

## **The Effects of Globalization on the Policy of the National Ethnographic Museum in Bulgaria**

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The effects of globalization have started to influence the national museums in Bulgaria since the beginning of the 1990s. The reasons for the long-lasting isolation up to the democratic transition stem from the communist regime which practically closed the state borders and abandoned freedom of thought and movement.

Nevertheless, questions of diversity could not have been swept under the rug by the ethnographic museum. The presentation of ‘Us’ always implies comparison with the ‘Other’. Like many other regions in the world the Balkans are inhabited by a mix of cultures historically and geographically interrelated. No doubt, the Bulgarian National Ethnographic Museum (NEM) has tried actively to participate in the nation-building process ever since its own foundation.

The museum’s tradition in presenting the Bulgarian national culture for a long time had excluded the display of other ethnic communities’ cultures. Until recently, such materials had never been subject to collecting as if they were not to be found within this same country. This element of NEM’s politics was changed under the influence of globalization and re-opening of the state after the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

Turning the tide with the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the museum mission was changed in order to escape the link with the discredited past. The stress was firmly put on ‘difference’ in its various geographic, ethnic or religious aspects. The collecting and exhibiting policies were focused on the past and avoided any current social or cultural issues.

The influence of globalization seen as intercultural relationships and exchange of information could be traced in NEM’s exhibitions presenting the Bulgarian diaspora from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. As a result of the impact of multiculturalism on ethnological research, NEM has started to present the ethnic communities in a series of temporary exhibitions. The series of displays have come to support state political concept of the “Bulgarian tolerance”.



**Photo:** National Ethnographic Museum, Sofia.

## Introduction

The effects of globalization have started to influence the national museums in Bulgaria since the beginning of the 1990s. The reasons for the long-lasting isolation up to the democratic transition stem from the communist regime which practically closed the state borders and abandoned freedom of thought and movement.

Nevertheless, questions of diversity could not have been swept under the rug by the ethnographic museums. The presentation of 'Us' always implies comparison with the 'Other'. Even when the museum is set to represent the unity of the nation and to avoid the display of foreign cultures, it deals with diversity. Like many other regions in the world the Balkans are inhabited by a mix of cultures historically and geographically interrelated. Given their crossroad situation linking the East to the West the Balkan people have had a bias feeling of belonging both to Europe and the Orient. Nationalism and the museum institution have guided and supported the overcome and the solving of this identity problem. The Bulgarian National Ethnographic Museum (NEM) has tried actively to participate in the nation-building process ever since its own foundation.

For a long time the museum's tradition in presenting the Bulgarian national culture had presumably excluded the display of other ethnic communities' cultures. Until recently, such materials had never been subject to collecting as if they were not to be found within this same country. This aspect of NEM's politics was changed under the influence of globalization and re-opening of the state after the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

This paper deals with the directions and dimensions of change in the National Ethnographic Museum's politics under the influence of globalization. It aims to find out the forms and gaps of the 1990s' reforms by examining the public activities of the Museum. The text is based on two sources of information. Personal opinions were gathered by informal interviews with the curators responsible for the particular exhibition projects. The curators were asked to present their own vision of the exhibition making process and the outcomes. The overview of the intentions in policy making in the museum are available in the interviews with NEM's director, as well as in recent publications. The discussions of museum policy problems are visible in the records of the Museum Council's meetings. The National Ethnographic Museum Archive supplied the study with exhibition plans, texts and photo documentation of the exhibitions. Some visitors' opinions were archived in the Visitor's books. Unfortunately, the NEM Archive is not fully supplied with copies of exhibition documents, so the analysis of the information faced difficulties in assembling the NEM's public policy 'puzzle'.

The research tried to place the museum activities in their social context attempting to outline the main factors influencing the policy shift. They were sought either in the intensification of external relations with other museums, or in the 1990s' social transformations (such as 'deflation' in the museum experience and reduction of organized visitor flows). The highest rate of impact on museum policy was expected from the academic discipline – the Ethnology. In 1990s Bulgarian ethnology slowly but surely adopted multiculturalism which opened a totally different opportunities for the NEM<sup>1</sup>.

## A Short Rewind

Since the time of the Museum's foundation in 1892 until the end of World War II, the curators had used to consider it crucial to include in the collections objects from lands falling

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1 Its influence has been facilitated by the close relations between the museum curators and the ethnologists working together for almost 50 years in one institution – the Ethnographic Institute and Museum, part of which the NEM has currently been.

outside the Bulgarian political borders. These were territories surrounding the present-day Bulgaria, including parts of Macedonia, the so called Eastern and Western Thrace (now in Turkey and Greece), the ‘Western borderlands’ (now in Serbia) and Northern Dobrudzha (now in Rumania). Materials from these lands were supposed to provide arguments for the nation-state dreams of a historically deep-rooted and geographically large Bulgarian community. The diversity was to be searched for inside the nation, and not outside it. The stress was put on the entity and solidarity, not on the diversity, which was assumed as a threat to the imagined community. These collections from outside the political borders of Bulgaria were compiled chiefly during the Balkan wars and after World War I as a result of the mass migration processes and population exchange<sup>2</sup>. The collections from these so called “Bulgarian ethnic lands” were mixed together with the other ethnographic objects in the museum and they were all labeled “Bulgarian” regardless of any current political issues. At that time ‘collecting’ meant ‘appropriating’ cultures. Even the museum sections (repositories) have been divided according to types of materials, not on place of origin.

At the beginning of the next period marked by the power of the communist regime the museum mission was subject to reform. The museum was expected to follow strictly the state politics and restrict its collecting activities only to the Bulgarian political territory. Moreover, the “nation” had almost negative connotation and therefore could hardly be on focus of the visible side of a museum’s activities. Another kind of community was to be constructed, examined and put on show – the meta-national communist, “internationalist” society. An imagined kinship relation within the Slavic population was verbalized and promoted by the museum exhibition and especially by the guide throughout the visit. In the 1980s there was a slight shift in the state politics with a stronger accent upon the national specifics of the socialist society. The “socialist nation” was to be presented in its integrity. No mention of ethnic differences or minority problems was allowed as part of the museum presentations. Massive parts of the collection (e.g. from Macedonia, Thrace and so on) were hidden back in the repositories and abandoned from public view till the 1990s as politically inappropriate. They were even divided in a separate department under the name “Materials from outside the Bulgarian lands”. Thus, the material culture from these lands was re-defined as foreign, distant and, thus, unfit for the museum space in Bulgaria. In other words, the museum presentation was expected first and foremost to be politically correct. And its “correctness” was defined through exclusion.

## The Shift

Turning the tide with the fall of the communist regime in November 1989, the museum mission was changed again in order to escape any associations with the discredited (communist) past. The reopening of the state affected NEM’s policy as a whole – its collecting practices and its public activities, resulting in revising the museum functions in regard to the museum – society interaction. Nevertheless, the commitment to nationalism remained its most visible political engagement.

Most evident was the shift in the exhibiting policy. A look from above could outline three major trends in exhibition-making:

1. Presentations based on regional cultural diversity in proof of the “one-nation” concept (14 temporary exhibitions)

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2 During this period mostly clothing was collected. Since then the typical clothing has had a special aura inside the professional museum community. It was assigned the symbolic meaning which it used to have before entering the museum space, i.e. indicating personal ethnic and/ or religious affiliation.

2. Introduction of ethnic communities' cultures in the Museum (5 temporary displays)
3. Presentations discussing current social problems (1 temporary display)

One could clearly see the domination of exhibitions dealing with nationalism. Although the curators state their ideas about the institution as politically neutral, the staging of such problems involves the National Ethnographic Museum in contemporary politics and relates it to some extreme parties' ideas.

Exhibitions of "Macedonian" and "Thracian" clothing and embroideries turned to become integral parts of NEM's public policy. They came to represent the wish for reconstructing the broken continuity within the history of the institution as well as the curators' strive for introducing diversity as part of the one-nation policy. The materials collected from the lands surrounding present-day Bulgaria were displayed next to objects from the country. Although the labels included information like the village name and its regional localization, no mention about its state localization was considered necessary. They were arranged to be perceived as Bulgarian. Regarding the macro-political context of these exhibitions, namely the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and the positions of the surrounding Macedonia countries (i.e. Greece and Bulgaria), the curators provoke visitors' perceptions with the hot issues of ethnic identity. Consciously or not, they engage the audiences in a nationalistic discourse focused on up-to-date political problems. The arguments supporting the curators' nationalist concepts are excerpted from the past. They refer to the strongest years of the Bulgarian nationalism when the struggle for unification of the Bulgarian people and territories culminated in taking a side in war conflicts.

During the transition period from the 1990 till the present day the accent of the public activities was firmly put on exhibiting difference in its various aspects. The impact of globalization seen as maintaining intercultural bonds and flow of information could be traced also in the NEM's exhibitions presenting the Bulgarian diaspora from the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. This trend in exhibiting once again came to support the concept for the solidity of the nation. But it also opened a gap in the museum – society relations by ignoring the current emigration processes and the new Bulgarian diaspora. Thus the concept for the (ethnographic) museum in Bulgaria remained bound to its essential subject - "the Past". The exhibitions have always played the role of illustration material to the particular institution's academic research. Although the museum has maintained the relation between academia and the society, its activities could not be referred to as representative for the majority of the society. Moreover, the museum has turned out to be representative of the preconceptions of a quite small community – its own curators and the researchers working for the Ethnographic Institute. By dealing only with the past, the curators in NEM demonstrate a lack of proper tools for examining and displaying "the Present".

In fact, the Museum showed once, just at the beginning of the 1990s, an attempt to address current social problems. The curators of an exhibition, called "The Bulgarians and the nature", looked up for ecological strategies in the traditional culture of the Bulgarians. It came at a time of strong social protests against the lack of ecological state policy after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster<sup>4</sup>. The display was a kind of revolutionary compared to NEM's previous exhibiting experience, because the curators chose an approach predominantly

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3 "Bulgarian Antiquities from Macedonia" (1992), "The Half-Cut Yard. Weekdays and Holidays of the Bulgarians in the Western Borderlands" (1996). "From the Life of the Bulgarians in Banat" (1998). We came upon a confusing attitude towards the objects donated from Bulgarian emigrants in Moldavia. They have been stored in the "Foreign arts" Department in the Museum after they were once presented as Bulgarian.

4 The fall of the communist regime and the democratic reforms in Bulgaria started from these protests.

educational, not aesthetic. By implication “The Bulgarians and the Nature” constructed bridges between past and present, staying loyal to the museum identity as linked to the past.

The truly significant “opening” of the NEM due to the impact of multiculturalism on Bulgarian ethnological research came in 1995 when the Museum started a series of presentations on ethnic communities’ cultures in Bulgaria. First was “Roma/ Gypsies from Times Past” (1995) followed by exhibits on Jewish, Armenian, Karakachan and Aromanian culture<sup>5</sup>. They were usually arranged on half of the exhibition space while the other half was reserved for different aspects of Bulgarian culture<sup>6</sup>. The public activities organized for and by the “other” communities’ representatives have really been a breakthrough in the straight political image of the museum. It appears as though the museum was no longer for and of the Bulgarian nation.

## The Outcomes

But this feeling is illusionary. The “ethnic” presentations were simply supplementary to the main exhibiting trend about the Bulgarian culture which was shown simultaneously on the next floor. Only a carefully selected list of ethnic cultures had the chance to be shown in the NEM. They conformed to the positive stereotype<sup>7</sup> of the close “other”. The negative ethnic images were simply excluded or failed to pass the curators’ discussions with no motivation. These were the Turks, the Bulgarian Muslims, the Tatars and the Gagauz. They are characterized either as Muslims or as having Turkic origin and/ or speaking a kind of Turkish dialect.

The stated aim of the exhibition series was to demonstrate the good practices of coping with the different ethnic groups, living in the Bulgarian lands for centuries (Decheva 2005). That is the reason these exhibitions to be qualified as quietly supporting the state policy towards the ethnic communities in the country (the 1990s’ government concept of the “Bulgarian ethnic tolerance”). Not surprisingly, all of these displays focused on past features of the ethnic cultures. For example, the Roma/ Gypsies were presented only by a selected list of professions: the musician, the craftsman and the fortune-teller, thus drawing an exotic collective image. Not a word was mentioned about current discrimination, segregation and other social group problems. The communities were shown as close “Other”, but with no notion of intercultural relations or stereotypes presented. The communication between the majority and the minorities was not a subject of exhibiting. It could eventually be heard in the guide’s remarks. The exhibitions did not come to eliminate the predominantly negative attitude of the Bulgarians towards “their neighbours”. They simply facilitated a short-lived encounter between the museum visitor with the “other” culture. I would just cite one of the comments, addressed to me as a guide by one of the visitors at the “Karakachans in Bulgaria” exhibition: “Why do you keep on setting these ethnic exhibits in the museum? You were supposed to show Bulgarian things and to educate the nation”. Her protest was not surprising. It was the expected outcome of a long-lasting, highly considered state and museum politics.

The more important and, I would say, unintended effect of displaying ethnic communities’ cultures in the NEM was their institutionalization. By entering the National museum their presence in Bulgaria was approved.

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5 “The Holy Path. The Bulgarian Jews through the Centuries” (1998), “Armenians in Bulgaria” (1999), “Karakachans in Bulgaria” (2001-2002), “Aroumanians in Bulgaria” (2005).

6 Since the 1988 the museum management has decided to remove the permanent exhibition and start a series of thematic temporary displays. The museum space has then been divided into two parts and there have usually been two exhibitions staged at a time.

7 The positive image of the “Other” is usually described as having characteristics similar to the Bulgarian national ones.

In the case of the Roma/ Gypsies the museum team helped the community articulate its own “collective” memories in a very extraordinary way. The community did not consider the Past that vital to its collective identity<sup>8</sup> as the museums do. So the exhibition could be assumed as presenting curators’ point of view or the politically correct one.

The following “ethnic” displays at the NEM developed the museum – community relations altering both their roles into almost equal. The community representatives were for the first time considered experts, not only mere respondents. This change was only temporary and did not affect the exhibiting of Bulgarian culture. In 2005 the NEM ended the series of presentations on ethnic cultures. During the discussions in the Museum council meetings the director pointed the visitors’ will as an argument for this decision.

In most of the 1990s’ official documents issued by the NEM the Museum is called “the most Bulgarian institution”. Comparing this definition to the museum image described in the visitor’s words cited above one could notice the full agreement between the curators’ and the visitors’ notion of museum. The nation is conceived as an endangered species that needs a special protection and would better be kept in safe, museum space. Still, in the 1990s and the 2000s the NEM is assigned the role of a cage or a reliquary.

## Resources

The National Ethnographic Museum Archive

Records of the meetings of the National Ethnographic Museum’s Council

Interviews at the National Ethnographic Museum:

A. Komitska, curator of Bulgarian Folk Clothing Department (Macedonia and Thrace Section), 18 October 2005.

Nadezhda Teneva, Deputy Director, Curator of Woodcarving and Home Crafts and Furniture Departments, 12 October 2005.

Vladlena Nestorova, curator of Jewels Department, 12 October 2005.

Mirella Decheva, curator of Fabrics and Embroidery Department, 1 November 2005.

Iva Philipova, ex-guide at the NEM (1995-2003), 1 November 2005.

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8 I would even argue the definition of the Roma/ Gypsies a “community” for this could be only an outsider point of view or an attempt to provoke the construction of an imagined community. The so called Roma/ Gypsy community is reported as highly heterogeneous with almost no sense of collective identity.

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