FRENCH DIPLOMACY MEETS "DISLOYAL" BULGARIAN INTELLIGENTSIA: SOFT POWER IN 1989

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Abstract: The main research goal of this text is to reconstruct, from a cultural and historical perspective, a key event in the history of Bulgarian-French relations: the meeting between newly elected French President François Mitterrand and Bulgarian intellectuals during his official visit to Sofia in early 1989. The study is based on information from reference materials, documents from diplomatic and State Security archives, interviews with respondents, recollections of event participants, and other sources. The theoretical approach is grounded in Joseph Nye's concept of *Soft power* and employs the scientific methods of synthesis and analysis. The chapter seeks to determine whether the breakfast with the French president served as an initiation into the quest for freedom for Bulgarian dissident circles and as official legitimization for domestic civil organizations, the so-called *neformali*. The case study is presented as an instrument of French cultural diplomacy in totalitarian Bulgaria.

Keywords: Soft Power, Dissidents, Intelligentsia, Bulgaria, Breakfast with Mitterrand, Transition to Democracy

"*For the other Europe, I have the feeling that the doors of the next century will be opened by the wind of freedom that will blow through the doors, through the windows…"* (Sur les pas de la liberté). These words were spoken by French President François Mitterrand at a joint press conference with Todor Zhivkov in January 1989, during his two-day official visit to Bulgaria. The cultural-historical perspective allows us to define elements of this visit as an example of cultural diplomacy in action: the meeting at the residence of the French

Embassy in Sofia on January 19, 1989 with several Bulgarian dissidents who, in opposition to the communist regime, had begun forming the first informal civil associations in the country at that time.[1] In the cultural memory (Asman) and collective memory (Halbwachs) of Bulgarian society, this meeting is simply referred to as "the breakfast with Mitterrand".[2]

However, what was the "other Europe" that Mitterrand was talking about? Of course, it referred to Eastern European societies and that part of Europe which was still under a totalitarian regime of government and belonged to the so-called Eastern Bloc (a.k.a. the Soviet Bloc), but in which certain layers of society had already accepted freedom and democratic foundations as basic human values. Significant changes were brewing in this part of Europe: initial forms of democratizing processes were gaining wider publicity, and engaged intellectuals were self-organizing in various forms with the aim of changing the socio-political conditions in their countries. The key word here is "self-organizing," since the groups of the *neformali* represented an essential counterpoint to the state apparatus. However, in the interpretation of some of the participants in the informal groups, another circumstance was brought to the forefront: the novelty this

[1] I will use the following chronological boundaries proposed by one of the participants in the events in question – Deyan Kyuranov, when describing the informal groups (non-conformists) or the so-called *neformali*. In Kyuranov's *„Politspomeni"* the period *„before the neformali"* is considered to be 1987-1988, and that of the *„neformali"* 1987-1990.

[2] The same definition is used by the respondents I spoke to on the topic of Bulgarian-French cultural relations in the recent history of Bulgaria. When the event is mentioned, it is even referred to with a single expression, with a single noun: "*the breakfast."* Apparently, its significance is so great that in the personal narrative of the informants, it is mentioned without further explanation, as a total, singular, symbolic event. In a similar way, for example, Sofia University or "St. Kliment Ohridski" is referred to as "the University" (singular), although there are numerous other higher educational institutions in the capital city. The statement testifies to the special status of the described object, its inimitability and concentration of *Symbolic Capital* (Bourdieu).

time was self-organization in a "favourable international situation" (Kyuranov, 39). That is, attempts to demonstrate dissent had occurred before, but in the period under review, they were facilitated by the international political background of the emerging anti-communist movements and various organized forms of resistance against the authorities. This was an encouraging factor for newly established human rights, trade union, and environmental organizations in Bulgaria, which were critical of the authorities but had not been able to engage in active public activity until then because the secret police, State Security services (*Darzhavna Sigurnost* – DS), had hindered the initiatives of the informal structures with all its means.

Was the "breakfast with Mitterrand" a political event? Undoubtedly, the visit represented a defining moment in Bulgarian-French diplomatic relations and demonstrated open external support for the opposition circles inside the country, creating a "*space for dialogue in a closed society".*[3] The presidential visit aimed to revive relations with Eastern European nations and to renew its policy to the East by expanding contacts with the countries of the Bloc, which had been ongoing since 1984,[4]

[3] The quotation is from a text that gives a historical overview of Mitterrand's visit to Sofia and his meeting with Bulgarian intellectuals, published for presentation purposes on the website *l'Institut François Mitterrand*. The foundation is of public benefit (founded and based in Paris) and functions as a scientific centre for the preservation of the memory and promotion of the life and political work of the former president. The Mitterrand Institute preserves written, audio-visual and photographic material in library and archive collections; supports research activities and publishing; hosts forums, meetings, seminars and conferences. The article "*Le voyage de François Mitterrand à Sofia en janvier 1989: un vent de liberté?*", which I am citing, was published in 2015 in the accompanying newsletter *La Lettre* (No. 52). The magazine contains analyses, historical research, articles, memoirs on Mitterrand's personality, political speeches, etc. and is not strictly a scholarly source, but provides valuable insights into Mitterrand's ideological and political legacy. [online] Le voyage de François Mitterrand à Sofia en janvier 1989 : un vent de liberté ? – Institut François Mitterrand. Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.

[4] *Ibid.*

but was in its most active phase after Gorbachev came to power (1985). On the other hand, we can also designate the event as a brilliant example of French cultural diplomacy and French foreign policy influence through cultural relations and debate with civil society, drawing on the dictionary definition itself: cultural diplomacy "*may be best described as the means through which countries promote their cultural and political values to the rest of the world*" (Cultural Diplomacy Dictionary of Academy of Cultural Diplomacy, 16). The working meeting with Mitterrand can also be thought of as a key historical moment associated with the overthrow of the communist regime in Bulgaria later that year (November 10, 1989), and is an example of the use of *soft power* tools from the French arsenal in aid of democratic change.

Terminological clarifications

I have to bracket the following working premise, when mentioning the term *soft power*: I will use the conceptual framework of *soft power* (Nye, 30) for the purposes of this analysis, as it is understood by the American political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr.[5] Nye's definition, which has been in scholarly-theoretical circulation for over three decades[6] has at its core an aspiration not to influence in a coercive way (through

[5] Joseph Samuel Nye Jr. is a Harvard professor and senior U.S. National Security adviser. He is known to a wide audience as the "father" of the *soft power* concept and is frequently cited in scholarly studies with a broad disciplinary focus.

[6] The term *soft power* first appeared in 1990 in J. Nye's book "*Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*", in which he examined the "decline" of American leadership on a global scale and found that there were military and economic power resources for influence, but there was a deficit in methods for influencing other international players through forms of persuasion. The essence of Soft Power is also well illustrated in a later text of his through the figurative pair "*carrot and stick*" (Nye, 30), where "*Power is the ability to affect others to produce the outcomes you want; you could do this through coercion and threats, so-called "sticks." You can do this with payments we call the "carrots." Alternatively, you could do it with attraction and persuasion, which is "soft power*."

direct coercion, aggression, force, intimidation or bribery), but solely through the power of persuasion and attraction. In the 1990s, the author found that factors such as "*technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power, while geography, population, and raw materials are becoming somewhat less important*" (Nye, 154). Other researchers suggest an earlier temporal interval (1970s and 1980s) for the essential emergence of the *soft power* phenomenon (O'Brien). The concept implies the predominance of subtle forms of influence (such as *culture*, *education* and *science*) over other more puissant power resources (*military*, *economic*, *ideological*, etc.) that can be used to influence and/or control other players on the international terrain (Lekova). In the scholarly debate, the topic has been critically discussed by many research voices (Rothman; Melissen; McClory; Gray; Haneş and Andrei).

Soft power consists of three typologized categories of resources: a country's *values* (1), *culture* (2) and *policies* (3) (Nye, 96) which are diametrically opposed to conventional understanding of positional power, namely *hard power* practices and traditional power hierarchies (Ivanov). The two concepts, however, are not semantic antipodes as they are subject to the following circumstance: their *interdependency* (Lekova). *Soft power* is more widely diffused and could exert a more lasting impact than *hard power* (whose effects are rather situational). *Soft power* is also contextual: it's not a *static*, but a *dynamic* process (Lekova). We could assert with a high degree of confidence that *soft power* instruments are more dominant than *hard power* instruments in the long term, due to the very nature of the spheres involved: education, film and music, food, cultural and creative industries, academic exchanges, sport, national cohesion, values, the attractiveness of political ideas, and many more. It may be

a slower way to influence other states, societies or groups of people, but it is certainly a deep-rooted one – and a strategic way of forming stable connections and enhancing a positive image. Moreover, its impact and influence on the *"battle for hearts and minds"*[7] is effective both on individuals and entire nations. In other words, the scale of the impact of *soft power* can be equally effective and impactful, no matter how big or small the target audience. I have already addressed the *soft power* issue in more detail in my article "*In the intersection of culture and politics: a gaze into soft power*."

Let us go back to the Soft power of Mitterrand's visit to Sofia on January 18 and 19, 1989[8] and, more specifically, to the "breakfast" defined in the diplomatic world as the beginning of "*Bulgaria's return to the European family"*[9] – a symbolic reference that has permeated the social fabric of Bulgarian society. This encounter has been firmly embedded in the history of Bulgaria's transition to democracy and market economy as an event with significant Symbolic Capital (Bourdieu), which encouraged informal associations and is defined by researchers as "*the first recognition of Bulgarian dissidents"* (Kalinova, Baeva, 501). Its symbolic characteristic is presupposed by the political reality of the country (Bulgaria was under communist rule at the time of Mitterrand's visit), but also by the high culture within whose normative framework the meeting was happening (only nationally established artists and public figures from dissident circles were invited to participate).

[7] It refers to the battle on the level of values and ideas during the Cold War in the foreign policy field, when the Soviet Union and the United States were in an ideological clash and in a race for the "*minds and hearts*" of nations.

[8] *Le voyage de François Mitterrand à Sofia en janvier 1989: un vent de liberté? – Institut François Mitterrand.* Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.

[9] The definition is that of H.E. Étienne de Poncin, Ambassador of France to Bulgaria in 2008, when the 20th anniversary of Mitterrand's visit to Sofia was celebrated. In: *Sur les pas de la liberté. 1989-2009: 20-ème anniversaire de la visite de François Mitterand en Bulgarie: témoignages*. Editions Uniscorp, 2008, p. 4

We can even say that this was a meeting of the two "*Europes*" – more precisely of the two images of Europe. On one side was established democracy: "*Europe*" as a political reality, as an image of freedom represented by the visiting French diplomacy. On the other side stood the first signs of an emerging opposition community in Bulgaria against Todor Zhivkov's governance and the desire for regime change. This was evident from the already established organizations, which viewed "Europe" as a possible and desirable political path, with the first step already taken. A lot has been written about the multiplying meanings of the symbolic complex "*Europe*" and the burgeoning images of the *European*, played out through Bulgarian cultural, political, domestic, spatial and identity-based modalities – see, e.g., Alexander Kyosev's culturological analysis "*Igrite na Evropa. Opit za kartografiya na edin balgarski diskurs*" (Kyosev).

Domestic and foreign policy background of Mitterrand's visit

In order to get a sense of the scale of the event's symbolic capital in a national dimension, it is necessary to ask the following question: *What made this event so significant?* Several factors that highlight its importance can be identified. To begin with, this was the first visit of a French Head of state to Bulgaria.[10] Moreover, the historical context of the event was highly intricate. The political situation was further complicated by the severe economic crisis Bulgaria was facing. On top of that, the visit took place at the beginning of a watershed year – a historical benchmark when totalitarian

[10] By the way, it is a little known fact that Mitterrand had visited Bulgaria before, but prior to taking office as President. In addition, he visited the country again after 5 years (in 1994), inviting the intellectuals to a meeting again.

regimes in Central and Eastern Europe fell one after the other. Before 1989, Bulgaria (*People's Republic of Bulgaria*) was a socialist republic with a one-party system and a political monopoly on all spheres of public life. In addition, during the late 1980s, the country found itself in deep international isolation due to the ongoing so-called "*vazroditelen protses*" ("revival process"). External reactions to the coercive policies of forcibly changing Turkish names to Bulgarian ones, which was at its most acute stage[11], were very negative and placed the country in an international vacuum. As mentioned, "*it is only in the years to come* […] *that the negative consequences for Bulgaria of this ill-considered act on the international scene will be seen"* (Kalinova, Baeva, 222). Until then, the country was considered the USSR's most loyal satellite – understandable since it tried to become the Soviet Union's 16th republic and to renounce its national sovereignty twice (in 1963[12] and 1973).

President Mitterrand arrived in Bulgaria demanding a meeting with the country's dissidents against the backdrop of such a political environment. People began to say things in front of him that had never been said in public before (this was visible mainly in the courage shown by the student community during the meeting in auditorium 272 at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", described by the French diplomacy as "*an unprecedented discussion"* (Stoyanovich). We should also emphasize the following: Mitterrand arrived

[11] The mass exodus and emigration wave of Bulgarian Turks, known as the "Great Excursion", began after Todor Zhivkov's speech on May 29, 1989. The statement effectively constituted a call to leave the country for Turkey.

[12] Stenografski protokol na plenuma na CK na BKP za po-natatashnoto i nay-tyasno sblizhenie i v perspektiva za slivane na NRB sas SSSR. 4.XII.1963. За първи път: Стенограмата от пленума на ЦК на БКП за сливане на Бълга□ Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.

in Bulgaria in his role as a "*moderniser of Europe*"[13], defined by some analysts as a unifier of the great visions of Charles de Gaulle and Jean Monnet.[14] In a way, the contact between French diplomats and Bulgarian intellectuals overcame the isolation and provided an opportunity to talk more actively within society about the dissident movement. One should not forget that until then these dissidents had only sporadic contacts with the Bulgarian editorial offices of the *BBC*, "*Svobodna Evropa*" and "*Deutsche Welle*" to promote their activities. In the academic literature, this meeting with Mitterrand was defined as "*the first official legitimation of Bulgarian dissent*" (Hristova, 116).

Hypostases of Bulgarian dissidence. Or some remarks on the composition of the working breakfast with Mitterrand

The question of domestic dissent is highly debated in Bulgarian cultural, artistic and educational circles. The issue has been the subject of numerous scholarly discussions (Nedelchev; Hristova; Baeva; Ivanova). Interpretations on the scope, content and conceptual boundaries of various dissident manifestations and forms of resistance against the communist dictatorship have given us an insight into how broad the limits of this concept are in its local, Bulgarian dimensions. To a certain degree, this is explained by the fact that part of the scholarly analysis of these historical events was carried out by the participants themselves, which raises the question of subjectivity. That is, it adds the need to con-

[13] "*F. Mitterand litse v litse sas satreseniyata na sveta*." Alen Fenkelkro razgovarya s Pier Asner i Yuber Vedrin. In: sp. „*Demokraticheski pregled*", kn. 38, zima (1998/99), p. 680

[14] *Ibid.*

sider the position contained in the author's study, where historical interpretation is further problematized when it comes to researching the recent past. In the examination of the problem, nuances from the whole spectrum of scholarly discourse are present (including, but not limited to): *Did the phenomenon of Bulgarian dissent exist at all? What were the similarities to and differences from the Czechoslovak and Soviet models? What specific initiatives were interpreted in the context of other civic expressions by intellectuals from various Central European socialist countries who were critical of the authorities?* The persistent correlation with foreign contexts is striking, highlighting the need to "interpret" the Bulgarian experience through its interactions with Western structures, or conversely, through its isolation from similar systems. Moreover, Western legitimation is a "primary condition" (Hristova, 121) for the formation of a dissident identity, rather than merely a complement to its existence.

In "*Uchastta da si disident v Balgariya*", M. Nedelchev, for example, accepts that to speak of a domestic dissident movement is "exaggerated" (206), but to deny the existence of dissidents is "unfair".[15] In another study (Hristova) – which makes a deeper attempt to provide the reader with a description of the Bulgarian characteristics of the phenomenon, and to typologize various anti-communist manifestations – the question of doubt surrounding the existence of Bulgarian dissent is raised again. The article also draws attention to the status of the Bulgarian public intelligentsia and discusses fundamental questions surrounding the personality of the dissident *per se*, situating his function within the field of moral-value (Hristova, 117), not so much within the categorical boundaries of the political.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 206

The above also relates to the question of which Bulgarian intellectuals can be referred to as dissidents: were they the prominent anti-communists who had openly criticized the regime, opposed the government through their work, or took part in all kinds of protest actions? Or would it include the internally opposition-minded individuals who were not necessarily anti-communists, but were sufficiently dissatisfied with the government to make an organized effort to overthrow it? Perhaps for some it was that specific type of dissent motivated by the impossibility of living in a lie (Solzhenitsyn)? Or perhaps it's something entirely different: an intellectual could only be seen as someone who opposes power, not just as a specific counterforce, but as one who resists all forms of power. This individual embodies a criticism that does not aim for power, meaning it doesn't ultimately turn into its negation. Instead, it is a critique that exists for its own sake, serving as a corrective solely through the value of its creative work. The typology of Bulgarian dissidents is not the subject of this study, so this article will not dwell on it, but differentiating the participants in "the meeting" is imperative when analysing the French motivation for organizing such an event in the first place.

The latter raises the need to take a closer look at the profile of the participants invited by Mitterrand: four writers, journalists and philosophers, a screenwriter, a physical chemist and an artist. In alphabetical order, the Bulgarian invitees included Alexei Sheludko, Angel Wagenstein, Baruch Shamliev, Blaga Dimitrova, Ivaylo Petrov, Koprinka Chervenkova, Nikolai Vassilev, Radoy Ralin, Stefan Prodev, Svetlin Rusev, Yordan Radichkov, and Zhelyo Zhelev. This group represented the intellectual elite at that time – in other words, the *soft power* of the country. However, the most strident and outspoken dissident figures did not appear among the

invitees. Absent for example was the chairman of the "*Nezavisimo druzhestvo za zashtita na pravata na choveka*", Ilia Minev, as well as Petar Manolov, who was currently on hunger strike. We cannot overlook the fact that most of those invited were current members of the Communist Party, thus no excessively radical people. The most repressed of society had not been invited, and there were no extremely effective figures from the opposition movements. On the contrary, there was a cautious demeanour and the tone of their criticism was considerably softened, probably also because – given the operational interest of this visit by the DS – they were aware of the possible consequences. However, would a true dissident have refrained from speaking their truth?

The French delegation must have thought that meeting with representatives of the dissenting intelligentsia would help a genuine dialogue between the East and the West: a dialogue in which democratic values and fundamental rights and freedoms were set as opposed to ideological discourse. In my view, despite the moderate persons present, the choice of participants still modelled the future type of societal reconstruction. We can also derive a semiotic perspective: the breakfast with the French president functioned as an *initiation* to the quest for freedom by dissident circles. Moreover, it is very significant that this meeting was actually attended by the future President and Vice-president of the Republic (respectively Zhelyo Zhelev and Blaga Dimitrova, who were invited as a philosopher and a poet, in their capacity as Bulgarian public figures with a high level of civic courage). This circumstance could be interpreted in two ways: on one hand, the French probably had a sense of who the next national leaders might be. On the other hand, it was the prestigious level of participation in this event that validated them as *neformali* and agents of change, in a sense even designating

them, since only twelve had been selected. However, this designation was not unambiguous in terms of the political perspective in which these individuals developed. For some of them, dissent was more of a *lustro* – they considered themselves opponents of Todor Zhivkov's rule, but not of the communist regime as a whole.

Although only intellectuals, and not active politicians, were present, the meeting protocol was intricately negotiated, and it is highly likely that consensus names were selected. In a 2009 interview with Freddie Foscolo[16], Véronique Soulé[17] assumed that a probable compromise regarding the composition of the breakfast meeting was likely to have been made by French diplomacy, otherwise there would be a risk of the whole visit being cancelled. At the same time, the journalist expressed confidence that Mitterrand "*firmly insisted that the meetings with the dissidents and students remain on the agenda*".[18]

A few words on why this text is titled: "*French diplomacy meets "disloyal" Bulgarian intelligentsia*." This identifier is present in a document dated 05.01.1989 and classified "secret" by the DS two weeks before Mitterrand's visit. It contained information on "*some organizational measures in connection with the forthcoming official visit of the French President*" (The Committee for disclosing the documents and announcing affiliation of Bulgarian citizens to the State Security and intelligence services of the Bulgarian national Army, 761). Needless

[16] Alfred (Freddie) Foscolo was a Bulgarian dissident, an active participant in the resistance against the communist regime, a political prisoner and emigrant in France.

[17] Journalist from "Libération" Newspaper, reporting for France on Eastern European issues and in particular on the Bulgarian socio-political landscape. She attended President Mitterrand's breakfast with Bulgarian intellectuals.

[18] *V Balgariya Miteran se ubedi, che komunizmat shte padne.* Intervyu na Fredi Foskolo s zhurnalistikata Veronik Sule, 29 yanuari 2010. Accessed 3 March 2025.

to say, the event did not remain hidden from intelligence operatives. Indeed, it was at the centre of their attention. In the eyes of the authorities, the intelligentsia was "disloyal" to the official ideological discourse. In the report of the intelligence services we read: "*Recently, both in other socialist countries and in the People's Republic of Bulgaria, there have been more frequent cases of prominent political leaders from capitalist countries seeking meetings with disloyal Bulgarian citizens – mostly from the intelligentsia – during their visits to our country*".[19] The fear of such meetings, which carried the risk of contacts with the West and the establishment of unwanted influences and collaborations between French representatives and Bulgarian citizens who stand on "*unhealthy*" (wrong) positions, was visible in all the measures taken by the DS before Mitterrand arrived in Bulgaria. The archival documents declassified by *The Committee*[20] provide valuable insights into the prevention and surveillance of the participants, about the attempts to prevent a wide public response to what happened, and about the operational vetting of all participants who might have points of contact with French diplomats. However, the adjective "disloyal" can be given a secondary meaning and used in the opposite connotation since the dissidents were, in a way, not loyal to the dissident cause itself – they had not shown enough courage to speak directly and openly like some students had. Therefore, they were not only disloyal to the ideological discourse – as the state apparatus had described them – but, perhaps, they were disloyal to the opportunity to defend their beliefs freely, without caution, and to show more civic valour.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 762

[20] The Committee for disclosing the documents and announcing affiliation of Bulgarian citizens to the State Security and intelligence services of the Bulgarian national Army

The following State Security order to "*instruct the Ministry of the Interior to carry out measures to minimize the opportunities for the most active disloyal citizens of our country to meet with French and other foreign journalists and members of the teams accompanying François Mitterrand during the preparation and official visit"*[21] supports the thesis that only the more obedient and apparently moderate "dissidents" were allowed to meet with Mitterrand. This assumption is also proven by another instruction "*to assign the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to arrange preliminary talks of these intellectuals with responsible comrades of the party and state apparatus with a view to exerting a positive influence".*[22] The over-fixation on controlling this event with prominent dissidents probably made the government underestimate the second event, which remains the most tumultuous part of this historic visit.

As part of Mitterrand's visit, an exciting meeting with the student community was also held, which had been of great interest to the French President himself. Credit for organizing this goes to the French press secretary, Yves Manville, who had been maintaining active ties with informal organizations in the country. The meeting was held in the largest hall – the packed auditorium 272 of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", the "heart" of the Alma Mater. As a cultural anthropologist, while preparing this exposé, I sought out key verbal illustrations and personal recollections to evoke the atmosphere of the event. The "temperature" of the student gathering can be sensed through the following biographical stories:

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 766
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 764

"We've been talking about this for weeks. Toni[23] *just can't get tired of repeating some details from the meeting of the French president with the Bulgarian students, and I listen to her and ask questions, the first answer to which I have already heard. I cannot calm down from the following remark of hers: when I saw some young faces in front of us at the University, I realised that I can now die calm. "Can you imagine," she repeated several times, "we were in the same halls where we listened to so much nonsense! But this time there were completely different boys and girls across.* ***I felt that something had changed forever in the country****. I was also happy for my father, who couldn't wait for it…" (Mihaylovska, 136)* (emphasis is mine).

And more, through the memories of the students involved, *"In the electrified atmosphere of auditorium 272 a new civic consciousness was taking shape" […] "Clustered tightly on the banks […] we witnessed the protocol arrival of the French delegation, surrounded by vigilant guards. Our questions, carefully prepared on sheets of paper and checked the previous day, were supposed to be asked at the signal of the Komsomol officer in charge. Instead, they were instantly superseded by a* ***storm of spontaneous, unrestrained and unexpectedly frank questions that arose in the crowded hall****" (Sur les pas de la liberté, 42)* (emphasis is mine).

Mitterrand arrived in Bulgaria with a huge delegation. He was accompanied by 48 members of political staff (19

[23] This is Antoniya Peeva, the official translator of the French president during his visit to Bulgaria. Peeva is a close friend of Elena Mihaylovska, from whose memoirs the quote is taken.

of them executives and 27 officials)[24], and according to the intelligence reports, the entire staff numbered over 120 people (including consultants, technical support teams, security) and around 80 journalists. The presence of five ministers among the delegation is noteworthy, which gives us reason to conclude that the meeting was not at all *pro forma*. On the contrary – a leader who went with such an entourage wanted to make an impact, to actually hold in-depth meetings and establish lasting and sustainable ties. In addition, the reports of the French journalists covering the visit were of great importance, while the Bulgarian media remained completely silent about the event.

It is apparent from descriptions in archival documents that Mitterrand was "*fascinated that in Bulgaria he could meet different people with original personal views*" (*Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bulgaria*, 1989, inventory 35, 46-16, a. u. 634). However, the Bulgarian state did not seem to have shared a positive view of the meeting. This is evidenced, for example, by the dismissal of Koprinka Chervenkova (theatre critic) from "*Narodna Kultura*" newspaper only a few days after the breakfast took place at the French Embassy. Upon hearing of this, the French government expected to receive a clarification on Chervenkova's case and Ambassador Lataillade was tasked with making a *démarche.*[25]

[24] These include: Mr *Roland Dumas* /Minister of Foreign Affairs/, Mr *Paul Quilés* /Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Space/, Mr *Hubert Curien* /Minister of Research and Technology/, Mr *Jean-Marie Rausch* /Minister of Foreign Trade/, Mr *Olivier Stirn* /Minister of Tourism/, Mr. *Théo Vial-Massa* /Chairman of the Bulgaria-France Friendship Group in the French National Assembly/, Mr. *Guy Penn* /Chairman of the Bulgaria-France Friendship Group in the French Parliament/, Mr. *Bertrand de Lataillade* /Ambassador of France to Bulgaria and his wife/, Mr. *Hubert Védrine* /Adviser, spokesman of the Presidency of the Republic/, Mr. *Jean Musitelli* /Technical Advisor at the General Secretariat of the Presidency/, Ms. *Antonia Peeva* /Conference interpreter/ and by individual invitation Ms. *Julia Kristeva*.

[25] *Ibid.*

In lieu of a conclusion

Based on everything discussed so far, there is reason to view the presidential visit as a clear case of *soft power* in action. Despite its short duration of only two days, François Mitterrand's visit remains significant in Bulgaria's recent history, and the meeting with opposition-minded intellectuals, which lasted only 85 minutes[26], has taken on a historic dimension. Precisely because it was "formatted" to convey and spread the message of freedom and democracy not through the *political* but through the *intellectual* field, the content of this meeting was *par excellence soft power* at work.

The meeting had a *framing* significance as well. At the time of its occurrence, processes that had already begun were reactivated and now taking a public shape. For instance, the formation of political clubs and the emergence of opposition figures – committed to the new path of freedom and fiercely critical of Todor Zhivkov's regime – signalled a clear shift in the political landscape. We have reasons to argue that the legitimation of informal movements in Bulgaria took place in the frame of high political culture, but its results reverberated far and wide, encouraging anti-communist sentiments and ultimately leading to change within the broader layers of society.

The meeting also had an *integrative* character since the visit to Bulgaria was positioned among Mitterrand's wider Eastern European tour. Before coming to Bulgaria, the French president visited Czechoslovakia (December 1988), then Poland (June 1989), Hungary (January 1990) and Moscow (May 1990). We can assume that such a strategic aim to support dissident groups, who would emerge as the fu-

[26] The Committee for disclosing the documents and announcing affiliation of Bulgarian citizens to the State Security and intelligence services of the Bulgarian national Army. *DS sreshtu grazhdanski organizatsii (1988-1990)*. Dokumentalen sbornik. Sofia, 2013. p. 767

ture political class in their countries, contained a multifaceted motivation. At first glance, the series of French visits can be seen as a tour to reach out to developing societies that were modernizing and would become future free markets. On the other hand, such diplomatic activity betrayed consistent efforts to establish long-term influence and protect French interests in Eastern Europe. Regardless of which one of the two modalities of impetus one chooses to justify these foreign policy activities with, the choice of French diplomacy to work with the tools of cultural diplomacy and establish bridges with the rebellious intellectuals remains central.

The visit managed to give courage to the dissenters, to support and legitimize the figures of the dissident movement, and had a real impact on the political process in Bulgaria. "*It's boiling here, all that remains is to lift the lid*", said Mitterrand of his impressions of the meetings in front of Véronique Soulé.[27] According to Roland Dumas, it was actually in Bulgaria that the French president realized the days of the communist regime were over.[28]

Equilibria and what followed

On the occasion of the celebration of a quarter of a century since Mitterrand's visit, Thierry Repantin (*MVnR. Otchet za stepenta na izpalnenie na utvardenite politiki i programi na MVnR za parvoto polugodie na 2014 g.*, 117), French Minister for European Affairs, also arrived in Sofia. Three Bulgarian presidents[29] took part in the commemorative breakfast organized in 2014: then current Head of state Rosen Plevneliev and two former presidents of the Republic of Bulgaria, Zhelyo Zhelev (1990-1997) and Georgi Parva-

[27] *V Balgariya Miteran se ubedi, che komunizmat shte padne.* Accessed 3 March 2025.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Ibid.*

nov (2002-2012). Such concentration was a sign of the great historical significance of the original event. On the same occasion, accompanying events were organized in parallel at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." The following statement of Prof. Ivan Ilchev[30], given in retrospect and within the framework of the public debate about the ongoing political changes in the country in 1989 and the unambiguous role of *soft power*, instrumentalized through university culture, deserves attention: *"This was an expression of the social turmoil in the second half of the 1980s, one of whose main centres was Sofia University […]. It was not clear to all of us what kind of change we were looking for then, but it was clear that it was needed. Here were discussed, often naively but always with fervour, options for the future of Bulgaria and Bulgarian society. Some of the first organizations that set themselves the goal of change were founded here. The teachers and students at Sofia University were at the heart of the numerous emerging civic organizations".*[31]

The 30th anniversary of the meeting of Mitterand with the Bulgarian intellectuals was celebrated with a scientific event again at Sofia University: a lecture and meeting with researcher Arthur Delaporte[32], entitled "*Breakfast with Mitterrand: 30 years later*." These are just a few examples in support of the power of cultural, scientific and academic diplomacy, contained in the domain of *soft power*. The oldest higher education institution in the country hosted the commemorations of the event, which periodically reaffirms

[30] Prof. Dr. Ivan Ilchev was Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (2007-2015).

[31] "*Zakuskata s Miteran – vazhen epizod za promenite v Balgariya*." BNR, 20.01.2014. [Закуската с Митеран – важен епизод за промените в България - Живот БГ]. Accessed 3 March 2025.

[32] Laureate of the François Mitterrand Institute Prize, specialist in the diplomacy of F. Mitterrand and Franco-Bulgarian relations. Currently, President of the France-Bulgaria friendship group in the French National Assembly.

its symbolic significance. In 2024, the French Institute in Sofia marked the anniversary with a conference-debate on the topic "*Past and Future of Dissent: 35 Years After Breakfast with President François Mitterrand*", inviting Michel Elchaninoff[33] and the last living member of the original "breakfast" line-up – Koprinka Chervenkova.

In conclusion, echoing the aforementioned anniversaries, there is a curious (or perhaps ironic) coincidence to add to the many French intersections with Bulgaria's national destiny. The events of 1989 took place exactly 200 years after the beginning of the great French Revolution. As phrased by Étienne de Poncins[34], during his visit to Sofia, Mitterrand glorified freedom or rather "*all the freedoms of which France has sought to be the guarantor since 1789*" (*Sur les pas de la liberté, 4*).

Mitterrand's encounter with the intellectuals can be summarized as follows: French culture and ideas sought to align with the pulse of the most dynamic segment of Bulgarian society. It is no coincidence that in social and cultural circles, Mitterrand was referred to as the "godfather" of the new democratic opposition in the country. To me, this highlights an essential lesson for cultural diplomacy: it must remain attuned to the socio-political context in which it operates, staying connected to the socio-political processes unfolding in the host country. At the same time, it should seek to create new connections, spread scientific and cultural influence, open doors where none existed before, and build bridges between free minds – which can, in turn, pave the way for greater freedom among those who are not yet free.

[33] University lecturer and doctor of philosophy, who works on the topic of contemporary dissidents and is the author of books on the history of ideas; editor-in-chief of the French monthly "*Philosophie Magazine*."

[34] Ambassador of France to Bulgaria during the period in which Mitterrand's visit to Bulgaria took place.

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