

IVANKA PETROVA

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia

[ivanka.petrova@iefem.bas.bg](mailto:ivanka.petrova@iefem.bas.bg)

## Youth Labor in Socialist Bulgaria – from Ideology to Labor Practices

The research is aimed at an important part of the state policy in socialist Bulgaria – the forced engagement of young people, future intellectuals as an unpaid or low-paid labor force in various sectors of economy. Through this compulsory employment of high school and university students in summer free months the ruling elites aim to discipline the young intelligentsia and to educate them in work habits. The main form of forced labor is the participation in youth brigades, but other alternative forms of youth labor are gradually being adopted and imposed. The text presents an ethnological study of youth seasonal labor in the sector of international tourism in the 1970s and 1980s, looking at the perspective of young intellectuals working during their summer vacations in the Youth Travel Bureau “Orbita” as part-time tour guides of foreign groups. This form of temporary employment of young people is accepted as an alternative to the participation in youth brigades and is related to intellectual work. The aim is to analyze the main features of the labor culture of part-time guides working at the International Youth Center “Georgi Dimitrov” near Primorsko. The officially imposed principles and norms for the work of the young collaborators are presented and their application in the working life of the guides is studied. The subjects of research are the attitudes for working with tourists, the relations in the work environment, the labor practices, the difficulties in everyday working life and the ways of overcoming them, the informal aspects of the activities. The study is based on biographical interviews with former guides between the ages of 50 and 65, conducted in 2019 and 2020. As a participant for six summer seasons in this type of work, the author also relies on the method of the reflexive anthropology. The results of the study show how the discrepancy between the expectations and intentions of the ideologues of the provided tourist services, on the one hand, and the behavior and labor practices of young people actually

occurs. The examples are indicative of the changes “from below”, through everyday strategies of young people, of the initially conceived system of the international youth tourism in socialist Bulgaria.

*Key words:* part-time guides, labor practices, Youth Travel Bureau “Orbita”, International Youth Center “Georgi Dimitrov”, international tourism

## Омладинске радне акције у социјалистичкој Бугарској – од идеологије до радне праксе

Истраживање је усмерено на важан сегмент државне политике у социјалистичкој Бугарској – принудно ангажовање младих, будућих интелектуалаца као неплаћене или слабо плаћене радне снаге у различитим секторима привреде. Овим обавезним запошљавањем средњошколаца и студената током летњих месеци, владајуће елите су покушавале да дисциплинују младе и да их науче радним навикама. Главни облик принудног рада је подразумевао учешће у омладинским радним бригадама, с тим да су се постепено наметале и друге форме омладинских радних акција. Рад представља етнолошку студију сезонских радних акција младих у сектору међународног туризма 70-их и 80-их година 20. века. Намера овог рада је да се сагледа перспектива младих интелектуалаца који су радили током летњег распуста у Омладинском туристичком бироу „Орбита“ као хонорарни туристички водичи. Овај облик привременог запошљавања младих прихваћен је као алтернатива учешћу у омладинским бригадама и везан је за интелектуални рад. Циљ је да се анализирају главне карактеристике културних форми које су се изградиле услед запошљавања младих људи као хонорарних водича у Међународном омладинском центру „Георги Димитров“ близу Приморског. Анализирани су они државни принципи и норме који су младима наметнути током њиховог обављања послова водича. Предмет истраживања су конкретно: ставови како се опходити према туристима, потом односи у радној средини и радне навике, свакодневне потешкоће које су се јављале приликом обављања послова и начини њиховог превазилажења, неформалне активности. Студија је заснована на биографским интервјуима који су вођени 2019. и 2020. године са људима старости између 50 и 65 година, који су били запослени као водичи. Ауторка се ослања и на сопствена искуства која је стекла радећи као водич током шест летњих сезона и, у том смислу, користи методологију рефлексивне антропологије. Ре-

зультати истраживања показују како заправо настаје несклад између очекивања и намера власти у погледу пружања туристичких услуга, с једне стране, и конкретних облика понашања и радних навика које су млади испољавали. Примери су индикативни за разумевање промена које су се одвијале „одоздо“ путем стратегија које су млади спроводили свакодневно, спрам првобитно замишљеног система међународног омладинског туризма у социјалистичкој Бугарској.

*Кључне речи:* хонорарни водичи, радне акције, омладински туристички биро „Орбита“, Међународни омладински центар „Георги Димитров“, међународни туризам

## INTRODUCTION

The unskilled physical labor compulsorily performed by young people in Bulgaria (upper secondary school pupils, students and young professionals with higher education) in various spheres of the socialist economy, mainly in construction, food industry and agriculture, has been the subject of research interest of ethnologists, folklorists and historians over the last two decades (Ivanova 2003; Brunbauer 2010; Raeva 2010; Yancheva 2015; Anchev 2017). The authors note the forced but often even formal nature of this work, imposed by the regime mainly in the youth labor brigades organised during the summer months. The distinctive features of this regulated labor activity are defined as the relatively harsh conditions of physical labor, often incompatible with the intellectual skills of the youth; the atypical living conditions imposed, albeit temporarily, on young people; the lack of pay or its minimal amount; and the attempts to socially and economically denigrate the young intelligent stratum. Doubts have also been expressed about the economic efficiency of youth brigadier labor, especially after the 1950's, when youthful impulses and enthusiasm for the construction of the large-scale socialist construction projects were almost completely absent (Brunbauer 2010). This compulsory employment of young people in summer free months was in line with the prevailing socialist ideology to impose total control over all spheres of public and private life. Through it, the ruling elites aim to discipline the young intelligentsia and to educate them in work habits.

In this article I will present another form of temporary employment of young people that is accepted, recognized and promoted as an alternative to participation in youth brigades in socialist Bulgaria. Unlike the physical unskilled labor of the brigadiers during the summer months, this type

of work involves intellectual labor. It presupposes, but also requires, the use of the excellent knowledge of foreign languages acquired in the few language high schools in socialism or in the philology departments of the universities, which also admitted and trained small numbers of students. Thus, right from the start, the access of the young people to this kind of work is severely restricted and becomes a privilege of only a select section of the young intelligentsia. Permission to undertake it is granted after successful completion of an entrance exam, specialised training and passing an examination on skills acquired for a specific type of activity. It is a seasonal job for high school and university students in the field of international tourism as part-time guides and translators for foreign youth tourist groups. It provides formal employment during the school-free months and guarantees an income for the young people doing it. In this paper, I will present an ethnological study of seasonal youth labor in international tourism in the 1970's and 1980's in Bulgaria, examining it from the perspective of young intellectuals working during their summer vacations as part-time guides at the "Orbita" Youth Travel Bureau.

International tourism became one of the important economic sectors in socialist Bulgaria, especially after the 1960's. The authorities expected substantial financial revenues in foreign currency from it, while at the same time burdening it with ideological tasks of presenting a positive image of the regime and the country to foreign visitors. It can be argued that state policy paid attention to this business both in economic and ideological / propaganda terms. International tourism is gradually, mostly due to the growing demand from other countries, becoming a "visiting card" of the political regime in Bulgaria (cf. Ivanova 2018). However, as Maya Ivanova notes in her study of international tourism in the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts, in its development this sector is constantly confronted with the problems and deficits of the socialist economy, weak administrative capacity and poor tourist services (Ivanova 2018). The socialist regime attempts to create legitimacy for itself through international tourism, as shown by Ana Luleva's anthropological analyses based on the example of the winter resort of Borovets. The author examines the relations of trust and distrust and the related informal practices of employees working in the sector in order to outline the main characteristics of the labor culture in the field of international tourism in the country during the period of late socialism, namely informality and relations of personal trust (Luleva 2021).

The above-mentioned studies by Ana Luleva and Maya Ivanova present analytical and critical perspectives on the work of the state enterprise

“Balkantourist”, conceived as a “showcase of Bulgarian socialism”, which provides most of the services in the tourist sector. In addition to this leading state economic organisation, other tourist enterprises with a more specialised profile and a more limited scope of activity, but also with a definite place in the system of international tourism, are being set up and operating in the country. One of them, which is the object of my research, is the Youth Travel Bureau (YTB) “Orbita”, established in 1958 with headquarters in Sofia and branches in some of the country’s district towns.<sup>1</sup> It was established as a specialized division for Youth and Tourism of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth Union. The Bureau’s target market is primarily students and young people up to the age of 30 in Bulgaria and abroad: it organizes visits of foreign youth travel groups to the country, sending Bulgarian youth abroad for tourism purposes, and excursions of Bulgarian youth groups to the country. “Orbita” operates its own tourist facilities (hotels, restaurants, sports complexes, etc.). The Black Sea resort International Youth Centre (IYC) “Georgi Dimitrov” near Primorsko, whose hotels, restaurants, bungalows, discotheques, sports facilities and summer theatre are managed by the Bureau, enjoys a great reputation in the country and abroad. Other youth tourist complexes, but in a much smaller size than that of the IYC, have been built in Sofia and in the towns of Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Plevn, Lovech, Vratsa, Rila and in the locality “Tsigov Chark” near the town of Batak in the Rhodope Mountains. The head office of the Bureau is housed in a large newly built building in Sofia on one of the central boulevards. Established as one of the first tourist organizations in socialist Bulgaria, after only a few years “Orbita” began to feel a dire need for seasonally working part-time guides to serve the numerous youth tourist groups coming mainly from European socialist countries.<sup>2</sup> The guiding and translating services provided are the result of the activities of a specialised Guides Department, which employs full-time guides all year round. This department is entrusted with the tasks of recruiting candidates for seasonal part-time guides, conducting entrance examinations and training of the approved candidates.<sup>3</sup>

In the text I aim to analyze the main features of the labor culture of the part-time guides working during the summer months at the International Youth Centre near Primorsko. I will present the officially imposed

---

<sup>1</sup> The Bureau was privatized in the 1990’s.

<sup>2</sup> The groups from the former USSR and GDR are the most numerous, the number of groups from Poland, Hungary and former Czechoslovakia is much smaller.

<sup>3</sup> More details about the training and exams for part-time guides at Petrova 2021.

principles and norms for the work of the young guides and explore how these norms are put into practice in their everyday working life. I will trace the attitudes towards the guiding work, the difficulties they face in their daily life and the ways of overcoming them, the informal aspects of their work. The analysis of the relations established in the working process and of the labor practices of the young collaborators in the International Youth Centre will help me to draw out the main characteristics of their labor culture. My primary sources are biographical interviews with former part-time guides, men and women between the ages of 50 and 65, which I conducted in 2019 and 2020. As a participant for six summer seasons in doing this kind of work, I also draw on the method of the reflective anthropology. During each of these six seasons, I spent at least one month at the International Youth Center, providing guiding and translating services to young tourists from the former GDR. My work as part-time guide replaced the participation in the summer school and student labor brigades, but I also worked in my free weeks during the summer vacation, and my work commitments usually lasted about two months. Most young part-time guides worked a similar pattern during the summer months.

## THE INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CENTRE “GEORGI DIMITROV” NEAR PRIMORSKO

The establishment of the resort, called International Youth Centre “Georgi Dimitrov”, in the immediate vicinity of the coastal village of Primorsko can be seen as a part of the state policy in the 1950s and 1960s for the construction of an infrastructure that would allow massification of the summer vacation of tourists on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this complex is to stimulate contacts between young people from different countries, especially those in the socialist camp. Its construction began with the Order of the Presidium of the National Assembly No. III 5052 of 2 July 1955 and the Letter of the Council of Ministers No. 49 of 21 March 1956. The actual construction of the complex began in the spring of 1957. The International Youth Centre is located on the land of the village of Primorsko on an area of 1 000 acres, in the southern bay between Primorsko and Kiten, separated from Primorsko by the lower reaches and the mouth of the Diavolska River, and from Kiten by a dense deciduous forest. The resort has been gradually built up over ten years and includes numerous

---

<sup>4</sup> More details about the development of the tourist industry in Bulgaria in the period of socialism in Ivanova 2018.

bungalows set among oak woodland, three hotels, four restaurants, two discotheques, three cafes, a sports complex, a summer theatre, a health post, several shops and beach facilities. The natural conditions prove to be very suitable for a good summer holiday: as the complex is located in a bay, the sea shore is shallow, the water is warm in the summer months and there is almost no swell. The beach is extensive and the sand is fine and golden. The climate is favourable for holidays because it offers a combination of sea air and cool forest vegetation.

The creation of the International Youth Centre has a direct economic and social impact on the region and local population: the seaside is modernized through the construction of the tourist infrastructure (cleaning and improvement of the terrain, water supply, sewerage, electrification, road network in the complex and to the nearby villages), new jobs are being created, respectively, to increase the income of the local population. The example of the IYC, albeit on a smaller scale, is correlated with the examples described by Maya Ivanova of the large resorts in the northern and southern Black Sea coasts as evidence of the modernizing change of the social and economic environment (cf. Ivanova 2018).

The resort near Primorsko is mainly designed to provide sea tourism for foreign youth groups. The access of Bulgarian youth to summer recreation in the International Youth Centre in the socialist period was very difficult. The possibilities for young Bulgarian people under the age of 30 to obtain a card through the Youth Travel Bureau “Orbita” for an individual two-week holiday at the Romantika campsite, consisting of tents and small bungalows without bathrooms, were quite limited. In this way, a kind of segregation of hosts is achieved, which has not only spatial, but also social aspects – the Bureau’s policy does not foresee that the Bulgarian youth staying at the IYC will be included and attracted to participate in the various daily events organized in the resort, which will be discussed later in the text. Rather, through this policy, they are treated as “second category” holidaymakers, which is also evidenced by the limited number of bungalows and tents provided for their use, as well as the remoteness of this campsite from the other bungalows and hotels where the foreign groups stay, and from the central part of the resort in general.

The quality of the tourist services offered to foreign groups in the youth resort corresponds to the level of solvency of young tourists from the former European socialist countries, which is relatively low. Most of them are accommodated in four-bed bungalows without bathrooms, also a large number of tourists occupy places in the hotels “Neptune” and “Horizon” in rooms with three and four beds. Youth groups staying in the bungalows

and in both hotels are fed in the self-service Neptune restaurant, while the more representative “Bisser” Hotel, with double rooms and its own restaurant where meals are served, is reserved for the small number of groups from Western European countries. In some cases it accommodates tourist groups from the former GDR, who have paid a correspondingly higher price for their holidays. In the evenings, holidaymakers can attend the two discotheques for an entrance fee or concerts, plays and film screenings in the summer theatre, most of them also with a fee.

## THE DAILY WORK OF THE PART-TIME GUIDES AT THE IYC “GEORGI DIMITROV”

Working with foreign tourist groups requires the 24-hour availability of the part-time guide who also acts as a translator. He / she meets the group at the airport,<sup>5</sup> accompanies the tourists by bus throughout the itinerary and is responsible for the implementation of all parts of the tour programme. Typically, the groups’ summer holiday covers two weeks and most often includes a seven-day stay on the Black Sea coast and a seven-day tour of the country (or a seven-day stationary stay in a mountain resort or in a town where the Bureau has a hotel base). Less frequently, the group spends both weeks at the International Youth Centre near Primorsko. In the latter case, the seasonal guide is assigned to work with two or three groups at the same time, but is not paid extra. Russian tourist groups often combine a week’s seaside holiday, most often at the IYC, with a week’s sightseeing tour of Bulgaria along routes associated with notable events of the Russo – Turkish War of 1877–1878. At the end of the stay, the guide sends the tourist group to the airport or to the “Friendship Bridge”, before signing, together with the group leader, the two copies of the most important document, the so-called *voucher*, which certifies the completion of the tour programme and the guide’s duties.

Arriving at the IYC by a transfer bus with the respective tourist group, the part-time guide accommodates the guests in their assigned bungalows or hotel rooms, receives the meal coupons from the accounting office, pays for them with the checks filled by him and distributes them to the tourists. The young guide must arrange daily meetings with the group leader and the tourists to brief them on the next day’s planned activities and encourage them to participate. Part-time guides attend mandatory

---

<sup>5</sup> Some of the Russian groups arrive with their own bus and the guide has to meet them after they cross the “Bridge of Friendship” (now the Danube Bridge) at Ruse.



briefings conducted by the senior guide at the resort three times a week at 9 AM. These are also attended by the staff guides who also accompany groups at the IYC. Every day from 10.30 AM, sports games and competitions are organised on the beach for two hours (beach volleyball, basketball, football, *folk ball*, etc.), in which the young guides are required to mobilise the members of their groups and form teams by nationality.

Two or three times a week, public ideological talks are organized in a special conference room in the afternoon, where the guides have to lead their tourists as listeners and provide simultaneous translations into the respective languages. Again in the afternoon, the guides organise and conduct a 'friendship meeting' between two groups from different countries as one of the compulsory services of the tourist programme. Thus, instead of letting their tourists spend a large part of their holiday freely on the beach and allocating time according to their wishes, the young guides must daily urge them to join in the activities of a varied nature that are organised. Twice a month a *Neptune evening* is held in the summer theatre, in which one or several short artistic and musical sketches must be presented by each nationality in the resort, and here again the role of the young part-time guide is the leading one: he / she must mobilise the group to devise a scenario and prepare such a stage performance.

The part-time guide must offer additional entertainment outside the program, which is extra paid by willing tourists. In the resort such services are e.g. a visit to the restaurant "Strandzata" with a rich dinner and folklore program, an attractive boat trip to the mouth of the river Ropotamo, bus excursions to the old towns of Sozopol and Nessebar, etc. In these events, the young guide is obliged to accompany willing tourists from his group and to help to perform the respective service. The tour guide is a mandatory intermediary and translator for the guests in their interactions with the local administration, health services, law enforcement and other institutions. It is clear from the responsibilities thus presented that the part-time guide must ensure that the members of the group spend as much time together as possible. Tour group leaders are also charged with such duties. Thus, young people should not be allowed to be out of control in a foreign country, even in their free time.

In defining the content of some of the guide services to be provided to the tourist groups by the part-time guides, ideological objectives stand out as the leading ones. Young guides are required to provide services in which the main emphases are in the direction of conveying basic ideological messages. For example, in the guide talk during the transfer of the group by bus to the IYC and in the organized excursions, as well as

in the daily conversations with the tourists, the guides must present the country and the population as “exemplary” in the building of socialism, and emphasize the successes of the socialist economy, social policy, health, education, and cultural development. The youths are entrusted with the task, during the obligatory bilateral “friendship meetings” and other mass events organized by them, to take care of creating friendly relations and sustainable ties between youths from different socialist countries.

The work presented above requires a heavy workload of the young people – there are no days off for them, nor a set time for rest on working days; they must be as focused as possible during the day and always ready to work at night. It is not rare for tourists to be hooliganised at night or to be taken ill late at night, and the guide must be available to assist. My respondents still remember such cases and share them:

“The Germans did not like the sea climate very much, and our food, especially the alcohol. They regularly woke me up at night: who with abdominal pains, who with fever, burnt on the beach. And I was always on the alert, although I watched them all to warn them” (N. N., male, b. 1961).

The charter flights to / from Sarafovo airport near Burgas (about 70 km from Primorsko), with which a large number of the tourist groups arrive and depart, are usually operated at night and the part-time guide spend the night hours in bus transfers to the airport and back, accompanying the departing group and / or newly arriving tourists on the charter flight. The tour guide is the first local resident the foreign tourists meet, the one they interact with the most, the one they learn the most facts about the country and life there from, which is why the Bureau puts a lot of responsibility on them. The distinctive sign of every tour guide at the IYC is his badge with the logo of YTB “Orbita” and his own name written in Cyrillic if he leads a Russian group, or in Latin if he accompanies other tourist groups. In this way, he is easily distinguishable from all tourists and can be approached for assistance by other young people, not only by members of the group entrusted to him / her.

## WORKING CONDITIONS AT THE INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CENTRE

Compared to the working conditions in the youth work brigades, those of the part-time guides at the IYC are much better. Young seasonal guides at “Orbita” carry out intellectually skilled work in serving young tourists from foreign countries, for which they are paid. By working, they have

the opportunity to spend several weeks during the summer at the seaside, enjoying better accommodation and food conditions than the Bulgarian young people travelling individually. In interviews, when comparing their work to the unskilled hard physical labor in the youth brigades, my respondents often stated that they perceived the part-time guiding work as high quality and even privileged:

“Our work was intellectual, we were paid for it anyway, and we went to the seaside, to the mountains, for no money. Back then it was not easy for a student to just go on holiday, that and on good terms, and the money was not enough. Yes, it was a privilege to work at Orbita, I see things that way” (I. P., male, b. 1958).

However, the responsibilities they bear for the lives and health of tourists, and their financial and organisational obligations as guides and translators, are incomparably greater than those of their peers involved in work brigades. Young part-time guides are doing wage labor for the first time in their lives, working as seasonal assistants in international tourism. In their memories today, my respondents evaluate their duties and responsibilities in a mainly positive light, especially when compared to those of the young people who participated in work brigades. From a contemporary perspective, the former part-time guides claim that they were a different and even elite group of young people, doing specialized work in the months free from school. This activity constitutes an important marker of their contemporary identity.

While working conditions are mostly viewed positively, in terms of the work they do, former seasonal guides at the International Youth Centre report varying levels of inequality, as well as unequal treatment compared to that of full-time tour guides. Certainly, hierarchically, they stand at a lower level in the Bureau’s structure than the full-time staff, and through a number of imposed economic and social restrictions these differences are accentuated and deepened. For example, young collaborators do not have access to work with youth tourist groups from capitalist countries. Despite successfully passing a ‘political training’ exam during their training, and even after several seasons of successful work, young part-time guides are not given much trust and are deliberately isolated from those groups that are only served by full-time guides. In the interviews, my respondents, former German-speaking seasonal tour guides, shared their dissatisfaction with such treatment and told of their attempts to “get” work with groups from West Germany. However, no one had any

success, not even the nephew of an employee at the “Orbita” headquarters who worked for five seasons as a part-time guide. It is the policy of the organization not to allow seasonal guides in the immediate vicinity of these groups. Another example of the management’s deliberate distancing of the young guides at the IYC is the spatial separation. Staff members are accommodated in the Neptune and Horizon hotels, while part-time guides are accommodated in four-bed bungalows of two categories – without and with bathroom facilities. This circumstance, however, rarely provokes dissatisfaction and complaints from the young part-time guides, although there is no shortage of verbal requests to the senior tour guide for a change of accommodation to a bungalow of the higher category. The resort is always overcrowded with tourists and the possibility of a young part-time guide getting hotel accommodation is minimal, even if his / her group is accommodated there. I myself stayed in a bungalow on one of my stays at the IYC, and my group stayed at the Bisser Hotel, eating in the restaurant attached to it. I was not allowed to eat in the same restaurant with my tourists, but only supervised their service by the waiters. On another of my stays, due to the overwhelming occupancy of the bungalows, including those provided for the part-time guides, the latter were accommodated on hiking beds in the hotel rooms with the staff guides.

Another type of inequality in the work done by full-time and part-time guides occurs because the quality of work and initiative of seasonal guides is not recognized or rewarded by the Bureau. Even in the document signed at the end of the tour by the group leader, there is no column for noting the quality of the guide’s services. Only the quantity of the services according to the group’s preliminary program is reported. The amount of money attracted by the part-time guides when their groups participate in additional paid events is not taken into account by the management structures. That is to say, there is a complete lack of material incentive for the work done, which has resulted in additional income for “Orbita”. However, the remuneration of full-time staff guides is different: they receive monthly bonuses for such additional funds raised. In terms of pay, there is also an imposed differentiation amongst the part-time guides: if a young person uses a month of his / her work at “Orbita” instead of participating in a labor brigade, his / her daily wage is two or three times lower than if he / she works during the holidays, even though the type of work and the responsibilities are the same.

During the course of their work at the IYC, part-time guides are subject to penalties: for example, they may receive less pay if there is a complaint

from the group leader or from the senior guides. One respondent told of such a case:

“I worked with three German groups at the same time on Primorsko. Over 90 people, from different towns, with three group leaders. I couldn’t cover them, it was very difficult with communication. They were staying in bungalows quite a distance away the three groups and even in the evening I could barely get them together to discuss things and organise the next day. In the end, the three leaders, when we met to sign the vouchers, wrote down that they had received ten days of guiding services instead of 14 days. This was not true, but they had already talked” (E. M., female, b. 1964).

The consequence for her was that she was paid the lowest possible rate for serving these groups, despite the difficulty of dealing with such a large number of tourists at the same time. Although not common, this type of punishment is officially regulated and possible to impose.

In the six seasons of my job, I was punished once too. When we were serving tour groups at IYC, it happened that our friends would visit us and we would put them up in our rooms for one or a few nights, of course with the consent of our roommates. During one of my stays at the resort I was exceptionally, due to lack of space in the bungalows, accommodated for a few days on an extra hiking bed in the hotel room of a staff tour guide. She didn’t mind me putting my friend up in the uncomfortable bed for two nights, but she immediately rushed to file a written complaint from me to the senior tour guide that I had brought a girl who wasn’t on the tour guide staff to spend the night in the room. As a result, I was deprived of payment for those two days.

In the interviews, respondents also talked about another type of “punishment” if they did not cope with their assigned tasks:

“The most unpleasant for me was when I had to persuade the Germans to play football or *folk ball* on the beach, and that every morning for two hours. Instead of sunbathing and swimming. When we didn’t get a whole German team together, as a punishment we, the part-time guides with German groups, had to complete the team and to race” (J. P., male, b. 1962).

I was also burdened with the duty of exhorting the group leaders to gather their tourists to participate in the beach team games and team

competitions. It happened that I was unable to secure anyone from my group and was forced to play as a “German girl” volleyball or *folk ball* so that the planned game would not be spoiled. It was easier for the guides of Russian groups, their tourists were always eager to participate in such sporting events.

## LABOR PRACTICES

Some young tour guides cannot withstand the demands and pressures and they work only one season at the International Youth Centre. However, they are a minority; those who work two or more seasons predominate. The work of the young guides and their labor discipline at the IYC are monitored and supervised by the senior guide and the collaborators of the Guides Department. In conversations with my respondents, they shared the belief that the distance between the young assistants and the staff guides remains too great. I did not observe, and my interviewees had no recollection of, the crossing of set hierarchical boundaries in the sphere of work and the establishment of closer informal friendship relations between part-time and full-time guides. Even if there were such cases, they were probably too few and rather exceptional to talk about or remember. Some of my respondents pointed out that, as young and new part-time guides, they had even felt intimidated by the senior staff guides, on whom it depended at the end of the summer season to obtain a document equivalent to the participation in a brigade:

“The first year I went to Primorsko and there I saw S., the senior tour guide, who led our training. They had sent him to be in charge of the part-time guides at the IYC. I was very worried all the time, lest I messed something up, lest I get embarrassed, because he was supposed to sign our notes for the university later”<sup>6</sup> (I. D., female, b. 1964).

Remembering their work as part-time guides at the International Youth Centre, my respondents often commented on the poor accommodation and food conditions enjoyed by the tourists. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, the bungalows were already outdated, quite neglected, the equipment was outdated, and regular cleaning and linen changes were not carried out. Former seasonal guides tell of cases when they had to enter into disputes

---

<sup>6</sup> The document is required of students as a prerequisite for continuing their studies in the following academic year.

with managers because of poor hygiene and poor living conditions in hotel rooms or bungalows, to complain to cooks because of the poor quality of some products or the reduced portion sizes, to make remarks to waiters about the poor level of service. Thus, from their early working years, young people are confronted with the dysfunctions of the deficit economy, particularly in the tourism sector, and they develop a critical approach towards employees from whom they do not receive a satisfactory quality of service due to foreign tourists:

“I was uncompromising there – when I saw that it was dirty, that they were lying to us in the scale, that they were serving us yesterday’s grilled food, and I went straight to the manager of the restaurant. We can’t put ourselves out like this, people have paid and what do they get? They go on holiday and they stay hungry. Is that how they remember us? I used to scold them, I didn’t spare them” (I. P., male, b. 1958).

I remember that the unsatisfactory hygiene in the bungalows was the main reason I often went with the respective group leader to the reception and demanded immediate cleaning.

While the vertical relations in the daily working life in the resort are generally highly formalized, the horizontal relationships between young seasonal guides often blur the boundaries between formal and informal relations. The guiding work does not imply competition between collaborators, such is also the case in the working life in other enterprises and institutions during socialism, as the centralized state monopoly prevents the unfolding of real competition in the economy (cf. Benovska-Subkova 2009).

Solidarity between young people stands out as a key feature in the labor culture of the part-time guides. Very often, they join their efforts, seeking to divide the common work between them or substitute each other to perform the respective services of the tourist groups. For example, guides with German or Russian groups gather those tourists, who wish to listen to a talk in the afternoon and only one of the guides accompanies the tourists and translates for them. His colleagues, who are relieved of this duty, treat him / her in the evening or pay his entrance fee at the disco. There are cases when a young colleague’s absence is concealed from superiors by having another part-time guide take over his / her work for a few hours. Temporary absence from work is not a common occurrence and is mainly related to overworking of the young people, and the services rendered by colleagues are usually returned with reciprocal favours or a treat. A respondent says:

“I had to send my group from the IYC to the airport in Sarafovo, their charter was at night. I barely went to the reception, there the bus already came, they loaded the suitcases. And I can't look up from tiredness, I had hardly slept the night before. The driver feels sorry for me when he looks at me. There was another group with the same charter, my colleague H. was leading it. And he shouts to me, “You go to sleep, I'll send them both groups”. I was not comfortable, to tell you the truth, but he insisted a lot, even got along with the group leader. I remember that later I bought him a ‘Pliska’ brandy from the bar, just to thank him” (I. D., female, b. 1964).

Although not very widespread, there are cases of deliberate evasion. For example, young tour guides do not always narrate the sights along the route throughout the bus transfers, as required of them and as they have been trained to do. This is most often observed during the night transfers from the airport to the IYC: the guides leave the newly arrived tourists to rest after the tiring flight without entertaining them on the microphone with stories about the history of the region or about natural sights that cannot even be seen at night. One respondent who accompanied German groups explained why he gave very short guided tours to tourists:

“All the ideology in our guided tours that we were taught at the Bureau, I didn't apply it. What German who came to holiday at the seaside was interested in our history? Or in the successes of socialism. I wanted to entertain them, to keep them happy, and when I see that they are tired or bored, I just let them rest and don't bother them with history or ideology” (S. G., male, b. 1963).

This statement points to a common practice of the young guides – providing opportunities for tourists to satisfy their individual desires to spend the holiday. Thus, the part-time guides seek and find ways to give personal attention to the interests of the vacationing youths of the tourist groups and to provide free niches to the young people from foreign countries, thus avoiding the perception of international tourism in Bulgaria as a kind of “serial production” (cf. Ivanova 2018).

In addition to not performing or cutting short some mandatory services, part-time guides use some unauthorized practices that have nevertheless established themselves as legitimate among them. In cafés or discotheques where afternoon ‘friendship meetings’ are held between two tourist groups from different socialist countries, a small part of the



money allocated for the tourists' consumption is diverted and shared between the manager of the establishment and the two guides. In other cases, the three agree to each get a bottle of luxury alcohol from the bar. I remember my utter amazement at my first 'friendship meetings' at the International Youth Centre when, right from the start, the bar manager quite casually handed me a bottle of expensive brandy, then gave some of the same alcohol to my colleague who was accompanying a group of Russian tourists. When I asked what this was, they both explained that this was the usual practice, this alcohol was for us and if I wanted I could have a bottle of vodka instead of the brandy. Diverting even a small part of the total budget in order to satisfy personal needs is a strategy inherent to working life under socialism (cf. Benovska-Subkova 2003). Former part-time guides still consider this practice to have served as compensation for the lack of additional incentives for their work and as a 'reward' for their hard work.

The tourist group's budget does not allow for the purchase of alcoholic beverages at these 'friendship meetings', designed as ideological events of a mandatory nature for group members. However, part-time guides encourage the tourists to order and pay for such drinks with their own money if they wish. In this way, revenue is brought into the respective establishment beyond the modest group's budget allocated for soft drinks and snacks. These 'friendship meetings' quite often do not even take place according to the set ideological framework with speeches by the two group leaders and the young guides, but from beginning to end they pass as a youth party with music and dancing. Thus, in practice, the requirements and norms for holding an ideological event are ostensibly observed, but it is emptied of its planned content and is replaced with youth entertainment. By implementing this practice, the young collaborators are diverted from the task of being intermediaries in conveying ideological messages to foreign tourists.

Other practices that can be defined as close to the illegal commercial activities during socialism are also widespread among the part-time guides. These include, for example, the personal exchange of currency practiced by some young guides, most often involving the exchange of Bulgarian levs for East German marks. When travelling abroad, citizens of socialist countries are allowed to purchase currency for a very small amount, which they can hardly use to cover their personal expenses. Part-time guides offered exchanges to tourists in their group, calculating a profit for themselves, and then usually managed to sell the purchased currency, again at a profit, to friends, relatives and acquaintances travelling in the

GDR. Another similar practice was the purchase of vodka with Bulgarian levs by Russian groups arriving by their own bus, which the young guide then sold to managers of local restaurants, also calculating a profit. Personal entrepreneurial activity plays an important role here, with the young people concerned taking too much risk:

“There was a great demand for levs, right, from the Germans when they came to the seaside to holiday. And I, you know, have been a risk taker since I was young, so to speak. I traded to them, they were happy, I was too. And from the exchange of East marks, well, I used to earn so much money in those two or three months every summer, which then, when I started working as a young professional, I managed to earn it for the whole year,” says one respondent in the interview (S. G., male, b. 1963).

Ana Luleva found and analyzed similar illegal practices in the field of international tourism among those working in the winter resort of Borovets during socialism. They were used as a means of providing additional income and helped to deal with problems of scarcity of goods (Luleva 2021).

The habitualized practices presented here, such as circumventing or seemingly complying with the rules, “outsmarting” superiors, changing the content of labor norms, and illegal activities, are not uncommon; they are part of everyday strategies created and used during socialism to manage the problems and challenges of everyday life, including in the labor sphere. Researchers have found and analysed similar responses when examining everyday practices during the period of socialism. They explain them as strategies of resistance and resilience, of ingenious circumvention of laws, of apparent adherence to norms (for more details see Roth 1998). These approaches have been described as defensive and as subordinates’ willfulness against any form of control (Wolf 2003, Creed 2007). I argue that through the implementation of such practices, young part-time guides from their early working years attempt to elude the government’s efforts to transform them into a homogenous mass of wage labourers in line with the ideology of social homogenisation of the population.

## INFORMAL CONTACTS IN THE SPHERE OF LABOR

In fulfilling their work tasks, young tour guides try to reconcile duties with entertainment. In the interviews, my respondents talked about how, despite the busy and long working days at the International Youth Centre,

they usually manage to create free spaces for themselves and find time to unwind from the stress of work. Often they spend all night in the discos, stay up late socializing with their groups or with other young guides around the bungalows or campfires. They take evening walks to the neighbouring seaside village of Kiten and spend the hours until midnight in one of the local coastal restaurants. Such entertainments are typical of young people, but prove incompatible with the demands of being on call and ready for work at any time. For this reason, they are not encouraged by the supervisors; on the other hand, however, they are not officially prohibited and are rarely sanctioned. Entertainment helps young guides temporarily, if only for a few hours, to get away from their busy work routines and also to satisfy their need for variety, rest and relaxation.

The provision of entertainment was explained by my interview partners as a successful attempt to slip away from the daily strict control of superiors as well as to circumvent the rules. Along with this, through informal social communication an opportunity for bonding is created, for young co-workers to relate better to each other, which in turn helps them to cope with problems at work and makes their stressful working lives more bearable. In the informal interaction, friendship bonds and emotional contacts are created with both other part-time guides and tourists from the foreign groups. Many such contacts have lasted a long time, some even to the present day. These trusting relationships form an important part of young people's social networks and often lead to the establishment of successful economic partnerships in the years to come.

Although entertainments and time spent on informal networking are considered legitimate by all my respondents, there are still some negative consequences of practicing them – they exhaust the young tour guides physically and sometimes lead to poor performance of professional work, which is actually detrimental to the labor organization.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the heavy workload, the threat of punishment and the small amount of pay, my respondents stated that they did not feel exploited. They do not feel so from today's perspective either. On the contrary, working as seasonal collaborators at "Orbita" is considered privileged, has been and continues to be an object of pride, an important part of their identity, and is perceived as valuable cultural capital – it is included, for example, in the publicly available CVs of famous Bulgarian scientists, politicians,

lawyers and other public figures. The main characteristics of the labor culture of the seasonal part-time guides are the high level of solidarity at work, the trust established between them, the mutual help at work, the creation of a network of useful contacts and long-lasting emotional ties. Respondents said that thanks to their work they felt grown up, responsible and independent, especially from their family. In fact, at the International Youth Centre they are always under the control and dependence of the senior guides.

But it is clear from some of the practices that have become an essential part of their labor culture, e.g. the circumvention or non-performance of compulsory services, the mastering of illegal activities, the personal approach to tourists, the exhausting entertainment, that the management structures have nevertheless compromised and shown some tolerance. It is likely that these were forms of tacit negotiation of relationships between senior and part-time staff in order to take a pragmatic approach – to keep this young skilled workforce available to work in the tourist sector.

The presented practices gradually became established as legitimate and useful and today the former part-time guides evaluate them as successful attempts to cope with the difficulties of their everyday life in socialism. My research does not give me grounds to argue that by developing a sense of belonging to an elite privileged youth group, part-time guides also developed loyalty to the regime, as Ana Luleva finds in her study of international tourism employees in the winter resort of Borovets (Luleva 2021). It is likely that my respondents did not develop such an attitude due to the fact that they were very young and their work was temporary, only for about two months during the summer holidays, and they did not have much opportunity to develop informal practices in their everyday working life to the extent that the full-time staff in the Balkan-tourist system managed to develop and enforce.

The formal structure, such as the Youth Travel Bureau “Orbita”, failed to bring the young tour guides into the ideological framework of the regime, and the attempts to use them as intermediaries to convey official ideological messages of socialism to foreign tourists failed. Part-time guides often emptied the events of their intended ideological content and conducted them formally, giving them a completely different meaning and significance. The results of the study show how the discrepancy between the expectations and intentions of the ideologues of the provided tourist services, on the one hand, and the actual behavior and labor practices of young people actually occurs. The examples are indicative of

the changes “from below”, through everyday strategies of young people, of the initially conceived system of the international youth tourism in socialist Bulgaria.

#### Acknowledgment

The financial support from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences under Bilateral grant agreement between BAS and SASA is gratefully acknowledged.

## References

- Anchev, Anatol. 2017. *Folklorat na rabotnitsite ot edno zveno na kanaldzhiska brigade*. Sofia: Izdatelska kashta „Tip-top pres“.
- Benovska-Sabkova, Milena. 2003. „Sotsialni mrezi, koalitsii i klientelizam na rabotното място през периода 1960–1989 г. в София“. *Balgarska etnologia* 1: 5–25.
- Benovska-Sabkova, Milena. 2009. „Sotsializmat kato modernizatsia (nablyudenia varhu Bulgaria)“. *Balgarska etnologia* 4: 5–22.
- Brunbauer, Ulf. 2010. „Sotsialisticheskiyat nachin na zhiivot“. *Ideologia, obshtestvo, semeystvo i politika v Bulgaria (1944–1989)*. Ruse: MD „Elias Kaneti“.
- Creed, Gerald. 2007. *Opitomyavane na revolyutsiyata. Ot sotsialisticheskata reforma kam protivorechiviya prehod v edno balgarsko selo*. Sofia: Apostrofi.
- Ivanova, Maya. 2018. *Turizam pod nadzor. Balkanturist – nachaloto na mezhdunarodniya i masov turizam v Bulgaria*. Sofia: Siela.
- Ivanova, Radost. 2003. „Stroim za narodnata republika! Mladezhkite stroitelni brigadi – shkola za komunisticheskoto vazpitanie“. In *Sotsializmat: realnost i ilyuzii. Etnologichni aspekti na vsekidnevната kultura*, eds. Radost Ivanova, 54–62. Sofia: Etnografski institut s muzey BAN.
- Luleva, Ana. 2021. *Kultura na (ne)doverieto v Balgariya. Antropologichni perspektivi*. Sofia: IK „Gutenberg“.
- Petrova, Ivanka. 2021. „Privilegiya ili prinuda: neshtatnata ekskurzovodska rabota na uchastiti se v sotsialisticheskata Balgariya mezhdu normata i trudovite praktiki“. In *Balgarskiyat sotsializam. Ideologiya, vsekidnevnie, pamet*, eds. Ana Luleva, Ivanka Petrova, Petar Petrov, Svetla Kazalarska & Yana Yancheva, 62–80, Sofia: AI „Prof. Marin Drinov“.
- Roth, Klaus. 1998. „Praktiki i strategii za ovladyavane na vsekidnevnioto v edno selo na sotsialisticheskata Bulgaria“. *Sotsiologicheski problemi* 3–4: 225–237.
- Raeva, Bilyana. 2010. „Detstvoto i brigadirskoto dvizhenie (1946–1950). Razpredelenie na vremeto v brigadata (po materialy ot Dimitrovgrad)“. In *Detstvoto pri sotsializma. Politicheski, institutsionalni i biografichni*

- perspektivi*, eds. Ivan Elenkov & Daniela Koleva, 131–163 Sofia: Riva.
- Wolf, Gabriele. 2003. „Vlast“ i „svoenravie“. Kam analiza na realnia postsotsialisticheski zhiznen svyat. In *Sotsializmat – realnost i ilyuzii. Etnologichni aspekti na vsekidnevната kultura*, eds. Radost Ivanova, 120–132. Sofia: Etnografski institut s muzey BAN.
- Yancheva, Yana. 2015. *Kolektivizatsiyata v balgarskoto selo (1948–1970)*. Sofia: IK „Gutenberg“.

Примљено / Received: 23. 02. 2022.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 06. 09. 2022.