Aspects of the Ideal of Socialist Masculinity and its Disintegration – From the “Iron Men” to the Man-centaur

Gergana Popova

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, BULGARIA
Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Philosophical and Political Sciences

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Abstract

The paper studies the socialistic interpretation of the Bulgarian sportsmen called “iron men” i.e. the sportsmen competing in the highly developed in socialist Bulgaria “power” sports (wrestle, boxing, and weightlifting). The article claims that the development of “power” sports along with the generally negative Communist conceptualization of the rough power serves the skillful balance between the explicit rules and the hidden requirements of the system. In its second part the paper studies the turning of this sportsman into the “mutra” – one of the popular masculine figure on 90s in Bulgaria. The “mutra” is conceptualized as a man-centaur – a masculine figure which body mixes bestial and human characteristics. The article claims that in a way this kind of body evokes not only fear or disgust but also admiration and envy and it constitutes one of the ideal types of masculinity in Bulgaria after 1989.

Keywords: ideal masculinities, iron men, power sports, socialist masculinity, mud.

1. “The iron men”

In the communist hierarchy of ideal masculine images in Bulgaria, the figures of the partisan and the worker were undoubtedly central. In the first years after the 9th September 1944 guerrilla’s discursive and visual representations occupied almost all of the symbolic space. They were gradually replaced by those of his successor – the hero of the labor front – the worker. Shock worker’s images, though with some nuances, entered into a similar paradigm of depiction. Workers were iconographically portrayed as strong men, tanned in battle or labor, with bulging underneath their clothes, muscular shoulders, clenched fists, and a forward-looking determined look. Their discursive representations were in the same register – they were described as fighters and heroes who have no rest and who, sacrificing their personal feelings, overcome all difficulties in the name of the new socialist society.

This emphasis on masculine power was, at first glance, a rehabilitation of the traditional type of masculinity, expressed in strength, self-sacrifice, asceticism, endurance, etc. “Masculinity” was manifested in all legitimate socialist discourses as well as in their visual analogues and yet it possessed severe specifics. In the first place, communist masculinity was deprived of the features of traditional “masculinity,” such as sexual power and non-ideologized

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1 9 September 1944 was the date when the pro-communist Fatherland Front took over the power in Bulgaria.

© Authors. Terms and conditions of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) apply. Correspondence: Gergana Popova, South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Philosophical and Political Sciences, Blagoevgrad, BULGARIA. E-mail: gerp@abv.bg.
physical power, which not only did not receive visual representations but were always exceptionally negatively conceptualized.

This paradox of communist masculinity was particularly evident in the ambiguous position that power sports and their representatives had in a socialist society.

In principle, the development of mass physical activity and sports was an essential part of the Communist party’s program for the production of healthy, agile, and able-bodied individuals needed for the construction of a communist society. In addition, physical education was seen as a tool for building collective identity and communist moral qualities such as discipline, modesty, and willingness. As early as the first years after the establishment of the socialistic power in Bulgaria, the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party on the state of physical culture and sport and the obligations of the Party in this field” stated:

“Physical culture and sports play an important role in preparing the people for high-reproductive work and defense of the country. Physical education is an integral part of the general socialist upbringing of the working people, especially the youth (insofar as physical culture and sport develop a number of valuable human qualities such as perseverance, will to win, courage, calmness, skillfulness, working out collective habits, etc.). At the same time, physical culture is an important tool for uniting the broad working and rural masses around the Party, as well as around the Fatherland front, trade union and youth organizations, through which the workers in our country participate in the political, economic and cultural life in the struggle for building socialism.” (Decision of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, 1949: 1)

Numerous journalistic and scientific articles explicated the need for the development of physical culture and sports in the same way. For example, in his report to the Central Sports Union, the future professor of physiology, long-time rector of Higher Institute of Physical Education and secretary of the Bulgarian Olympic Committee Dragomir Mateev said:

“Physical education does not just mean an activity that targets the body. Physical education is first and foremost the education of the central nervous system. Its tools are one of the most powerful tools of nurturing the spirit. Through them, social emotions such as the sense of duty, feeling of friendship and comradeship and friendly mutual assistance are developed and also the will develops and strengthens. Physical education influences the character as a whole, sharpening and eliminating its antisocial manifestations, and developing its valuable social features. These effects on the spirit and character of the youth are the real reasons because of which all modern pedagogical figures and reformers pay such great attention to physical education.” (Mateev, 1944: 2)

Along with instrumentalization of the mass sport as an educational tool, an unspoken but important factor in stimulating its professional counterpart was the opportunity for Bulgarian communist state to draw political dividends from the athletes' achievements in the propaganda war against the capitalist world. Somewhat unexpectedly because of the ideological emphasis that it put on the collective factor in sport, its politics was primarily aimed at promoting and creating advanced schools in power sports.

As early as 1949, the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party enacted a “Decision to improve the state of wrestling as a national sport.” It was followed by an extensive campaign in this direction. A new decision of the Central Committee from 1969 insisted on strengthening the position of the Bulgarian wrestling as a traditional Bulgarian sport, and the Order of the Ministry of Education from 17 March 1971 required “... to create conditions for the most widespread practice of wrestling by students in the classroom and extracurricular physical and sports activities in schools and higher education institutions” (School – Natural Environment of Wrestling, 1971: 1).
In the 60’s the Bulgarian sports and classical wrestling already broadcasted its European, World and Olympic champions. At the 1956 Melbourne Summer Olympics, Nikola Stanchev became an Olympic Wrestling Champion. Enyo Valchev won gold medals at the 1962 World Wrestling Championships, at the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 1964 and at the European Wrestling Championships in 1968 and 1969. He also won silver medals at the 1959 and 1969 World Wrestling Championships and the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. In the 97 kg category, Boyan Radev became a two-time Olympic champion in 1964 and in 1968 and a world champion in 1966.

The end of the 60’s marked the beginning of Bulgarian success in two other power sports – boxing and weight lifting. Bulgarian boxing for amateurs creates a strong school, and in 1969, Ivan Abadzhiev took over the weightlifting team, the achievements of which exceeded even those of the Bulgarian wrestlers. In the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Nurair Nurikian, Andon Nikolov, and Jordan Bykov became Olympic champions; in 1974 in Italy at the European Championships Andon Nikolov, Georgi Todorov, Nedelcho Kolev, Atanas Kirov took gold medals, and the same year at the World Cup in the Philippines Bulgaria was a world champion. In 1976 at the Montreal Olympics, Nedelcho Kolev set a world record after a broken tendon, and Norair Nurikian, Dancho Mitkov, and Blagoi Blagoev became medalists. At the Moscow Olympics in 1980, Assen Zlatev and Yanko Rusev won gold medals, Blagoi Blagoev and Nedelcho Kolev – silver. One of the biggest successes of the Bulgarian weightlifting team was the 1986 World Championships in Sofia during the time of Naum Shalamanov, Mitko Grublev, Sevdalin Marinov, Alexander Varbanov, Antonio Krastev and Asen Zlatev who took gold and silver medals in almost all categories (See Bogdanova, 1988).

At first glance, the successes of Bulgarian fighters, weightlifters and boxers, praised in Bulgaria as “iron men”, marked the triumph of the individual physical strength. But on the other hand, these achievements were primarily discussed as a collective. Even in absolutely individual sports, victories were considered not as individual over-the-top dueling or setting a personal record, but as a success of the team, the school, the people. Instead of agonic, the socialist athlete cultivated an almost army collective spirit. “Collectivism, companionship in mutual assistance are organic features of our socialist sports school. There are also its advantages over the West European sports schools” wrote Stefan Radnev in a book on the education of Bulgarian youth (Radnev, 1956: 237). In turn after the Munich Olympics in 1972 in: “Address of the Bulgarian athletes participating in the XX Summer Olympic Games to all athletes in People’s Republic of Bulgaria”, was said: “Because we are such a friendly sports family, what can only exist in one socialist country. We are flesh from the flesh of the Motherland, we are graduates of our glorious Komsomol – we are the children of the Bulgarian Communist Party, without which care we cannot imagine our successes” (Our Olympic successes – filial pay for the Party’s care, 1972: 1). In this sense, the manifestations of individual strength were seen as part of the collective socialist corporeality and power.

Secondly, the achievements of the Bulgarian wrestlers, weightlifters, and boxers were conceived as an entirely normal result of the favorable environment of the socialist society. Indeed, with regard to the successes of Bulgarian wrestlers, the “folk tradition” of Pehlivan fights, which

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2 Olympic boxing champions were: Georgi Kostadinov in 1972 in Munich, Peter Lesov – in 1980 in Moscow, Ismail Mustafov – in 1988 in Seoul. In 1982 in Munich, Ismail Mustafov became the world champion in boxing for amateurs. Seraphim Todorov, who began his career in the 1980s with his three worlds and 3 European titles, is among the most successful Bulgarian athletes (Bulgarian boxing federation [http://www.bgboxing.org/about-bfb/history/]).

3 The Komsomol was popular name of the youth organization of the Communist Party. In Bulgaria its whole name is Dimitrovist Communist Youth Union.
had created native talents such as Nikola Petrov and Dan Kolov⁴ was sometimes mentioned in books or articles. Yet far more attention is paid to the Communist party’s concern for this particular sport as well as for sports in general (Zhivkov, 1962; Lessingerov, 1970; Kriviralchev, 1970). In a speech to the Bulgarian Union for Physical Culture and Sports, the Bulgarian Head of State Todor Zhivkov stated directly: “The successes of our wrestlers, of our basketball players, as well as the achievements in some other sports, cause excitement and a feeling of patriotic pride among our people... These successes are the result of the efforts of numerous armies of gymnasts and athletes, of the efforts and work of a wide range of trained workers – physical executives, specialists, coaches, instructors and teachers who work with great love, enthusiasm, dedication and energy in the field of Bulgarian physical culture and sport. They are the result of tremendous political organizing and educational work of our Party, of the Bulgarian Union for Physical Culture and Sports, of Komsomol, of the Dimitrovist Pioneer Organization ‘Septemvriiche’⁵, of our public school and of other public mass organizations” (Zhivkov, 1962: 56).

And one of the many sports articles on this topic provided the following explanation of the good performance of Bulgarian athletes at Munich Games: “Some tend to put the emphasis on the excellent training of our competitors, which could not but reflect their mental attitude. This is undoubtedly true, but it can hardly fully explain the change that has occurred in them. Others simply want to see the quantitative accumulations that have grown into a new quality – the routine that has been acquired over the years has been seamlessly passed on from generation to generation. But hardly the key is here... Others mention the long-term moral and volitional preparation of our Olympic athletes, led this time and more and more methodically and more effectively. But this is not the “big secret”. It lies in the growing self-esteem of our people, in the ever-stronger belief in its own capabilities, the successes in building a developed socialist society, the continued mastery of science and technology, the increasing well-being of Bulgarians and the related gains in education and in general. All that has been achieved in recent years in Bulgaria has a particularly strong impact on the athletes’ self-confidence. They are representatives of an increasingly daring youth, of young people for whom there are fewer borders, young people who can more and more” (Eksrov, 1972: 72-74). This social determinism turned “iron men” into interchangeable social constructs, seemingly devoid of their physical potential.

A third important aspect in the development of power sports is their use as a demonstration of the power of the system. In a symbolic sense, the “iron men of Bulgaria” with their vigorous, muscular figures served as a suggestive embodiment of the power of socialism, as a warning sign-message aimed at its enemies. However, it is important to mention here that the bodies of the fighter, the boxer, the weightlifter were, in a sense, “de-corporated” by the tactical oscillation between their appearances and their concealments. The “iron men” served the regime by demonstrating its power, but their over-public exposure seemed as a dangerous play with destructive for a socialist society tendencies. Therefore, after competing, the “iron men’s” bodies disappeared to give way to the public, the representations of other models of bodily appearance.

From the following it seems that “iron men” fit into an allegorical scheme typical of Bulgarian socialism, presenting the body as a kind of neutral organism driven by a strong communist spirit. Achievements in sports were treated as one of the modes of communist heroism, as a kind of shock work in the field of sport. “We can say that this athlete who is good at work or

⁴ Nikola Petrov (1873-1925) is a Bulgarian wrestler, competing against many well-known fighters of his time. In 1898 he won the title of Champion of America in New York. Next year he becomes European Champion in Classical Wrestling in Vienna. In 1900 he won the world wrestling champion Paul Ponce and received the title “The Strongest Man of the 20th century”. Dan Kolov (1892-1940) is a Bulgarian fighter. Even today, he is considered by many to be the greatest fighter of all time and a legend in the martial arts. Dan Kolov has over 1500 meetings as a professional fighter, of which he has lost only 72.

⁵ The children’s communist organization in Bulgaria.
exercise is good at sports” – mentioned a book on the sportsmen’s education (Yanchev, 1967: 65). A socialist athlete was required to have the same qualities as any true communist worker – discipline and unconditional devotion to the Communist party, ideological rigidity, high morale, and strong will (Sotirov, 1972). Sportsmanship was regarded primarily as a physical projection of the ideological and moral-volitional characteristics of a communist personality. An important role in this dematerialization of the body played its presentation as an epiphenomenon of the archetype of the “heroic body”, originating from the ascetic, martyr’s figure of the partisan. This archetype was often reproduced in the stories of athletes who, despite their traumas, driven by their devotion to the Communist country and its people, are able to perform real sporting deeds. The Sport newspaper published an extensive article on this topic: “There are many cases when Bulgarian athletes overcome the disease, overcome the suffering from the trauma or the bleeding wound, compete to the point of exhaustion and win. On the field, these combatant athletes come out with the feeling that they are representative of a new world, of a new harmonious society, of a peaceful society free from oppression and exploitation” (Party Fighters, 1973: 2). And after the 1967 World Cup in Bucharest, where he won a silver medal, competing with a serious injury, Boyan Radev stated: “I represented them in this most unforgettable meeting of mine. I promised on their behalf. They had obliged me beforehand to represent myself with dignity, with honor as a Bulgarian patriot and communist at the Olympic Games in Mexico” (Stanchev, 1982: 70).

What has been described here leads to the conclusion of a specific duality in relation to the iron men, which brings to light some ambivalence aspects of socialist masculinity. On the one hand, the athletes’ strong muscular bodies returned to a traditional axiological paradigm that places in its center the masculine power, a victory achieved not by the spirit but by physics. The development of power sports dealt with the latent nationalism fed by the mythological archetypes of the hero, the haidut, the voivode, and by the continuity with the legendary figure of Dan Kolov. In this perspective, Bulgarian “iron men” played the role of both one of the few legitimate nationalist identification signs and a symbolic vent for the accumulated social destructive energy. On the other hand, in the typical way of Bulgarian socialism, they were reduced to allegory, to one of the many modes of communist heroism. The development of power sports such as wrestling, weightlifting, and boxing, combined with the otherwise negative conceptualization of brute bodily strength, appeared as a skillful balance between open requirements and norms and the implicit needs of the system. It serves as a sublimation of the collective unconscious of socialism by channeling latent Bulgarian nationalism and patriarchal spirit within the dominant legitimate ideology. It was the contamination of traditional pre-socialist ideals about the man with the models of socialism.

2. The man-centaur

After the fall of socialist rule in 1989, this stratum of diligently-grown athletes remained out of work and beyond the control of state structures. Accustomed only to handle the potential of their bodies, unlimited in the forms of legitimate violence, “iron men” provided a significant resource to the criminal sector, engaging directly with it through trafficking in girls, thefts, robberies, racketeering, etc. or as combat troops and guarding emerging economic groups. The term “wrestler” is deprived of the connotations of discipline, compliance with rules, and

6 The haidUTES are members of the armed local people’s resistance to the Ottoman rule from the 15th to the 19th century. The etymology of the term is Hungarian, denoting border guards. The Ottomans refer to this term as armed “robbers” fighting against their rule. A significant change in the thinking of the haidut in Bulgaria was introduced by Georgi Sava Rakovski, who created the idea of a haidut as a people’s protector. Voivode is the leader of the haidutes’ bands.

7 In Bulgarian, the terms wrestler and bouncer are expressed in the same word.
sports honor inherited from sports terminology and began to refer to unlimited carriers of power. In addition, while most of their socialist predecessors had occupied the training halls most of the time, post-totalitarian “wrestlers” appeared in the public space, instilling natural terror in the average Bulgarian.

In the period of disintegration of the state structures and delegitimation of the police and the court, they, in a sense, exposed the state monopoly on violence. At the beginning of the 1990s, former wrestling athletes as Iliya Pavlov, Vasil Iliev, Georgi Iliev, Dimitar Dimitrov-Monkey, Krasimir Marinov-Margina, Mladen Mihalev-Majo, Dimitar Jamov became the leaders of criminal gangs involved in smuggling, racketeering, and cars’ theft. They entered into cooperation or competition with other criminal groups, also formed mostly by competitors in other sports such as Eastern martial arts, rowing, canoeing, etc. Gradually, power groups legalized their businesses, creating robust security and insurance companies, and later they started running large trading companies, casinos, hotel complexes, privatized enterprises, etc. Not only did these former athletes gave birth to some of the most powerful economic groups, but they also set the dominant, albeit ambivalent, model of masculine behavior and body in the early to mid-’90s.

The “wrestler” with black clothes and sunglasses – in his official version (borrowed from the well-known representations of mafia clans) – or with a bat, unkempt sweat pants, shorts, and a vest, became the dominant male figure from the early and mid-1990s. And if the name “wrestler,” which appeared in 1990–1991, was related directly to the former athletes’ sporting past and referred in particular to the specifics of their activity, then the later – “mud” – contained the far more ambivalent attitude of hatred and admiration, fear and desire, repulsion and attraction. The “mud” was, in a sense, a centaur, a human-animal. This very name implied mud’s bodily formlessness, primacy, brutality. It suggested the notion of an unspiritual, unconscious body; of a body left to the power of its impulses and drives; of a transgressive body imposed in space. The unnaturally developed muscle mass, combined with otherwise sagging bellies, lack of neck and low forehead; the deliberate abandonment of care for clothing manifested in sweatshirts, tank tops, shorts, etc., demonstrating disregard for social norms and a sense of omnipotence; the compulsory bat symbolizing brute force; the “lurking” posture in constant readiness for battle (Kyosev, 2003: 302); the street fights and organized beatings as the only means of solving problems and accessing what is desired – this whole constellation of zoomorphic characteristics and unruly behavior seemed to carry the “mud” out of the normalized socio-cultural space into the natural world. In fact, even when, in the later years of Bulgarian transition, the appearance of many of the members of this contingent changed dramatically, and they became elegant, good-looking businessmen, the name “mud” remained, referring to this primordial existence. The nicknames of a number of leaders and members of the force groups – Monkey, Bear, Lizard, Dog, Mouse, Ant, etc. were also alluding to it.

But the “chthonic being” of the “mud” in a peculiar way not only lowered but also elevated them over the “human” social world. Undoubtedly, their appearance and actions evoked fear and horror, to some extent overcome by parodying them in a series of jokes, skits, and cartoons, presenting “muds” – according to the smart definition of Alexander Kosev – in the role of “something means between sinister tricksters and dumb trolls” (Kyosev, 2003: 302).

On the other hand, some of the “mud’s gangs” emerged as a reaction to unorganized Roma crime since the early 1990s. They were conceived as a kind of counterpoint to decaying state structures, to inactive police and the judiciary: counterpoint, fueled by the archetypes of the Bulgarian folklore tradition, which is not particularly involved in the notions of legality. In this respect, the image of the “mud” was also loaded with positive connotations – despite the violence, beatings, and racketeering, muds in the public consciousness were also somewhat heroic figures,

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8 The Bulgarian term is *mutra* which means ugly, shapeless face.
fascinating with their power and masculinity, with the boldness to stand against the law and social norms, with the potential to achieve what is desired at all costs and with an unrestrained life in the risks and pleasures leading most of them to the inevitable fatal end. They were perceived as a kind of “goat omission”, as doomed, sacrificial figures who had ventured to live according to the principle of pleasure in the normalized by the laws of reality social world. That is why the brutal mud’s bodies were, in a sense, objects of envy and admiration; they also turned out to be attractive erotic objects.

An emblematic couple of the Bulgarian transition were the untidy, lanky man in a tracksuit and a tank top – the “mud” and the provocative, well-dressed, sexy beauty – a model or pop-folk singer, named “mudress.” Of course, these types of liaisons were largely due to the access to money and power of the Bulgarian muds. Mudress itself, in this sense, was a symbolic expression of the power and masculinity of the mud, just as his manliness was literally represented in the heaps of muscles, shapeless body mass, and force gestures (Dichev, 1998). Yet years after the sunset of the power bosses in the late 1990s, their former lovers speak of them with admiration, just as many of them are still present in the public consciousness as protectors, benefactors, bohemians, men of honor. Mud won the most beautiful and sexy girls not just with money, gifts and trips to luxury resorts, he won with the erotica of risk, of primacy, of undisguised masculinity. The Bulgarian transition went back to the pre-socialist model of the binary male-female world, to the traditional notions of the Balkan, powerful, aggressive, potent male. But the mud’s body not only entered into the masculine schemes – it referred to the mythological visions of the power and hyperbolized sexual potency of human animals. In this sense, the “muds” gave birth to aesthetics in which the primal and the ugly awaken not only disgust and horror but also attraction. And in this sense, they constituted a specific model of masculinity.

This context provides one of the guidelines for interpreting the case of perhaps the most influential man in Bulgaria in the last two decades – the current Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, who, in a sense, is a kind of distilled epiphenomenon of the mud’s archetype. During the socialist regime, Borisov graduated from the Higher School of the Ministry of the Interior with a degree in Fire Protection. He trained taekwondo and karate, becoming a karate trainer at the MoI. After the collapse of the regime in 1989, Borisov turned to the security business. In 1991 he founded the company “Ipon-i” Ltd, which was one of the largest security companies in the country and provided security for people like Todor Zhivkov, the future Prime Minister of Bulgaria – Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and the President of the International Olympic Committee Juan Antonio Samaranch. In the following years, Borisov founded other companies, in some of which he was a partner with persons from the power groups such as Rumen Nikolov-Pasha, Mladen Mihaele-Majo, Alexei Petrov-Tractor. A number of investigative journalists, including Western journalists, presented him as part of the criminal circles in Bulgaria, as one of the leaders of one of the most powerful criminal groups - SIK and as a business partner of well-known Bulgarian gangsters. In the works of the later killed writer Georgi Stoev, who also had participated in the force squads, Borisov is described as a “mud”.

His political career began in 2001 during the government of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha when he was appointed Secretary-General of the Ministry of the Interior. In 2005 he emerged as an independent candidate for mayor of Sofia and won with a large majority. In 2006 he founded the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party, which in 2009 won the parliamentary elections and, with small breaks, has ruled Bulgaria so far. Boyko Borisov is, for the third time, the Prime Minister of Bulgaria. Already at the beginning of his political career, the former security guard ranked first in all possible popularity ratings, earning himself the image of being the only uncorrupted fighter against criminality⁹, of people’s protector and also of a sex-

⁹ In this regard, while is the Secretary-General of the Ministry of the Interior Boyko Borisov’s explained the crime by saying in relation to the court: “We catch them, they release them!”
symbol, as evidenced by his repeated selection of “Man of the Year” by various women’s magazines.

In such a context, the case of Borisov’s football career is curious. He was not content to be President of a team, as many of the criminal bosses of the 90s did, such as Mladen Mihalev, Vasil Iliev, and Georgi Iliev, Grisha Ganchev, etc. During his first term, Boyko Borisov was registered as a football player of the Vitosha Bistritsa team, known as the Bistritsa Tigers. The team then competed in the third level of Bulgarian football. He participated in many matches in which he received the support of a number of ministers from his government (Borisov is most pleased 2012). Statistics show that in 2011 when 52-year-old Boyko Borisov was on the pitch, Vitosha Bistritsa had no loss. Not only that – after a friendly match, Borisov said earnestly: “Gonzo, let him admit, brought three or four Levski players and with our Tigers from Bistritsa won them 18:12. He scored four goals, and I scored eight”. For comparison: Levski is the most famous Bulgarian team, and Georgi Ivanov-Gonzo is one of the most successful Bulgarian footballers from the recent past, who has 162 goals in official matches for the teams in which he played (Angelov, 2011). Because of his sports career, Borisov was getting involved in a lot of scandals – his team used the government plane, and he ignored the rules of the Bulgarian football union, entering the game without first being included in the match lineup. Perhaps his football achievements reached a comic extreme when he was nominated for Bulgarian Football Player of the Year at the end of 2011. In the provisional standings, Borisov was in the first place, ahead of the Manchester United goalkeeper Dimitar Berbatov, who, however, expressed his desire to be removed from the standings. As opposed to him, Borisov said in an interview: “Only for “Footballer of the Year” I will not show modesty, and therefore I would not return the prize. I cannot recognize myself as a weak player” (The prime minister: I’ll get the award 2011). In the end, Borisov refused the award, suggesting that it should be awarded to Bulgarian best young footballer. On the verge of conformism and irony, the poll, however, was the latest proof that despite the many scandals surrounding Borisov and despite his criminal past, at least during his first and second term as prime minister, his image was not only not seriously damaged, but also constructed precisely by his manful physical appearance, biography, and his authoritarian behavior. This particular constellation of physical and behavioral characteristics makes him the embodiment of the ideal, purged of negatives, the vision of the “positive mud.”

From a certain point of view, the appearance and imposition of the super-masculine monstrous bodies on the “muds” and the excess power and eroticism carried by them are one of the angles of the collapse of the socialist archetypes of ideal masculinity and their replacement with new ones in the early and mid-1990s. They appear to be a symptom of the too long, empty space of phallic masculinity during the socialist period and the implicit need for it. And yet the long-lasting fascination by Boyko Borisov – a figure approaching too close to the mud’s patterns – as well as the sustained romantic talk by journalists, lovers, and followers of other ringleaders of the 90’s still exists10. It seems to indicate the steady presence in the first decades of the 21st century in Bulgaria of a somewhat hidden, somewhat shameful archaic ideal for the male body and behavior associated with the brute male power and force, that does not recognize boundaries, rules, and norms.

10 See Simov, A. (2011). A ballad for Ganetsa; Darina Pavlova: Ilia Pavlov is the man of my life (2015); The spokesman for Multigroup spoke about Bozhkov and Iliya Pavlov (2020); Pavlova, B. (2017). Gangster, singer, party man: Ivo Karamansky’s legacy.
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