

Bulgaria: hyper-femininity without sexual connotations?

Description

Young Bulgarian women exhibit a pronounced hyper-femininity, often to the point of caricature. This expression of freedom before 1989 can now, paradoxically, be viewed as a societal constraint in post-socialist Bulgaria, reflecting the complex identity these women navigate.

Anyone familiar with pre-1989 Bulgaria will note that nothing seems to have changed with the transition to a market economy regarding the feminine code. The post-socialist changes, which have given a radically different face to Bulgarian society, have not altered how some young women express their femininity. From Sofia to Varna, via Gabrovo, Plovdiv, and Bourgas, we meet some beauties daily or night on café terraces, in restaurants, bookshops, museums, universities, and in front of shops.



Hyperfemininity is not hypersexuality

What's immediately striking is the excessive way in which they display feminine codes, sometimes to the point of caricature: sensual mouths, flashy lipstick and varnish, skirts as short as they are tight, stiletto heels, plunging necklines, designer handbags, hair held back with a clip or falling over the shoulders... nothing is left to chance.

Let's call this propensity to assert one's femininity "hyper-femininity." But make no mistake: The hyper-femininity displayed by these young Bulgarians should not be seen as vulgar, representative of a struggle, or even imported from the West. Above all, it is part of a code.

In Bulgaria, the difference between the sexes is noticeable, and the genders are clearly defined. However, the hyper-femininity of these young women should in no way be taken as an indication of unbridled sexuality. Quite the contrary. This desire to display unequivocal sexual signs is misleading. Those who choose to assert « I am a woman » in this way come from all socio-professional categories in Bulgarian society, but their level of education is generally high. Some are students, others are already working.

Against the Western gaze

Highlighting these characteristics that our Western judgment tends to regard as sexual in no way reduces them, in their own eyes, to the rank of women objects. Hyper-femininity does not rhyme with hypersexuality, nor is it meant to.

In Western Europe, on the other hand, hyper-femininity often has a negative connotation. Highlighting a person's sexual characteristics is generally analyzed as evidence of frivolity but also as an attempt to arouse the male gaze or even machismo. Psychologists believe they detect an identity malaise in hyper-femininity. The desire to display unequivocal sexual signs could be the sign of an inner malaise. According to psychoanalyst Isabel Korolitski, *"a woman who feels comfortable in her femininity does not need to dress up"*(1). Psychologist Maryse Vaillant adds that *"when this look is excessive, it combines masculine aggression with the signs of femininity as defined by men. In other words, hyper-femininity is a way of taking power by occupying all the roles"*(2). These are all analyses that, in Bulgaria, could be seen as censorious, even moralizing, and out of place.

What may seem vulgar to the Western observer is not so in Bulgaria. It's as if it's accepted that a young woman can highlight her femininity in this way. The purpose of hyper-femininity is not to arouse the primal machismo of men or to maintain any rivalry between women. Above all, it expresses an inner journey, a desire to please oneself first and foremost. None of these hyper-women is prepared to give up her independence or her personality.

By over-emphasizing their femininity, by over-sexualizing it, it's as if these young women are saying, "I'm a 'real' woman," understood as "I feel good about my femininity." In other words, they are seeking reassurance rather than seduction. By mirror effect, Bulgarian men display virile masculinity, which is also assumed. In this society, there is no real place for men with an androgynous style.

Even so, the hyper-femininity currently on display, even if on the surface it resembles that of the 1970s and 1980s, may seem indicative of a gender malaise in post-socialist Bulgaria.

Changes in the labor market

Before 1989, the Communist regime contributed to the widespread employment of women. The education system was open to all, and young women had no difficulty finding work, the principle being that work was as much a duty as a right, regardless of gender. Activity rates for men and women were more or less the same. And even if not everything was equal – women were less likely than men to reach management positions in large state-owned companies – women's professional success seemed natural and socially desirable. In this context, hyper-femininity was seen as an expression of freedom precisely because it was freely chosen by independent young women who wanted to express their differences in a society dominated by routine and uniformity.

In Bulgaria today, the status of women has changed considerably. Generally speaking, post-socialist transformations have affected women more than men. Gender inequalities have emerged in terms of access to work, vocational training, and career opportunities, calling into question women's independence. As Nadège Ragaru points out, women have been confronted with *"the reassertion of a paternalism that was thought to have been erased by the communist system."*(3) From this point of view, 1989 represented a real turning point in gender relations in Bulgaria. The *NoDiscrim* project, for example, which specializes in the study of discrimination of all kinds in Europe, has shown in the case of Bulgaria that inequality in access to work is achieved by limiting job offers to women, with advertisements containing restrictions on age, experience, and gender. Pregnant women with young children are less likely to be hired. Access to positions of responsibility is reserved for men, and a higher education degree protects women less than men against unemployment (4).

Most women work part-time, on fixed-term contracts, temporary agency work, or atypical working hours. Although the gap has been narrowing in recent years as a result of the 2004 Anti-Discrimination Protection Act(5), it is still significant in Bulgaria (60.2% for men compared with 50.7% for women in 2013)(6). In rural areas, gender differences are even more marked. The closure of large state-owned enterprises has led to a retreat into the domestic sphere, with the *"reassertion of community rules of behavior and traditional family hierarchies"*(7).

From free hyper-femininity to constrained hyper-femininity

Today's young women are post-1989 children who have never experienced communism. Most of them studied it in their final year of secondary school and heard about it from their elders in their families. *"My parents told me it was better before because everyone had work,"* says Anna Pelova (25 years old)(8). Nowadays, it is not uncommon for physical qualities ("young and pretty") to take precedence over experience at job interviews.

This raises legitimate questions about the nature of hyper-femininity expression in contemporary Bulgarian society in a context radically transformed from the 1970s and 1980s. Far from being an affirmation of freedom, it is more likely to be seen as a constraint because the very unfavorable changes in the status of women in Bulgarian society, and more specifically in the labor market, may lead some of them to adopt hyper-feminine codes to force their way into employment and, beyond that, into financial independence.

Notes :

(1) [Flavia Mazelin-Salvi, «Hyperféminité, la nouvelle insolence», *Psychologies*, décembre 2009.](#)

(2) *Op. Cit.* Note 1.

(3) [Nadège Ragaru, « Être femme à l'Est : les effets de la transition en Bulgarie postcommuniste », *ProChoix*, n° 8, décembre 1998.](#)

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- (4) « L'état des luttes contre les discriminations en Europe », *Nodiscrim*, 2004.
(5) [Protection against Discrimination Act, 1 January 2004.](#)
(6) [Eurostat.](#)
(7) Nadège Ragaru, *Op. Cit.*, Note 3.
(8) [Marianne Meunier, « En Bulgarie, l'heure de la relève », *La Croix*, 4 novembre 2014.](#)

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