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The few studies on the topic view the Great Leap Forward in Bulgaria either as a complete copy of the Chinese campaign or as an indigenous effort with barely anything to do with China other than the borrowed label. My findings show that the situation was much more complicated. There is no question that China’s campaign had a major impact on the Bulgarian leadership’s decision to adopt a similar approach to development. Moreover, major policies, like endorsing completely unrealistic production targets or consolidating agricultural collectives into larger units, closely mirrored the Chinese model. The most surprising fact for me was that these policies were implemented at a time of worsening Sino-Soviet relations and were thus bound to cause deep irritation in the Soviet Union. As a result, the “Chinese aspect” was toned down at a later stage of the campaign, but the policies continued unabated and led to a major economic crisis in Bulgaria.

China’s social experiment followed Eastern Europe’s experience in rural collectivisation by nearly a decade, rather than preceding it. What was unique about the Chinese experiment, and what major lesson does it teach us about the economic logic of the common vs. the private?

The main goal of the Great Leap Forward, namely to showcase the superiority of the Communist system by catching up with advanced economies in record time, was similar to those of previous campaigns in the Soviet Union. But the implementation had some unique features, such as regulations prohibiting cooking in private homes and forcing people to eat in communal halls. Moreover, the scale and speed of the disastrous impact were unprecedented, at least for the second half of the twentieth century. Within less than three years, the economy of China was completely wrecked and tens of millions of people died of starvation and brutality. The key lesson is that economic growth that leads to prosperity takes a long time and requires sensible economic policies that are not guided by ideology.

Five decades later, China’s economic performance has changed beyond recognition. In your opinion, would “the Chinese miracle” have been a suitable model to transplant onto Bulgarian soil after the political changes in 1989? Has Bulgaria wasted her chance to become “an economic tiger”?

Over the past twenty-five years, Bulgaria has certainly missed several opportunities that could have paved the way to becoming a dynamic and prosperous economy. But I don’t think that the Chinese model, with its combination of authoritarian rule and economic liberalization, would have been an option for a small country in Europe. At the very least, Bulgaria would have ended isolated from the rest of Europe, and so without the ability to take advantage of trade and investment opportunities.