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Inquisitive, intelligent and playful, dolphins have been known to  
guide seafarers to safety.

Schools continue to promulgate an idealized version of the Bulgarian household but who are they fooling?

### Baiting the Bodybuilder - the Growth of Girl Power in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's criminal "insurance" rackets of the early 1990s have been dismantled but the Neanderthal bortsis, the hired muscle, remain influential and ubiquitous. They are widely emulated and, as a social group, they represent a highly demonstrative clan among the well to do within urban society. Their offspring strut their stuff in the corridors of the elite schools. Disembarking from upmarket, foreign cars (characteristically, jet black or crimson) at 8.15, they enter school, mobile phone glued to ear, intent on making a fashion statement sufficient to knock the socks off any US pop idol. They are frequently disdainful of their classmates and teachers. The average teacher hasn't the skill or the courage to curb their brashness. What can the school directors do? Threaten expulsion?

These kids represent a highly expressive student subculture keen to experiment with a sense of social dominance deriving from their parents. They undertake this experiment in the "best" schools in the affluent neighbourhoods and graphically demonstrate the fragility of a two-tier state education system in which the portion that services the affluent has been partially privatized on the basis of a long established system of social prejudice. By paying extra, wealthy parents can buy a more comprehensive education package for their kids and this represents a true cash cow for influential coterie of educators.

Clientelism has pervaded academe for decades supported by the spurious correlation of intelligence with social status. The use of myriad extra textbooks in the elite schools supported by private tutoring is explained in terms of the "special" intelligence of the students in the catchment area. It goes without saying that these kids are especially gifted because

they come from the "best families". Children from the worst families are, by definition, uneducable.

Disruptive behaviour from affluent kids provides an intimidating prospect for a teacher who is accustomed to absolute control. What is the world coming to when the offspring of the "best families" provide the model for a significant delinquent tendency within the student population? The weakness and non-viability of the structures which serve the stratum of "best families" have become all too obvious now that the group has been invaded by the uncouth Frankenstein's monster created by a few among the upper echelons of Bulgarian society.

Haralan Alexandov, a social anthropologist, explains how the bortsis are a product of a brutalizing "cult of physical strength and violence" that pertained in the sports schools that they attended and from which they emerged "feeling inferior and lacking basic social competence, vaguely aware of the deprivation they have suffered and largely deprived of moral sense". They were a natural choice as foot soldiers for the criminal groups that emerged in the early 1990s.

That was a decade ago. Today, a significant proportion of this group is very affluent and socially influential. Have their complexes and vague feelings of resentment evaporated as if blown away by the air conditioners in their fancy cars? Why exactly does a man need to build his body until it reaches the dimensions of a Namibian silver-back in order to feel good about himself? Does it work?

Of course, most countries have their bodybuilders and pugilists. However, Bulgarian society is characterized by the extraordinary ubiquity of this male image in conjunction with the omnipresence of men in uniform. It is as if Bulgarian society lacks the mechanisms that permit the sublimation of the testosterone drive. This subject could be simply amusing were it not for the fact that the widespread and overt celebration of machismo has gone a little beyond, say, the male swagger associated with Latin cultures. In Latin countries, one often encounters gallantry and graceful manners directed towards the fairer sex. A strident feminist may find this patronizing but it's generally well intentioned and rooted in a system of chivalry.

In Bulgaria, the celebration of machismo seems to be an unfortunate symptom of difficult social transition that affects patterns of parenting

and contributes to the circumstances that lead to the abuse of women and children. Ominously, in a paragraph headed 'Sexual Harassment' the Rough Guide to Bulgaria warns female travellers that the worst "sexual excesses" can be expected from the "young, arrogant nouveaux riches". Newfound wealth and opportunity is helping to throw into sharp relief ugly gender issues that, previously, were largely concealed or even contained.

Nationalistic jingoism echoes around Bulgaria's schools. However, the expression of pessimism represents the other side of the coin of Bulgarian national awareness. Members of the older generation reflexively use the expression "Bulgarska rabota" (Bulgarian work / drudgery) in response to life's myriad misfortunes. This derives from "an attitude of mind" identified by Prof. Toma Tomov "that (finds) expression in affirming that Bulgarians (are) a culture apart from the rest of the world; a place of special predestination governed by people of peculiar propensities". Bulgaria is "a territory on which all undertakings, fairly reliably tested elsewhere, (acquire) awkward proportions". Ideas take on a bewildering "special meaning" in Bulgaria and "when handled by Bulgarians".

Tomov's interpretation reads like the social saboteur's charter, the tendency to wilfully stymie the processes of modernization and problem solving while enigmatically attributing the obstruction to fate. This helps to sustain clientelist networks - familial groups, clusters of associates, amorphous cliques systematically undermine the activities of non-members and impede social progress in order to maintain their positions of privilege and prosperity relative to the rest of the population. The process impedes organisational development, wrecks efficiency and productivity in the workplace.

A large number of young men suffer the feeling of exclusion arising from anti-meritocratic impediments in the places in which they work or attempt to socialize. They must endure the fragmentation of male communities into groups hostile to one another. They are perpetually insecure and, therefore, do not have a fully rounded sense of their own manliness. The exaggerated machismo thing starts to make sense. You have to be tough in order to grab your slice of the pie that entails women, property and, indeed, schooling for your kids.

It is, of course, possible to contrast amoral clientelism with the non-familial amorality of free-market individualism in its most rampant, "time is money" form. It is precisely this New Orthodoxy of Corporatism / Consumerism that is currently clashing with more traditional structures and throwing Bulgarian sexual and social relations out of kilter. For many, materialist opportunity is tantalizingly out of reach or it demands unhealthy compromise.

Men can afford to behave with gallantry when they're happy with the state of the world and have the space and sense of leisure that permits the cultivation of manners. However, for many Bulgarian men, a brutalizing, dog-eat-dog philosophy seems appropriate.

My research reveals that, in general, Bulgarian teenagers form stronger attachments to and a greater dependence on non-familial role models compared to their counterparts in the USA and Great Britain who are protected by their stronger individualism and healthy cynicism regarding popular culture. A recent survey conducted among American teenagers revealed that they now rate mum, dad and older sibling as influential role models. Regrettably, many Bulgarian children seem unreasonably devoted to pop culture.

I feel that this has a great deal to do with the tension felt within households because of the rapid social and economic changes taking place in Bulgaria. In addition, nationalistic jingoism within state education tends to produce a saccharine version of "typical Bulgarian home life" and quaint images of parents, grandparents and the traditional relationship between the sexes. In comparison, the apparently reckless abandon of the icons of western popular culture is intoxicating and addictive. A friend of mine in the teaching profession recently remarked that girls who are probably carrying condoms in their vanity bags are "patronized" and "treated like babies" while at school. I regret her earthiness but I certainly get the message.

Alexandrov and Tomov have reported authoritatively on the difficulties associated with the erosion of patriarchy within the family and society at large and the related the evolution in the relationships between the sexes and among the generations.

Naturally rebellious teenagers are confused by the survivalist actions of many among the parental and grandparental generations in response to

new pressures at work and perceived assaults on the "sacrosanctity" of household structures and relationships within the extended family. This confusion is exacerbated by the educational dogma pertaining to parental and gender roles.

Recent research reveals an evolution in expectations regarding the role of husband and father. In many instances, women, socially active and successful in their careers, have portrayed their partners as touchy, confused and insecure with a consequent tendency towards verbal aggression and the melodramatic expression of their "rights" as head of the household. In some instances, physical intimidation is involved. The tension between marital partners is often associated with the notion that women are in the ascendancy both socially and economically. Although female-occupied jobs came to be devalued during the 1980s (and women in general are still susceptible to discrimination in the realm of employment), it was in the male domain of manufacturing and agriculture that the real decimation of jobs took place almost immediately after the demise of Communism. As a result, it is not that uncommon for women in the age range 30 to 45 to be making a significant contribution to breadwinning in Bulgarian families.

Even at the teenage level the male machismo is "under assault". I've detected the emergence of a range of gender-related vulnerabilities for teenagers pertaining to both the extreme contrast between traditional gender imaging and "Girl Power" and the inherent ambiguity of this brand of pop feminism.

While classroom delinquency continues to be mainly a male phenomenon, there is an increasing disruptive tendency among schoolgirls linked to a sense of girl power. The way it manifests itself reveals the underlying ambiguity:

- Behaviours characterized as "boyish"
- A sexually provocative dress code (most definitely **not** boyish)
- The use of negative male stereotypes designed to bait the teenage male population (hardly feminine)

The American academic, Rachel Simmons, explains that girl power comes at a cost because of the contrast between the emerging teenage "feminism" and the passive, nurturing role expected by society. Girl power fails to empower because it brings pressure to bear on the network of

relationships that girls value and depend upon. In Bulgaria, with its heavily idealized versions of femininity and motherhood, there is a wide contrast between the social ideal and girl power that possibly adds to the attractiveness of the latter for teenagers. It renders girl power role-play a far more effective means of gaining attention, the apparent adulation of classmates. Yet, eventually it only serves to alienate the majority.

According to Simmons, society has traditionally refused to give young females access to open conflict. They are socialized to be "nice" above all else. Girl power promotes aggressive posturing ("attitude") but who or what is it directed at? The cynical answer is - an image in the mirror. It is this answer that the peers of the girl power sisterhood tend to arrive at and they eventually become dismissive of the behaviour.

When interviewed, boys expressed ambivalence and confusion regarding the prevalent image of the modern feminist woman that the American columnist, Jim Cohen, graphically describes as looking "like a prostitute" and acting "like a sailor". However, some 17% of the female interviewees truly valued that image and copied it rigorously **almost to the point of obsession**. They had sacrificed friendship with weaker, socially compliant peers and taken to hanging around in tough-talking pairs or trios in order to play a role that actually served to socially isolate their small groups.

The American clinical psychologist, Amy Taublieb, points out that "(i)f a young person has emotional / psychological security as well as open lines of communication with parents, the actual influence (of external role models) is minimal." However, in revealing the factors of social transition that impinge upon the emotional / psychological security of the parental generation, Haralan Alexandrov portrays a situation in which Bulgarian teenagers are **extremely vulnerable**.

The most consistent body of information on gender issues available from the adult community is the sickly sweet version provided by school that sits in marked contrast with what they see of Britain and the USA. Schooling does not nurture Bulgaria's youth. It serves to whet the juvenile appetite for naïve experimentation. A crisis is pending that will make the Western Punk movement seem positively twee.

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