern bloc. Eastern European women are now exposed to a steady diet of exploitative, sexually provocative depictions of women, which in turn feeds a poisonous trend in women’s and girl’s perceptions of their bodies and their sense of self-worth in the absence of alternative role models. This transformation into an over-sexed, hyper-feminine body might produce a feeling of empowerment, a feeling of having set out on the road of a different kind of life, one that will be less strenuous and more Western. Some scholars have linked these trends of “modernizing” gender with the massive transformation of the post-Soviet economy and the aggressive marketing of “beauty” as the utmost desired commodity, noting that pursuing beauty is seen in the East as both empowering and westernizing.⁴⁰ However, this sense of empowerment, at minimum, rests on shaky grounds—among other things, it is based on problematic stereotypical and patriarchal definitions of femininity, which often reinforce rather than transform the relations of inequality and repressive gender identity in Eastern Europe. The danger here also lies in the political economy underlying the import of western images of the perfect, sexed-up body, which creates in turn a new type of stereotype of the Eastern European women—sexy, frail, hungry for attention, and waiting to be rescued (or discovered) by a rich, powerful man—producing new masked politics of domination and subordination. Ultimately, the transformative potential for radical change that the end of the communist regime signaled is being replaced by a new consumer tableaux of carefully crafted gender stereotypes that do not include re-imagining and challenging the patriarchy, but only adding new stylish accessories to it.

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⁴⁰ Rathner, Günther. 2003. *Post-Communism and the Marketing of the Thin Ideal*, in *Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition*, edited by Nasser, Mervat / Katzman, Melanie A. and Richard A. Gordon. New York: Taylor & Francis, 93-111.

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