

Article No. 2

The New Eastern European Woman: A Gold Digger or an Independent Spirit?

Elza Ibroscheva
[Southern Illinois University](#)

Keywords

Eastern European women, cultural identity, pop folk music, post-Communist transition

Abstract

This essay contends that the woman of the new Eastern European democracies have created a new identity, in sharp opposition to the traditionally established image of the Eastern European woman as a caretaker and a heroine/worker. By examining the rhetoric of the lyrical content of contemporary Bulgarian pop folk songs, this essay argues that Eastern European women have overthrown traditional stereotypes of femininity and asserted a new independence.

The advent of democracy in the former Communist states of Europe brought both promise and hardship. A once monolithic fate based upon ideological rigor and progressive stalemate has been replaced by a perplexing variety of threats to stability in this fragile region, with the advances of democracy frequently drowned out by the noises of intolerance, social injustice and repression.

In this changing new world, the voices of women are vital to a healthy social and political discourse (Hunt, 1997). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern European women enthusiastically embraced the radical social and political changes that advocated equality at home and in the work place. Even with a new open market economy, however, the position of Eastern European women did not change as expected. The difficult transition in the countries of the ex-Soviet bloc confirmed that the collapse of Communism is nothing more than an ascendance of capitalism. A free public life and civil society were but facades for the underlying realities of capitalism, and patriarchy was a necessary component of a retrogressive social formation that clearly undermined the status of women in Eastern Europe.

In the 1960s and 1970s, American feminists viewed Eastern European and Soviet women from afar and envied their situation (LaFont, 1998). Indeed, women from the former Soviet bloc enjoyed rights and privileges which Western women could only dare to imagine and enjoy, such as laws that provided three years of maternity leave, widely available state-sponsored child care, and abortion rights. These were just few of the "protectionist" laws established by the socialist states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in their attempt to resolve in a Marxist fashion what they termed the "women's question." Consequently, the illusion existed that women in the Communist countries had indeed been liberated.

Yet, rather than experiencing complete emancipation, Eastern European women were forced into a pseudo emancipation, mainly because their labor was needed for the Communist industrial development. The importance of women's role as the producers of future workers was recognized, while, at the same time, state ideology encouraged women's participation in the labor force and deprived housewifery of status (Korovushkina, 1994). Work was a duty, not a right, and low wages necessitated both the wives' and husbands' incomes for family survival. The equality that the Communist governments proclaimed translated into women working like men in the labor market. Importantly, no counter equality existed for men's involvement in the

domestic domain. Pre-Communist patriarchy remained firmly intact, with women shouldering the burden of economic and domestic labor. Instead of truly liberating women, state Communism turned into a system that doubly exploited women in their roles of producers and reproducers.

Today, while the particulars of women's status differ from country to country, patterns of marginalization exist which include diminished labor market access, increasing vulnerability to crime, loss of family-oriented social benefits, and exceedingly low parliamentary representation (Hunt, 1997). In many countries of transition, the feminization of poverty has been striking. For example, every second woman (and every third man) in Bulgaria lives in poverty – 73.3% of the women feel they are poor to a certain extent (Daskalova & Filipova, 2004). More importantly, of the 26 million jobs that have disappeared in Eastern Europe since 1989, 14 million were held by women (1999 UNICEF Report, *Women in Transition*).

In this essay, I will show how women of the newly liberated Eastern European countries have asserted a new identity, often in sharp opposition to the traditionally established images Eastern European women and women of the Communist past as caretakers and a heroine-workers, conditioned in a highly patriarchal society. By examining the rhetoric of the lyrical content of contemporary Bulgarian pop folk songs, I argue that Eastern European women have overthrown traditional stereotypes of femininity and asserted a new sexualized and aggressive role of independence, driven to a large extent by an unique mix of the traditional cultural values of resurgent Orthodox patriarchy and the challenges of the new capitalist realities of the post-Communist transition.

Popular Music and Gender in Eastern Europe

Popular music in Eastern Europe has been a common arena for constructing gender as the most accessible and most public medium of mass communication. As Simic (1976) contends, popular folk music in the Balkans presents a unique mixture of commercialized musical tradition, integrating and reflecting daily life. Popular Bulgarian folk songs contain a complex system of symbols, reflecting both traditional and contemporary culture. These songs are popular because they reconcile the past with the present. This dynamic characteristic sharply contrasts with the so-called authentic folk songs which are frozen in form and address themselves primarily to the past (Simic, 1976).

These contemporary folk songs are above all dynamic; they have a short life span with new ones replacing the old, thus providing an ever-changing mirror of ongoing social realities and the sentiments underlying it. Balkan pop folk music can be compared to the American Country and Western tradition since both are a type of modern commercial folklore with origins in earlier grass root forms. Moreover, in both forms of musical expressions, there is an appeal to nostalgia, and on the other hand, a response to the rapidly shifting concerns and exigencies of contemporary life.

No doubt the role folk music plays in stirring up social movements among young women in the United States should be taken into account. Douglas (1994) contends that listening and playing folk music was one of the ways in which young people all across America felt the urgency of extending social justice on all levels throughout the country. Douglas writes, "Music was so central to our lives because it seemed to tell 'the truth'" (p. 105). Douglas also points out that American folk singers showed that being female and being political were not mutually exclusive. On the other hand, Ramet (1994) argued that music in Eastern Europe was not only a cultural or diversionary phenomenon; it also was a political phenomenon. According to Ramet, "Its medium is suggestion. Its point of contact is the imagination. Its medium is that of the muse—all of this makes music an unexpectedly powerful force for social and political change" (p. 1). And while both folk and popular music can be used to express political and social messages, they can also be used as a force to build and sustain cultural identity. In fact, Hudson (2003) studied the history and content of Serbian popular music to argue that the traditional song has long been embedded in Serbian cultural identity and has been inspiring Serbian nationalism since the nineteenth century. Hudson argues that in the early 1990s, Serbian popular songs contributed

to feelings of estrangement and alienation. Hudson also points out that popular music forges cultural and national identities which explicitly legitimate the relations of power in society. Hudson remarks, "Culture can be used as an ideological resource by contestants and can therefore serve as a source, or even an accelerant, of conflict" (p. 169). Here, the author recognizes that Serbian folk songs, and Balkan folklore in general, recognize two key figures which mark the mythology of the region—the "warrior hero" and the "mother/sister." In the national and cultural consciousness of the Balkan nations, women function in the roles of mother and sister. Both roles are devoid of any sense of sexual identity and purified as a sign of national innocence. Hudson continues,

The image of this mother/sister figure—who either gives birth to the nation through her sons, who become future soldiers defending the national community, or, a sister-figure, [who] gives succor to the wounded warrior hero—is a primordial one in the Serbian nationalist discourse, and is common to many other European discourses. (p. 171)

As Irvine and Kirkpatrick (1972) explain, music as a rhetorical message is powerful because it has been considered entertainment rather than a form of argumentative discourse. Traditionally, it has been insulated from moral and cultural restraints normally associated with verbal discourse. Thus, the contemporary pop folk music in Bulgaria is an interesting and fruitful arena to explore in search of the Eastern European woman's new identity.

Schreuer (1986) finds of the "gold digger" to be "the most fully drawn image of a woman we get in America during the 1930's" (p. 34). He points out that the "gold digger" was actually modeled on an old Broadway character, but was updated for the Depression era audience. An interesting parallel could be drawn between the thematic direction and imagery of popular songs in America during the Depression years and in Eastern Europe during the years of economic and political post-Communist transition. The character of the gold digger, in both periods, epitomizes the survival- plus-struggle-equals-success formula.

In "The Whisper of Money," the Bulgarian singer Boika Dangova makes several typical "gold digger's" requests, insisting on being awarded material possessions:

Then send me off on a holiday to Hawaii,
But you don't have to come along, I will be faithful, rest assured.
(*Sjumut Na Parite* – "The Whisper of Money")

The female heroine in the song even goes a step further to ask for a holiday at an exotic location, while she promises that she will remain faithful and loyal to her lover. She is, on the one hand, virtuous in her promised fidelity; yet she also is promiscuous and opportunistic. She transforms the whole enterprise of survival into a game—and she knows all the rules and how to use them. In this song, the woman refuses the gift of roses for money:

No, I don't want roses—they have thorns.
You don't want me to be hurt, do you?
Do not whisper sweet words of love in my ear.
Most of all, my darling, I love the whisper of money.
(*Sjumut Na Parite* – "The Whisper of Money")

She is willing to exchange the symbol of love for its cash value, a materialistic motivation which nevertheless will guarantee her certain financial security and independence in a rather insecure and unstable world. At first, she cunningly manages to refuse the roses without openly asking for a cash reward for her love. The "gold digger" is intent upon having love on her terms. At the same time, she can also be the little girl—a return to the innocent woman of the traditional patriarchy because the mere touch of the rose can hurt her if not handled properly. Moreover,

the character replaces the words of love, the romanticism of poetry and flowers, with the “whisper of money:”

No, I don't want roses—give them to me in cash!
 I'll give you a kiss, don't be a spoiled baby!
 Do not whisper sweet words of love in my ear.
 Most of all, my darling, I love the whisper of money.
 Do you know my honey bunny that I cannot sleep at night.
 With my levs (Bulgarian currency), I think I am going to get burned.
 Give me foreign currency, give me real money.
 Only with US dollars and German marks love can be returned.
 (*Sjumut Na Parite* –“The Whisper of Money”)

The character demonstrates her willingness to offer a reward for her material acquisitions and to such extent, her activity could be interpreted as an act of prostitution, where physical pleasure is offered in exchange for money. In this example, the heroine is the active, controlling figure, while her lover assumes the passive, receiving end of the relationship. In an examination of popular American songs from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Endres (1984) discovered that in the majority of songs studied, women seldom initiated the action. They were normally characterized as passive figures—important to the plot of the song but seldom active. Similarly, Wood (2001) contends that women are usually defined by their bodies and how men perceive them. In the Bulgarian pop folk song, however, the heroine is the active and the aggressive partner in the relationship. She promises to give her lover kisses, but she orders him to behave like an adult and to refrain from begging for affection. She calls him “honey bunny” and “my darling,” implying her strength as the controlling figure holding the reigns of the relationship. As Simic (1976) contends, “the image of the young female [in Eastern European traditional folk music] is always antithetical to that of the man, a perfect counterpart; she should be submissive, sexually pure, weak and passive” (p. 162). In the traditional Serbian folk songs, the male is seen in terms of strength, blustering pride, truculence and the ability to drink heavily:

I like to lead the horo dance!
 Girls want to dance by me,
 They all love handsome me,
 And blush from my glance.
 (*Ah Kak Sakam Da Vodia Horoto* – “Oh, How I Like to Lead the Horo”)

Pretty young maiden,
 Do not cross my path,
 Do not get yourself in trouble!
 (*Ne Mi Sechi Putia* – “Don't Cross my Path”)

In the traditional Serbian folk song, the woman is very passive and submissive, acting as though she has been rejected or alienated. Sometimes, she appears as a martyr:

Farewell, my dear, I can love you no more.
 I have spent too many lonely nights waiting
 Long nights while you were off with others.
 Know, how much I have cried and suffered!
 (*Zbogom Lubov* – “Farewell, My Love”)

Last night I saw you at the water well,
 You were drinking from another girl's water,
 You were no longer mine
 And I cried all night, wishing I never saw you there with her!
 (*Ot Drugata Voda* – “Someone Else's Water”)

In contrast to these images of the woman in the traditional Balkan society, the heroine from “The Whisper of Money” clearly dominates the relationship, well aware of her strengths and of her partner’s weaknesses, thus, thwarting the stereotype of submission imposed by the conservative patriarchal Eastern European society of the past.

The female heroine in Bulgarian folk songs appears mostly as the archetype of the prostitute. This archetype has been previously used by Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, who portrayed the prostitute as men’s savior. Through her body, she relieves men of their sins of sexual desire. More recently, family life in Eastern Europe has also been colloquially called a “cross,” which is the fate of Bulgarian and other Eastern European women. In this sense, perhaps the post-Cold War boom in pornography and prostitution could be interpreted as liberation from the de-sexualization of life under state socialism. In fact, Deltcheva (1996) pointed out that the notion of the liberalization of a society was measured by the degree of pornographic literature it allowed to be freely distributed. “The ‘pornographic network’ gained enormous dimensions—starting from the sales of *Emmanuelle* at every street corner to the *Playboy* photographs (pirated) which periodically appear in leading daily and weekly newspapers (p. 307). Lissjutkina (1992) went as far as characterizing the prostitute as a pioneer of the market economy, an independent entrepreneur, bravely breaking taboos.

This somewhat unorthodox hypothesis has the prostitute not as victim but as heroine of the transition period, symbolically knocking both the asexual transcendental mother figure of religion and literature, as well as the de-sexed worker-mother of state socialism. While the image of the prostitute might appear to embody the neo-liberal notion of the individual in the marketplace—rebellious, unprotected, exposed to danger but liberated, it dodges the issues of relational bonds. The split implied in this duality between “damned whores and God’s police” (Summers, 1975) does not offer much in terms of role models for young women in Eastern Europe. However, it is also clear that many of the motives driving “streetwalkers” into this business are often economic and a result of the gender inequalities which became a fact of life in the newly transformed societies of Eastern Europe. The heroine of the song spends most of her time at night worrying about her economic survival. She demands to be paid in foreign currency, which will guarantee her financial stability and security. Curiously, she appears knowledgeable about the financial vocabulary of foreign currency exchange and offers her love in exchange for material possessions and financial security.

One more example of the “gold digger” image in Bulgarian pop folk is Desislava’s song “I Feel Best with many Men around Me:”

I feel best with many men around me
 Everyone of them should spoil me
 Everyone of them should be crazy about me
 Everyone should give me gifts everyday
 Everyone should really want me
 Everyone should play a hero for me
 Everyone should risk his life
 And always be faithful to me.
 (*Nai Mi e Dobro s Njokolko Muze* — “I Feel Best with Many Men Around Me”)

The “gold digger” heroine in this song is almost the exact opposite to the traditional image of the Bulgarian woman. She is not waiting for her man’s love but is actively pursuing the affection and the financial support of several partners. Since men dictate the rules of the relationship, the heroine in this song illustrates that women should not be excluded from the right to be in control of a love relationship, and thus, the values implied in this song clash with the stereotypical expectations of traditional Orthodox patriarchy. Besides being in control of a relationship, the gold digger demonstrates her savvy with a sharp understanding of man’s intentions and a strong sense of intuition:

That was a cheap trick you played on me
 Trying to get me in your car
 Taking me around town like that,
 I know you would expect a favor from me
 (*Tuk-Tam* – “Here and There”)

In a similar search for asserting her identity, the pop folk singer Kati describes herself as a butterfly, a fragile and beautiful creature which has come to life through a notable metamorphosis and has embraced a new beginning. Perhaps this metaphor indicates the transformation of Bulgarian woman from the suffering, shapeless and asexual image of the Soviet woman into the colorful, liberated and adventurous image of the new Bulgarian female:

I am a free butterfly,
 and I fly around from bloom to bloom,
 like a little sundry wonder
 in this gray and arduous life.
 (*Peperuda* – “Butterfly”)

Just like the female protagonist in “The Whisper of Money,” the heroine in “Butterfly” does not reveal the need for a man to fulfill her life. Quite to the contrary, she seems to be in control of the men in her life. The heroine clearly rejects the submissive and dormant docility of her ascribed female role. Instead, she is the dominant figure in the relationship, charting and deciding the rules of the courtship game. She is not embarrassed by her sexuality, but rather, empowered by it. She has chosen to manipulate her admirer and entangle him in the extensive webs of her game.

You keep running after me, breathless,
 but when I test how much you love me,
 I myself am going to land on your shoulder.
 I am going to let you catch me
 And I will sin with you.
 (*Peperuda* – “Butterfly”)

By initiating the seduction ritual, the protagonist in the song not only repudiates the traditional pattern of courtship allowed in the highly patriarchal Eastern European societies but also assumes what has been customarily considered male territory—the right to make advances towards partnership in an amorous relationship and the right to direct and dominate the course of events. She is powerful and determined: “I test how much you love me/ I myself am going to land on your shoulder/ I am going to let you catch me” indicates the strength of her will and most of all, her resolution to be in control of her relationships.

The female protagonist in the song refutes yet another stereotype associated with the traditional image of the Eastern European woman. Often, as various studies have indicated, the ultimate fulfillment of the female character was only possible in family life. Alexandrova (1989), for example, speaks of an element of continuity in patriarchal patterns which construe marriage as perhaps the most important achievement in a woman’s life, no matter how educated or independent she is and no matter how successful she has been in her profession. She writes:

Here is a society that has proclaimed as its goal the extrication of women from the narrow confines of the family and the inclusion of these women in all forms of public activity. And it would appear that this society had achieved its goal—Soviet women work at the most varied jobs, and many of them are well educated, have a profession, and are financially independent of men. And yet, in this very society, among these very women, a patriarchal social order and its psychology thrive” (p. 31-32).

Contrary to this tradition, the protagonist in “Butterfly” refutes the notion of marriage and commitment, and instead declares her independence and her desire to continue to assert her autonomy and individuality:

But remember, I am always going to carry
the soul of the butterfly
If you really really like me
Let me fly around again
Don't turn love into unbearable chains.
(*Peperuda* — “Butterfly”)

A similar notion towards rejecting the traditional defense of the family as the haven of love and protection for the Eastern European woman is expressed in the song “Don't Tie Me Down” performed by Rumiana. In this song, the female character, similar to the character in “Butterfly” openly rejects the oppressive chains of the patriarchal standards of behavior. The family, as the cure for all social ills is being prescribed once again, as often it is recorded by Eastern European traditional values (Einhorn, 1993). The family was seen as a placebo for the pain of material insecurity and psychic trauma in the periods of social upheaval. Nevertheless, the heroine in the song rejects this opportunity:

Everyone wants to tie me down
With a wedding and children
But I will only do this when I am ready
What I really want now is
To stay the way I am.
(*Ne Me Vruzvai* — “Don't Tie Me Down”)

Finally, in “Leave Me Alone,” the singer Gloria describes her way of separation from the confines of her desexualized past. She openly admits her character flaws but at the same time, she insists on protecting her independence and sustaining control of her own life. Apparently, men are not the heroine's central preoccupation. Rather, her chief concern is leading a complete and independent life as person:

That's who I am –I am not perfect.
That's who I am –emotional.
That's who I am –I won't change
And I will never switch for another.
Leave me alone,
I don't stand in anyone's way
I rule my own life
And I like living it this way.
(*Ostavate Me Na Mira* — “Leave Me Alone”)

Here is a new woman, aware of her imperfections and weaknesses, but in control of her life, determined to succeed on the basis of her merits as a human being, even if it means using her sexual power to define herself without the necessity of the patriarchal or the Communist frameworks of gender values.

Conclusion

Women in Eastern Europe might have survived Communism, but the difficulty of constructing a new social order where the language and rules of gender relations must change still lies ahead. Unfortunately, what Communism and traditional patriarchy have managed to instill in the consciousness of women is a sense of immobility and an absence of future. It will take a long time before the true “revolution” in the cultural and social realm will take place and redefine the very nature of gender interaction and communication.

Even though the reality of women's current and changing situation in Eastern Europe remains contradictory, Eastern European women are struggling to break free of the Orthodox patriarchy and the Communist ideology, both of which confined women to the domestic sphere. Eastern European women are contesting these notions by voicing their beliefs and desires in popular music. Numerous pop songs in Bulgaria became an expression of women's creative power and sexuality. A hit song popularized by the Bulgarian Union for Democratic Forces, dating back to early 1989, was entitled "The Farewell Dance." The video featured a beautiful woman dressed in red, with red tiara and red mask, who appeared diabolical and vampire-ish. She dances with state security men, with Communist functionaries, and with naïve but disillusioned young men who sing the following lyrics: "Farewell my darling, when you were young and beautiful, I believed in you—but now you are a hundred years old and I realize that you have deceived me all along." Ironically, this song was used by the Union as an electoral vote-catcher in 1991, symbolizing that the Big Lie, the Evil, the Past (female) is pushed aside by the Truth, the Good, the Future (male).

In such a repressive patriarchal system, women must resist the images of themselves as being weak, submissive, and deceitful. Moreover, most of these traditional constructions of gender roles had been crafted and maintained by social, political, religious and market forces that do not necessarily consider and reflect the current aspirations of women themselves. On the other hand, women's legally guaranteed equality, and the affirmation they achieved through their working lives, enabled them to begin to ask new questions about the nature of social relations. Women are concerned about the new identity that questions their alienation and the hierarchical structures imposed on them.

The image of the "gold digger" and the glamour girl are closely intertwined with the independent spirit of the new Eastern European woman because Communism failed to address issues of individual autonomy and sexuality. Even though the female character in the songs used in this analysis affirms her attraction to material rewards, her materialistic whims mask a certain sense of power and control, arising from the transition to a capitalist economy. In spite of her cynicism, the female character emerges beyond the image of a predatory calculator, deceptively soft and powerless in lace, high heels and a miniskirt. She knows the rules of the game and plays them to her advantage. Moreover, by establishing her strength as the dominant figure of the relationship, the female voice in the contemporary Bulgarian pop folk rejects the stereotypes of the asexual, emancipated woman of Communist Eastern Europe. Instead, she is assertive, demanding, and aware of her sexual power, a "gold digger" whose newly gained "freedom" results from the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe. Still, that "freedom" to be sexuality exploited in the name of market forces remains unchallenged.

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