Bulgaria: the mobility of Technical and Medical Elites in North Africa

Description

From the 1960s onwards, the Maghreb, a land of emigration, was also a place of passage and residence for workers from the socialist bloc, particularly Bulgarian engineers, technicians, and doctors.



During the period of colonization, the countries of North Africa developed a cash economy (agricultural and energy). After independence, they suddenly faced a shortage of technical personnel and decided to call on skilled workers from countries in the socialist bloc. Bulgaria, which had many senior technicians then, could take advantage of this situation by exporting part of its workforce, which was soon to come under French-speaking influence.

Origin of East-South technical mobility during the socialist period

As a direct consequence of decolonization and the nationalization of North Africa's mineral resources, the number of engineers, managers, technicians, and doctors in these territories fell sharply. This led to medical deserts, while the number of technical elites meant that the country's natural resources could no longer be exploited satisfactorily. The USSR and the satellite countries, which had already drawn closer to the countries' governing bodies, offered to provide them with the cheap, specialized labor they lacked. Immediate needs often left these states no choice but to accept such an offer, and cooperation agreements were quickly concluded between the protagonists within the framework of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA)(1). As a result, a large number of engineers, doctors, nurses, midwives, teachers, and architects were sent to the capitals and major cities of the Maghreb, as well as to industrial regions (such as Safi in Morocco, home to a chemical complex linked to local phosphorus deposits). Bulgaria was able to make the most of the situation, as its universities had trained a large number of engineers and doctors. It was able to export some of its human resources immediately. Moreover, the country had enjoyed a perfect image with the National Liberation Front (FLN) since 1960, when the Bulgarian Navy had managed to supply this organization with arms, despite the French military blockade. To carry out this export of workforce, the Bulgarian state relied on administrative structures dedicated to this specialized mission: Technoimpeks (in charge of teachers and medical staff), Technoeksportstroj (engineers, technicians, and specialized workers), and Păteksport (engineers in charge of planning works). The Bulgarian authorities retained the bulk of expatriates' salaries to avoid defections during this work period abroad. They only paid them back to them on their final return to Bulgaria. In addition, State Security and Military Intelligence officers stationed in Algeria regularly visited the families of the development workers to check on their loyalty to the socialist regime.

The specific nature of Bulgarian cooperation with decolonized Algeria

Following the signing of the Evian Agreements on 18 March 1962 and Algeria's accession to independence, most French nationals and "pieds noirs" living in this former French department returned to mainland France en masse – one million people emigrated between May and December 1962. Even if France wanted to protect its interests in Algeria by keeping its personnel there, the nationalization of industry, with the implementation of the dissuasive « Tripoli program » from 1962 onwards, led to the hemorrhaging of the intellectual and technical elites. Faced with an emergency and chaos, the Algerian government called on Eastern European labor, particularly Bulgarians. Engineers were sent to Algiers and the major industrial regions (mining, metallurgy, and oil), such as Annaba and Arzew, 40 km from Oran. Bulgarian doctors were assigned to public hospitals and remote areas, veritable "medical deserts." These administrative assignments, which did not consider the recruits' specialties, led to several medical errors. For example, a Bulgarian radiologist with

no generalist skills could be posted as a country doctor in a desert region to the detriment of future patients(2). Despite the questionable management of these human resources, it has to be said that they provided vital support in maintaining the public services and industrial capacity of the newly independent state.

A large contingent of engineers was sent to Annaba, one of the three main centers of the country's processing industry, dominated by the Société Nationale de Sidérurgie (SNS) facilities, founded in 1964. From the 1960s to the 1980s, between ten and twenty Bulgarian engineers worked there permanently. As their children and spouses joined them, a small community of around forty people gradually grew. The other priority area of the assignment was Arzew, where Bulgarian engineers and technicians were employed in refinery control operations.

Other professionals, such as civil engineers and architects, have also been sent to Algeria to help construct new buildings and neighborhoods. Bulgarian teachers were recruited and placed in the universities of Algiers, Constantine, Annaba, and Oran to teach scientific and technical subjects to a new generation of young Algerians. Others were sent to teach schoolchildren in primary and secondary schools. Finally, several agricultural engineers were tasked with improving crop yields.

This deployment of workers abroad enabled the Bulgarian state to replenish its treasury and rebalance its trade with its foreign partners. The phenomenon was so important that in 1964 the Bulgarian Balkan opened a Casablanca – Sofia air route with a stopover in Algiers.

The francophonisation of the children of Bulgaria's elites

Most of the development workers moved with their families to North Africa. As a result, their children had to be schooled locally in educational establishments. By instructions from Moscow, the Bulgarian authorities instructed expatriate families to enroll their children in the Russian schools opened in these territories(3). Despite this, many of them still needed to comply with the instructions they received. Putting the quality of their children's education and cultural awareness first, they enrolled their offspring in schools run by the French Cultural Mission, particularly the French lycées that were the benchmark at the time. Despite this form of civil disobedience, which had been in evidence since the late 1960s, the Bulgarian authorities were relatively flexible and did not apply any sanctions against the parents. On the other hand, Russian and Czech development workers in the region were under pressure to comply with Soviet directives regarding the schooling of their children. The Bulgarian authorities also tolerated certain fraternization between their nationals and the local French population.

According to data gathered from various sources (lists of former pupils, candidates for school-leaving exams, testimonies from former pupils, teachers, and management staff of these schools), more than a thousand Bulgarian schoolchildren were involved in this schooling and the Francophonisation that inevitably ensued(4). According to the school staff in charge of them, the children were friendly and highly motivated and always adapted quickly to their new school. They prioritized scientific subjects, and most of them went on to study engineering or medicine. Once their parents' contract ended, these students returned to Bulgaria to pursue a more traditional education. However, the increase in tuition fees at French schools from 1984 onwards led to a significant drop in Bulgarian students enrolling.

Following the fall of the socialist regime and the return of East-West mobility, many of these young French-speaking people, with their diplomas and professional skills, tried to migrate to France or Canada(5). It is difficult to measure the scale of these moves because they are individual trajectories and because the people concerned, quick to integrate socially in their host country, are very discreet about their origins and personal background.

Extending the links between Bulgaria and North Africa

Although the end of the socialist regime did not end the Bulgarian technical and medical presence in North Africa, these professional expatriations have decreased significantly. Firstly, non-essential staff were repatriated from Algeria following the unrest in that country after the demonstrations of 1988. At the same time, the Bulgarian agencies responsible for exporting labor were restructured from the early 1990s onwards. Despite these changes, Technoexportroy still has two international offices in the Maghreb (Algiers and Rabat). However, this presence has been

in decline since the 1980s, as the Maghreb has lost its attractiveness to other countries in the Arab world with shortages of healthcare workers and technicians, such as Libya (until the “Bulgarian nurses” affair in 1999), Yemen and Iraq (until the recent wars in these two countries). The return and “normalization” of post-socialist East-West mobility enabled everyone to migrate individually without recourse to these former public companies(6).

Sources:

(1) Stéphan Altasserre, Bulgarian mobility in Western Europe, particularly France during the post-communist period (1989-2012), PhD thesis, University of Strasbourg, November 2013.

(2) During an interview in Paris on 13 May 2011 with a French doctor who worked at Constantine University Hospital between 1964 and 1965, he told us about his personal experience with a Bulgarian radiologist who had been sent as a field doctor to a small village on the outskirts of Constantine and was unable to meet the needs of his patients.

(3) Individual interviews with 13 teachers from French schools in the Maghreb (Annaba, Oran, and Rabat) who had taught Bulgarian pupils and with 32 Bulgarian or French pupils who had taught Bulgarian pupils after 1960.

(4) Consultation, in the early 2010s, of pages listing schoolchildren on the Annaba and Oran alum portals, which are no longer accessible; Service de Coopération et d’action culturelle (Cooperation and Cultural Action Department).

(5) Between June 2011 and April 2012, we spoke to eight former Bulgarian schoolchildren who had received a French education in North Africa and migrated to France following the fall of the socialist regime (1989). Since 2008, other indirect testimonies have confirmed the path taken by former Bulgarian pupils who lived in North Africa during the post-socialist period.

(6) In August 1969, Vladimir Topentcharov, Bulgaria’s ambassador in Paris at the time, stated in an article published in Le Monde Diplomatique that *« more than 1,500 Bulgarian specialists were involved in transforming the economy and in construction work in a dozen developing countries »*.

Thumbnail: Algeria, 2011. Source: Maya-Anaïs Yataghène/Wikimedias Commons

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