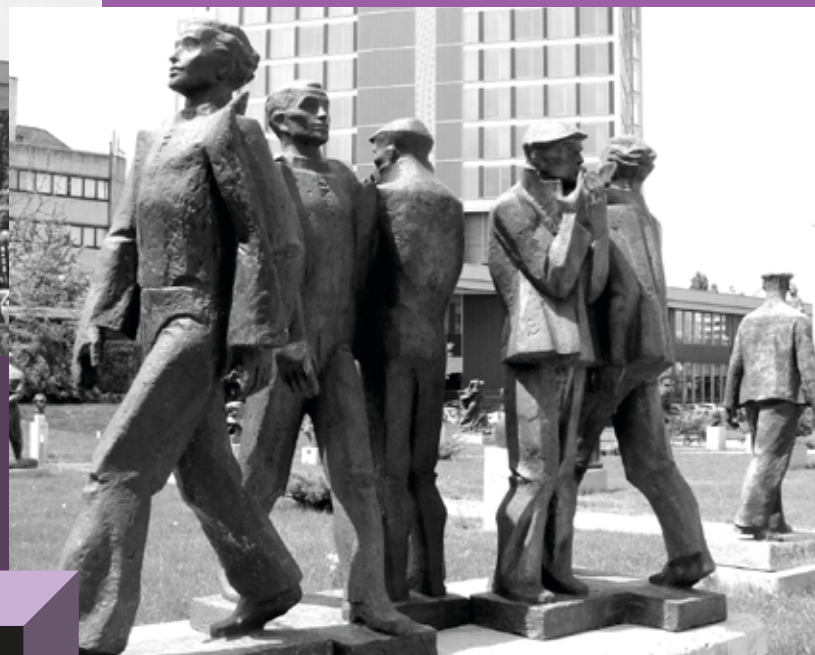


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Centre for Advanced Study Sofia

newsletter

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Back to the great leaps forward...

Kiril Tochkov



Just a decade or two ago, China was perceived in Eastern Europe as a far-away, exotic fairyland. Therefore, comparing China's economic development under Communism with Bulgaria's is a most extraordinary research topic. What inspired the choice of target-countries in your comparative study?

Kiril Tochkov: I have been fascinated with China from an early age. When I was growing up in Bulgaria in the 1970s and 1980s, there were barely any contacts between the two countries. There was not even a single Chinese restaurant in Bulgaria at the time. From conversations with people from my grandfather's generation, I learned that in the 1950s China and Bulgaria had a very close relationship, which fell victim to the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s. This was a big surprise to me, and ever since I have wanted to explore this topic in more detail.

Your CAS research settled upon a comparative analysis of China's "Great Leap" (1958–1961) – enacted through enforced land collectivization – and

Bulgaria's subsequent agricultural experience in the 1960s, once the Chinese model was transferred to Bulgarian soil. What surprised you most about your findings?

K. T.: 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?

K. T.: 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

Finally, how would you evaluate your stay at CAS?

K.T.: My fellowship at CAS was an amazing experience, and I have been recommending it to colleagues of mine. I am an economist and a China scholar, but my project also requires an intimate knowledge of Bulgarian history and archival sources. At CAS I had the chance to learn a great deal in that regard from experienced scholars like Roumen Avramov and Diana Mishkova, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for their help and support. Another major benefit was the interdisciplinary environment at CAS. I received invaluable feedback on my project from other fellows from various academic fields, which certainly enriched my perspective and improved my scholarship. Last but not least, the weekly seminars at CAS were a great forum for meeting interesting people and exchanging ideas.

Interviewed by the Editor

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"?

K.T.: 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.

