

# The Theory of the Hun Origin in Contemporary Bulgaria

*E. A. Koloskov*

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The article is devoted to the history of the formation and transformation of the theory of the Huns in contemporary Bulgaria through the prism of the political history of the country from the beginning of the debate about the origin of Bulgarians up to present day. The article examines how political reality impacted the processes of shaping scholarly and educational images, i.e. constructing a “convenient” usable past by the Bulgarian academic and non-academic circles. The main aspect in the study is related to the question of various interpretations of the ethnic origin of the Bulgars, the Huns and the role of the Slavic factor in the ethnogenesis of the contemporary Bulgarians. The milestones of the difficult history of Bulgaria and changes in political regimes have become the reasons for rejecting “Slavic” origin or, in some case, returning to it depending on external and internal circumstances. Today the Hun theory in all its variations and interpretations lies outside the professional scope of academic circles but is becoming the domain for various marginals. However, increasing activity of the right and the far-right in the politics of Europe capitalizing on the 2015 refugee crisis might return to the mainstream of official academic discourse the theory of the Hun. The upcoming challenges of foreign policy (Euro-skepticism, ambitious projects outside the EU framework) and internal political issues (the question of national minorities) may also have a significant impact on this issue.

*Keywords:* theory of the Hun, Bulgaria, origin, ethnogenesis, identity, mobilized Middle Ages.

## Гуннская теория в современной Болгарии

*Е. А. Колосков*

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Статья посвящена рассмотрению истории формирования и трансформации гуннской теории в современной Болгарии сквозь призму политической истории страны от этапа зарождения дискуссии о происхождении (прото)болгар в конце XVIII — начале XIX в. до сегодняшнего состояния проблемы. Наибольшее внимание уделено непосредственному влиянию политической действительности на формирование научных

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*Evgenii A. Koloskov* — PhD (History), Associate Professor, St. Petersburg State University, 7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation; [e.koloskov@spbu.ru](mailto:e.koloskov@spbu.ru)

*Евгений Андреевич Колосков* — канд. ист. наук, доц., Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 7–9; [e.koloskov@spbu.ru](mailto:e.koloskov@spbu.ru)

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и образовательных образов, т. е. конструированию академическими кругами Болгарии «удобного» актуального прошлого. Главный аспект исследования связан с вопросом различных интерпретаций этнического происхождения болгар, протоболгар, гуннов и роли славянского фактора в этногенезе современных болгар. Основные вехи непростой истории Болгарии и изменения политических режимов находят прямое отражение в сюжетах отказа от «славянскости» или, наоборот, в возвращении к ней в силу внешних и внутренних конъюнктурных обстоятельств. Очевидно, что нарративы этногенеза современных наций, как и дискуссии об автохтонности или обретении родины — сюжет весьма спекулятивный, широко используемый для различных трансформаций и мифологизации актуального прошлого. Вполне ожидаемо, что глобальные процессы, затрагивающие в том числе и Болгарию, могут привести к новому витку мифологизации прошлого. И хотя на сегодняшний день вариации и интерпретации гуннской теории во многом находятся за пределами профессиональных интересов академической среды и стали в большой степени полем деятельности различных маргиналов и фолк-историков, нам представляется, что активизация правых и ультраправых в Европе на волне миграционного кризиса 2015 г. с высокой долей вероятностью может вновь вернуть гуннскую теорию в мейнстрим официального академического дискурса. Грядущие внешнеполитические (евроскептицизм, амбициозные проекты вне рамок ЕС) и внутривнутриполитические (вопрос национальных меньшинств) вызовы также могут оказать значительное влияние на данный вопрос.

*Ключевые слова:* гуннская теория, Болгария, происхождение, этногенез, идентичность, мобилизованное Средневековье.

The issue of ethnogenesis is of great importance to national mythology. It involves issues of primordiality, ancientness, rights to certain historical or pseudo-historical legacy. It is not uncommon or new for the Slavic world, and for other nations as well, to reconsider proto-history, reject traditional perception of one's own ethnogenesis, to debate about ethnical component of the nation. Such discussions take more intense form within the context of radical historical changes, changes in political direction, and national catastrophes. Given a complex Early modern and Modern history of Bulgaria, it is no wonder that historiography of the origin of proto-Bulgarians (or Bulgars) comprise a wide range of works and a large number of very interesting theories. This paper aims at tracing the transformations of the theory of Hun origin of the Bulgars with regard to the political history of the country since its independence in 1878 up to the present day. This research focuses on the obsessive rethinking of the theory of Hun origin of the Bulgars by historians of different periods, and on the correlation between political changes and actualization of the old historiographic tradition.

The theory of the Hun origin of proto-Bulgarians has some variants and distinct features. First of all, it can be named a “Hun theory” or “Hun-Turkic theory”. Secondly, it can mean that Bulgars were exactly Huns, or that they were a Hun tribe, or that Bulgars and Huns had the same origin or ancestors<sup>1</sup>. Thirdly, they could also live and fight together during a long time as a “Hun-Bulgarian Alliance”<sup>2</sup>, according to proponents of the theory. In any case, there are appeals to the military history of the Huns, which is always characteristic of the apologists for the theory of the Hun texts<sup>3</sup>. The most important element of

<sup>1</sup> Dobrev P. Blgarskite ognishcha na civilizaciya na kartata na Evraziya. Sofia, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Dimitrov B. Blgarite i Aleksandr Makedonski. Sofia, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Daskalov R. Chudniyat svet na drevnite blgari. Sofia, 2011. P. 172–173, 295–296.

the theory of the Hun is the issue of migration of Bulgars as an alternative to an autochthonous version of the Bulgarian origin and the Bulgarian ethnogenesis.

Some contemporary Bulgarian historians use the theory of Hun origin as an alternative variant of the ethnogenesis of Bulgars<sup>4</sup>, but there are no references to the glorious military history or claims to the status of the most ancient civilization in Eurasia in their works. It is noteworthy that texts by contemporary researchers studying the Hunnic theory are rarely known outside the academic environment and do not have much public resonance. Popularization of the theory of the Hun origin in contemporary Bulgaria remains in the domain of amateurs and some politicians. I believe there is a certain similarity between such narratives and the popularity of the theories of Slavic origin of Normans in Russia. Of course, it should be pointed out that supporters of the Hun theory consider an anti-Slavic concept of the Bulgarian ethnogenesis and politogenesis “a patriotic narrative”, or according to Leo Klejn, a “scholarly patriotism”<sup>5</sup>.

The theory of Hun origin of the Bulgars is not the only theory and not the first theory of the proto-Bulgarian origin. There are also Turkic-Tatar, Turan, Slavic, Iran, Pamir and other theories of the Bulgar ethnogenesis. The analysis of the theory of Hun origin of Bulgars can help to account for a regular recourse to it by scholars and politicians and to explain their conviction of it being politically neutral and usable past.

In all probability, the issue of the origin of the Bulgarians was raised by Philip Johan von Strahlenberg, a Swedish officer captured by the Russians in 1709 after the battle of Poltava. He is considered to have been the one who connected the origin of the ethnonym “Bulgarians” with the name of the river Volga, the town Bolgar and the Tatars from Kazan<sup>6</sup>. Afterwards, this theory was used by all subsequent scholars, including Joseph de Guignes in 1758<sup>7</sup>, Vasily Tatishchev in 1768<sup>8</sup>, August Ludwig von Schlözer<sup>9</sup>, and Johann Christian von Engel in 1797<sup>10</sup>, who regarded the Bulgarians contemporary with them to be Slavified descendants of the unified Eurasian “Turkic-Tatar” people. At the same time, in “The Kingdom of the Slavs” by Mauro Orbini published in 1722 in Russia, the Bulgarians were described as belonging to “the Slavic gens”<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, a viewpoint, alternative to the Turkic theory, was put forward by Paisius of Hilendar, who in his “Slavic-Bulgarian history”

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<sup>4</sup> *Chukov V., Andreeva-Chukova R.* Central Asian Studies in Bulgaria: Main Trends and Perspectives // Central Eurasian Studies Review. Vol. 1, no. 3. 2002. P. 4. URL: <https://cess.memberclicks.net/central-eurasian-studies-review> (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>5</sup> *Klein L. S.*: 1) Antinormanizm kak proiavlennie “nauchnogo patriotizma” // Troitskii variant — Nauka. 2018. No. 253. P. 10–11. URL: <https://trv-science.ru/2018/05/08/antinormanizm-kak-proyavlenie-nauchno-go-patriotizma/> (accessed: 11.02.2020); 2) Spor o variagakh kak perezhitoe // Zemlia nasha velika i obil'na. Sbornik statei, posviashchennyi 90-letiiu A. N. Kirpichnikova. St. Peterburg, 2019. P. 183–200.

<sup>6</sup> *Strahlenberg F. I.* Zapiski kapitana Filipa Ioganna Stralenerga ob istorii i geografii Rossiiskoi imperii Petra Velikogo: Severnaia i Vostochnaia chast' Evropy i Azii. Moscow; Leningrad, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Histoire générale des Huns, Turcs, Mogols et autres Tartares occidentaux. URL: <https://archive.org/details/histoiregenrale02guiggoog/page/n10> (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>8</sup> *Tatishchev V. N.* Istoriia Rossiiskaia s samykh drevneishikh vremen, neuspnyimi trudami cherez tridsat' let sobranaia i opisanaia pokoinym tainym sovetnikom i astrakhanskim gubernatorom Vasilem Nikitichem Tatishchevym. Moscow, 1768. URL: <https://cloud.mail.ru/public/DxGx/a8TvJNod7> (accessed: 11.06.2020).

<sup>9</sup> *Shletser A. L.* Russkaia grammatika. Ch. I–II. St. Petersburg, 1904. URL: [https://archive.org/details/schloezer\\_rusgram](https://archive.org/details/schloezer_rusgram) (accessed: 11.06.2020).

<sup>10</sup> *Engel Fon J. K.* Istoriya na blgarite v Miziya. Veliko Trnovo, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Orbini M.* Tsarstvo slavianskoe // Vostochnaia literatura. URL: [http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus17/Mavro\\_Orbini/text1.phtml?id=10718](http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus17/Mavro_Orbini/text1.phtml?id=10718) (accessed: 11.05.2020).

in 1762, quite expectedly, regarded Bulgarians as the Slavs who borrowed their ethnonym from the river Volga where they had resided before migrating to the Balkans<sup>12</sup>.

Another representative of the “Slavic camp” was Jovan Rajić with his book “The History of various Slavic peoples, particularly the Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs” published in 1794 and 1823<sup>13</sup>. A Slavonic scholar Iurii Venelin (1802–1839), who brought up the question of the genesis of Bulgarians, undoubtedly, considered proto-Bulgarians to have been Slavs<sup>14</sup>. Afterwards, his work was deemed to have formed the basis for academic speculations about the origin of the Bulgarians as descendants from “Tatars or Slavs”<sup>15</sup>. The Huns, and, consequently, the Bulgars, according to Venelin, were Slavs. The affinity between the Bulgarians and the Russians, in terms of language and mentality as well as with regard to a common historical fate, was the cornerstone of Venelin’s Slavic concept, a precursor of Slavophilism, to a certain extent.

Narratives about “Tatars or Slavs” determined alternative imaginary future of the Balkan Peninsula: a future under the Russian tsar rule, according to Venelin, or under “humane, European, Hungarian” Habsburg rule, according to von Engel<sup>16</sup>; who preferred to see no difference between the Ottomans and the Bulgarians.

During the era of Turkish dominance, the idea of “Turkic” origin of the Bulgarians, obviously, was negatively perceived by Slavacists. However, there was another threat making the Oriental theory appealing: independent Greece after 1830 had claims upon the regions, which, according to Bulgarian intellectuals, used to be inhabited by the Bulgarians. The Greek concept aiming at appropriating the ancient history of Hellas had to be challenged by a more powerful concept. Georgi Rakovski resorted to Indo-European theory to justify ideological superiority of the Slavs over the Greeks, connecting the Slavs directly to India as the homeland of all European peoples<sup>17</sup>.

It should be noted that “Tatars or Slavs” dispute was not the only option in the discourse of the origin of Bulgars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was a different concept which considered proto-Bulgarians to be representatives of Finno-Ugric peoples. Such Slavacists as Julius Klaproth, Johann Kaspar Zeuss, Robert Roesler, Pavel Šafárik, Konstantin Jireček, Alexander Hilferding and Victor Grigorovich supported this theory. There were variants of the Finnish-Ugric theory: some considered the Bulgarians to have been of Finnish descent; others preferred Chudes (Baltic Finns), some — the Udmurts, others — the Nenetsor Samoedic people.

The theory of the Hun origin of proto-Bulgarians identifying legendary Bulgarian Khans with Hunnish chiefs was first articulated by a German scholar Zoistin in

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<sup>12</sup> *Hilendârski P.* Istorija Slavyanoblgarskaya // Istoricheskoe sbranie za blgarskii narod. URL: [https://bg.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%98%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F\\_%D1%81%D0%BB\\_%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8A\\_%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0/4](https://bg.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%98%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F_%D1%81%D0%BB_%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8A_%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0/4) (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>13</sup> *Istoriia raznykh slavenskikh narodov.* URL: <https://archive.org/details/istoriiaraznykh00jovagoog> (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>14</sup> *Venelin Iu.* Drevnie i nyneshnie bolgare v politicheskom, narodopisnom, istoricheskom i religioznom ikh otnoshenii k rossiianam. Moscow, 1856. URL: <https://www.prilib.ru/item/408092> (accessed: 31.05.2020).

<sup>15</sup> *Trencsenyi B.* Relocating Ithaca: Alternative Antiquities in Modern Bulgarian Political Discourse // Multiple Antiquities — Multiple Modernities: Ancient Histories in Nineteenth Century European Cultures. Frankfurt/Main, 2011. P. 249.

<sup>16</sup> *Engel Fon J. K.* Istorija na blgarite v Miziya. P. 60–61.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Rakovski G. S.* Blgarite drevle nosili i imeto kimbri ili kimerii. Sofia, 2009.

1837<sup>18</sup>. It was spread in Bulgaria due to Gavril Krastevich, a historian, a jurist, one of the most prominent figures of the Bulgarian Renaissance, the founder of the Exarchate, and Governor General of Eastern Rumelia in 1884–1885. Krastevich developed the theory of the Hun origin in his book “The History of the Bulgarians” published in 1869<sup>19</sup>. However, when he was preparing the second and third volumes of his work, which dealt with Khan Kubrat, settling down of Bulgars along the Danube river, and the first Bulgarian Kingdom, he was forced to abandon his plans for publication after a severe criticism of his theory by Marin Drinov<sup>20</sup>.

Gaining independence enabled to actively advance academic studies, and Bulgaria, as any newly built state, was confronted with an acute issue of extending the time frame of their nation and state to the past. Given the context of struggle with Turkey for the neighboring Rumelia, confrontation with Serbia, which also became officially independent in 1878, and Greece with regard to Macedonia, the question of the origin of Bulgars and their fundamental difference from other inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula came to the fore<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the external political situation had changed: at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1885 and subsequent cooling down of relations with Russia, the shift in foreign policy towards establishing the alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany became more evident. Following the change of direction in the foreign policy, the significance of non-Slavic component in ethnogenesis of Bulgars had changed as well.

Another factor was the enthusiasm of Bulgarian political elite who took up the struggle for Macedonia in addition to changing the background of the European concerted policy in the Balkans. Macedonia was an Ottoman province de jure under the patronage of Christian people by the Great powers. It was hard to nationally identify local population living there. Young Balkan states, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, figures of Albanian national revival, Macedonian autonomists and, of course, Ottoman authorities attempted to explain to locals their “true” identity and to prove their historical rights to the lands of their “ancestors”. It was an important task for Bulgarian scholars to justify claims of Sofia to Ottoman lands. Of course, there was a similarity between languages and aspirations of Bulgaria after the Treaty of San-Stefan, but soon they faced the united Greco-Serbian front because Belgrade and Athens were seriously concerned about overwhelming success of the Bulgarian enlighteners there. Aggressive confrontation led to the search for different myths because “Tatar” or “Mongol” origin of the ancient Bulgarians became a favorite thesis of nationalist circles in Serbia and Greece<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Voinikov Z. Poiava na tiurkskata teoriia za proizkhoda na prablgarite v blgarskata istoriografiia // ”Istoriia-BG“ Sait za blgarska istoriia, istoriia na Sredna i Sentralna Azia, i elektronska biblioteka na d-r Zhivko Voinikov. URL: [http://www.bulgari-istoria-2010.com/1\\_1.html](http://www.bulgari-istoria-2010.com/1_1.html) (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>19</sup> Krastevich G. Istoriia blgarska, chast I — Istoriia blgarska pod imia Unnov. Tsarigrad, 1869. P. XVII–XVIII. URL: [https://books.google.ru/books?id=yqoLAAAAIAAJ&dq=inauthor:%22D0%93%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8%D0%BB+%D0%9A%D1%80%D1%8A%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87%22&pg=PP7&redir\\_esc=yv=onpage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ru/books?id=yqoLAAAAIAAJ&dq=inauthor:%22D0%93%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8%D0%BB+%D0%9A%D1%80%D1%8A%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87%22&pg=PP7&redir_esc=yv=onpage&q&f=false) (accessed: 11.06.2020).

<sup>20</sup> Boneva V. Revivalist Gavril Krastevich. Shumen, 2000. P. 79–80.

<sup>21</sup> Daskalov R. Bulgarian-Greek Dis/Entanglements // Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Vol. 1: National Ideologies and Language Policies. Leiden; Boston, 2013. P. 149–240. (Balkan studies library. Vol. 9).

<sup>22</sup> Nikolov A. Paraistoriata kato fenomen na prekhoda: preotkrivaneto na drevnite blgari // Istorich-eskiat khabitus: opredmetenata istoriia. Sbornik v chest na 65-godishnina na dots. d-r R. Donkov. Sofia, 2013. P. 29–30.

Faced with a situation of growing Bulgarian nationalism, the representatives of these circles exploited the theory of non-Slavic “Turkish-Tatar” Bulgarians entirely in favor of their propaganda. A Greek historian and ethnographer Ioannis Kalostipis devoted a significant part of his work to opposing Bulgarian influence in Macedonia and the ideology of the Bulgarian Exarchate. From a Greek perspective, the “Mongol” or “Turanian” origin of Bulgarians testified to their racial and cultural inferiority compared to the “noble Hellenic ethnic group” that contributed so much to European and world civilization. According to these Greek scholars, the mixing of ancient Bulgarians and Slavic tribes did not improve the situation, and contemporary Bulgarians were just descendants of their wild ancestors<sup>23</sup>. Kalostipis was especially outraged by the attempts of Bulgarian scholars to trace their nation to ancient times, to the same period as Greeks and even further, and their claims that they had been indigenous to Thrace and Macedonia, and that “Alexander and Aristotle were Bulgarians”<sup>24</sup>.

Serbian authors stated that the Bulgars conquered large parts of the Balkans which had been settled by Slavic, i.e. Serbian tribes. However, their settlement was limited in the northeastern parts of Bulgaria, while in other territories the Serbian ethnic group was preserved under the name of Bulgarians. The proponent of these theories was a notorious Milos Milojevic<sup>25</sup>. It is easy to find a reflection of these theories until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later when it was presented in works seeking to prove a completely artificial character of the Bulgarian nation constructed by the Great Powers to hinder the unifying “Piedmont” role of Serbia among the southern Slavs<sup>26</sup>.

So, the Hun origin was deemed a good choice because it was not a Turkic tribe (according to Bulgarian scholars of the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century) — Turks were the main enemy and de jure owners of the disputed land — and because it was an ancient and a glorious myth — Huns were not Slavic or Greek people. The only ideological problem was the need for the Europeanization of the Huns. Young Balkan states regarded themselves as “an avant-garde of European civilization against Asian barbarians”,<sup>27</sup> and Bulgarians refused to accept that their ancestors could be non-European. However, the Second Balkan war and defeat changed the task of political propaganda.

A special importance was attached to the narrative of Hun origin in the publications during the period of the Balkan wars in 1912–1913 and the First World War<sup>28</sup>. It is worth mentioning some of the most well-known works of the period, among which there were two works by Ivan Shishmanov — “A critical review of the question of the genesis of proto-Bulgarians from the linguistic viewpoint and etymology of the name “Bulgarian”, 1900<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Kalostipis I.* Makedonia. Athina, 1993. P. 107.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* P. 155–156.

<sup>25</sup> *Miloshevič M.* Odlomci istorije Srba i srpskih-jugoslavenskih zemaļa u Turskoj i Austriji. Beograd, 1872. URL: [http://ivoandric.no/biblioteka/Istorija/Milos%20S.%20Milojevic%20-%20Istorija%20Srba%20\(Odlomci\).pdf](http://ivoandric.no/biblioteka/Istorija/Milos%20S.%20Milojevic%20-%20Istorija%20Srba%20(Odlomci).pdf) (accessed: 11.06.2020).

<sup>26</sup> *Nikolov A.* Paraistorijata kato fenomen na prekhoda: preotkrivaneto na drevnite blgari. P. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Adanir F.* Ethnonationalism, Irredentism, and Empire // *The Balkan Wars from Contemporary Perception to Historic Memory.* Cham, 2017. P. 15–16.

<sup>28</sup> *Trencsenyi B.* Relocating Ithaca. P. 274.

<sup>29</sup> *Shishmanov I. D.* Kritichen pregled na vprosa za proizkhoda na prablgarite ot ezikovo gledishche i etimologiite na imeto “blgarin” // *Sbornik za narodni umotvoreniya, nauka i knizhnina.* Kn. XVI–XVII. Sofia, 1900.

and “A critical review of the question of the genesis of Bulgarians”, 1909<sup>30</sup> — and a publication by the leading Bulgarian medievalist Vasil Zlatarski “The History of the Bulgarians from their emergence in Europe until the establishment of the Bulgarian Kingdom on the Balkan peninsula”, 1914<sup>31</sup>.

The theory of Hun origin also appeared in the major work of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the history of the Middle Ages written by the same Vasil Zlatarski — “The History of the Bulgarian State in the Middle Ages”<sup>32</sup>. The origin of proto-Bulgarians before their migration to the Balkans was described in detail in the first volume entitled “The epoch of Hunno-Bulgarian dominance”<sup>33</sup>. It was during this period that the main approaches to the issue of the origin of Bulgarians and the theory of Hunno-Turkic ethnogenesis took shape to be reproduced afterwards. In accordance with this concept, “the prehistory of Bulgarians should be traced to the history of those Asian Turkic peoples which are known under a common name Huns (Hiong-nu, Hiung-nu) in Chinese chronicles and as Hunni in works by European authors”<sup>34</sup>.

During the interwar period, and especially during the period of Bulgaria’s active collaboration with Germany, the most notable follower of the theory of Hun origin was Stefan Mladenov<sup>35</sup> and Dimitar Sysylov. Mladenov located the ancestors of proto-Bulgarians in the region of the Altai Mountains, identifying them with other numerous tribes of so called “Hunno-Turkic tribal confederacy” comprised of the Huns, the Khazars, the Oghuz, the Avars and others<sup>36</sup>. Sysylov suggested in his two main works, published in 1936 and 1939<sup>37</sup>, that Bulgarian ancestors inhabited the lands to the east of the Pamirs and the Tarim River — East Turkestan.

The term used by Sysylov — “Hunnori” — defines an ancient people connected with the Tokharians who moved to the west during the Migration Period<sup>38</sup>. It is important to note that “Hunnori”, according to Sysylov, were Indo-European representatives of the developed sedentary civilization, not Turks or Mongols, nomadic tribes or small hordes as it was presented in previous versions of the theory of Hun origin. Proto-Bulgarians — “Hunnori” — laid the foundations of the European civilization. By introducing an arbitrary name “Hunnori”, Sysylov was trying to connect the presence of European population residing in the valley of the Tarim river with the theory of the Hun origin of proto-Bulgarians by Vasil Zlatarski<sup>39</sup>. It should be pointed out that this curious antipode of the traditional Slavophilism in the Bulgarian historiography was congruous with the contempo-

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<sup>30</sup> *Shishmanov I. D.* Kritichen pregled na vprosite za proizkhoda na Bulgarite // Sbornik za narodni umotvoreniia. 1909. No. 1. P. 145–175.

<sup>31</sup> *Zlatarski V.* Istoriya blgarite ot poyavata im v Evropa do osnovavaneto na blgarskoto carstvo na Balkanskiya poluostrov // Godishnik na Sofijskiya universitet. Istoriko-filologicheski fakultet. 1914. No. 10–11. P. 1–112.

<sup>32</sup> *Zlatarski V.* Istoriya na blgarskata drzhava prez srednite vekove. Sofia, 1918.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* P. 55–175.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* P. 55–56.

<sup>35</sup> *Mladenov S.* Poyavata na Asparuhovite Bulgari v Turkskiya klon na Ario-Altajskite narodi // Bulgarska istoricheska biblioteka. 1928. No. 1. P. 49–71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Sslov D.*: 1) Ptyat na Blgariya. Sofia, 2000; 2) Blgari v drevnostta otsam i otvd Pamiir. Sofia, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> *Sslov D.* Ptyat na Blgariya.

<sup>39</sup> *Sslov D.* Blgari v drevnostta otsam i otvd Pamiir.

rary foreign policy<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, rejecting their “Slavonic” components, Bulgarians acquired ethnic similarity with the Germans, Hungarians, Finns and even Japanese people — their allies in the Axis. The popularization of such theory serves as an excellent example of how the past ethnicity can be reconstructed in correlation with political preferences<sup>41</sup>.

Modern Bulgarian scholars consider the concept of Sysylov to have been loosely based on the works by the Dutch sinologist Jan Jakob Maria de Groot<sup>42</sup>. In this regard, some web-pages provide examples of how modern researchers make ironic comments on Sysylov’s analysis of the texts in Middle Chinese, the basis for his hypothesis<sup>43</sup>. As far the figure of Sysylov is concerned, it is also worth mentioning that he was actively involved in creating the organization “The Bulgarian Horde” in 1938. This “intellectual circle” propagated the idea about “Bulgarians not being Slavs”, which was in high demand during the Second World War when anti-Slavic rhetoric of the Nazi Germany made a considerable impact on the Bulgarian national doctrine. According to “The Bulgarian Horde”, the Bulgarian state had to restore its beginning which in political terms meant reviving royal prerogatives and abolishing Parliamentary principles and party system as alien to the historical tradition<sup>44</sup>.

At the same time, the “Slavic” principle was mobilized in the propaganda of the anti-fascist forces, both in Yugoslavia and in Bulgaria itself. “Slavicism” contrasted with what was perceived as a pro-fascist point of view. It also helped to strengthen the Macedonian communist doctrine of an independent Macedonian nation, different from the Bulgarians precisely because of its purely Slavic character<sup>45</sup>. Soon Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great became a part of the national pantheon of ASNOM<sup>46</sup>. Undoubtedly, this thesis was inherited from the Serbian historiography of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After the war, the theory of Hun origin came under sharp criticism. It was officially perceived as being “in line with political views of chauvinistic and fascist science of the past regime”<sup>47</sup>. Social changes taking place after 9 September 1944, were reflected in the academic sphere as well. The Communist Party of Bulgaria started to implement the policy of ideologization of historiography in accordance with Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist principles. The guidelines of this policy can be illustrated by the statement of the party functionary Vylko Chervenkov made in 1948 when he called for “cleansing the Augean stables of bourgeois historiography” and establishing “healthy academic basis” for history

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<sup>40</sup> *Daskalov R.* Blgarskoto obshchestvo. 1878–1939: v 2 t. T.1: Drzhava. Politika. Ikonomika. Sofia, 2005. P.250.

<sup>41</sup> *Sygelos Y.* Nationalism form the left: the Bulgarian Communist party during the Second World War and the early post-war years. Leiden, 2011. P.186.

<sup>42</sup> *Bakalov G.* Istoriografski problemi okolo rannata istoriya na evrazijskite Bulgari // *Studia Protobulgarica et mediaevalia Europensia*. Sofia, 2003. P.41.

<sup>43</sup> *Borisov B.G.* Blgarskite Don Kikhotovtsi // *Bulgarian history*. URL: <https://sites.google.com/site/bulgariannewhistory/blgarskite-don-kihotovci> (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>44</sup> *Romanova V.* Blgarska orda — 1938 g. i spisanie “Avi-Tokhol” // *Naukata v prekhod: Istoriia i parastoriia*. 19–21 septemvri 2011 g. URL: [https://www.prehodbg.com%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2FV\\_Romanova\\_Doklad\\_Belgrad\\_19\\_09\\_2011.pdf&usq=AFQjCNFY1D3v38k2surxdojDbfqTmqKwBg](https://www.prehodbg.com%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2FV_Romanova_Doklad_Belgrad_19_09_2011.pdf&usq=AFQjCNFY1D3v38k2surxdojDbfqTmqKwBg) (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>45</sup> *Nikolov A.* Paraistoriinata kato fenomen na prekhoda: preotkrivaneto na drevnite blgari. P.14.

<sup>46</sup> Anti-fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia was the communist led authorities which represented the Macedonian nation from 1944 until the end of World War II.

<sup>47</sup> *Sygelos Y.* Nationalism from the left: the Bulgarian Communist party during the Second World War and the early post-war years. Leiden, 2011. P.186.

by “decisively rejecting reactionary legacy”<sup>48</sup>. Georgi Dimitrov insisted that “the remains of a bourgeois method and Great Bulgarian chauvinism” should be done away with<sup>49</sup>. New authorities adopted an extremely negative attitude towards “bourgeois” scholars. It was considered that they were not to be trusted as “these scholars and professors are nothing but educated servants of the capitalists”<sup>50</sup>. Thus, Sysylov was arrested and sent to the Belitsa labour camp.

In 1948, Alexander Burmov published a number of works, such as “On the issue of the origin of proto-Bulgarians”, where he criticized the theory of Hun origin of Zlatarski and his followers<sup>51</sup>. Burmov, who was almost the only historian to study this problem in the 1940–1950s<sup>52</sup>, put forward a hypothesis about the origin of Bulgars from the Sarmatians. It is noteworthy that Burmov, rejecting the theory of Hun origin, copied the views from the Soviet historian and philologist Nicholas Yakovlevich Marr (1864–1934) who believed that ancient Bulgars were Sarmatians. The reasons behind such commitment to Marr’s standpoint were evident — his position in linguistics was supported by Stalin, and his principles were considered to be mainstream in the Soviet scholarship<sup>53</sup>. After the theory of Marr had been debunked in Stalin’s article “Marxism and Problems of Linguistics”<sup>54</sup>, the theory of Slavic origin of proto-Bulgarians became popular again for a short period<sup>55</sup>.

After Stalin’s death some concepts were abandoned in the historiography of the countries of people democracy, and the process of revisionism of medieval narratives began. In Bulgaria it was carried out by the Bulgarian Communist Party trying to consolidate the national identity which was undermined after the initial anti-national “euphoria of denial” and pro-Soviet “internationalism” according to V. Mutafchieva<sup>56</sup>. Thus, in the “History of Bulgaria” in 1954 it was stated that Bulgars were Turkic people by origin<sup>57</sup>. This statement was not supported by any evidence, and no references to academic works were provided. Afterwards the situation had changed, and some researchers returned to the moderate variant of the theory of Hun origin. Todor Zhivkov lamented in 1967: “We are not talking about Khan Asparuh, the creator of the Bulgarian state. We are not talking about Krum the Fearsome, who saved the Slavs from assimilation, and all Slavs [for this] must put a monument to him. We are not talking about Tsar Simeon and the Golden age of Bulgarian culture, we are not talking about Tsar Samuel, Tsar Kaloyan and Tsar Ivan Assen II. We speak little about the Bogomils, Ivaylo, peasant uprisings, etc.”<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Markov G. Polovin vek intistut za istoriia na BAN // Institut za istoricheski izsledvaniia Blgarska akademii na naukite. URL: [http://www.ihist.bas.bg/nachalo\\_istorija.htm](http://www.ihist.bas.bg/nachalo_istorija.htm) (accessed 11.03.2020).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Voinikov I. Poiava na tiurkskata teoriia za proizkhoda na prablgarite v blgarskata istoriografia.

<sup>51</sup> Burmov A. Km vprosa za proizkhoda na prablgarite // Izvestiya na blgarskoto istoricheskoto druzhtvo. Sofia, 1948.

<sup>52</sup> Voinikov I. Poiava na tiurkskata teoriia za proizkhoda na prablgarite v blgarskata istoriografia.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Stalin I. Marksizm i voprosyazykoznaniiia. // Pravda. 1950. 20 iunija. P. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Trencsenyi B. Relocating Ithaca. P. 274.

<sup>56</sup> Mutafchieva V. Predislovie // Sdt nad istoricite. Blgarskata istoricheska nauka. Dokumenti i diskusii 1944–1950. T. 1. Sofia, 1995. P. 5–15.

<sup>57</sup> Istoria na Blgaria: v 9 t. T. I. Sofiia, 1954. P. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Zhivkov T. Nyakoi osnovni problemi na rabotata s mladezhata i Komsomola. Tezisi, razviti ot drugarya Todor Zhivkov na zasedanieto na Politbyuro na CK na BKP na 12 oktombri 1967 g. // Todor Zhivkov za Komsomola i mladezhata. Sofia, 1968. P. 64–66.

In 1973, Ivan Duichev published an article “Nominalia of the Bulgarian khans” where he resorted to the traditional interpretation of the theory of the Hun origin<sup>59</sup>. Later, a new variant of the theory was suggested by Veselin Beshevliev in his monography “Proto-Bulgarians: Everyday life and Culture” published in 1981<sup>60</sup>. Beshevliev placed proto-Bulgarian tribes on the border between most agricultural peoples of the East and nomadic groups in the Tian Shan and the Altai mountains, i. e., the area of dissemination of the Pamir civilization<sup>61</sup>.

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of regimes of people’s democracy, and a surge of nationalism on post-socialist territories gave rise to actualization of all variants of the theory of Hun origin. There was a tendency to abandon “Slavonization” of history in academic studies, and, as a consequence, marginalization of the research into ethnicity of Central Asia. Contemporary Bulgarian scholars, to a large extent, rehabilitated the theory of Hun origin among the concepts of ethnicity of proto-Bulgarians<sup>62</sup>. It should be pointed out that this theory didn’t become dominant. In addition, another very important contributory factor to the popularity of the theory of Hun was an anti-Turkic tendency in Late and Post-Communist Bulgaria<sup>63</sup>.

The proto-Bulgarians studies came to the fore at the time of so-called “Revival process” in 1984–1989, when the existence of any Turkic language in the country was conveniently explained by the proto-Bulgarian ethnic component. Of course, official scholarship capitalized on the proto-Bulgarian theme to prove the one hundred percent Bulgarian origin of the Turkish population in Bulgaria, but it was not a primary argument. After all, Bulgarians suddenly discovered for themselves a role of a vital and stable state-building element, and their number and equal status with the Slavs became axiomatic in the research of some ideologues of the assimilation of the Muslim, especially the Turkish, population in Bulgaria. But the short duration of the “revival process” between 1984–1989 did not enable these theories to be fully developed by researchers<sup>64</sup>.

This tendency can be exemplified by a research of the famous Bulgarian Turkologist Strashimir Dimitrov, who, alongside others, introduced the “revival process” into the Bulgarian academic circles. He specialized in studies of the Gagauz. It is a Turkic-speaking community of the Orthodox faith that inhabits mainly Dobrogea and in Bessarabia. The issue of the origin of the Gagauz and their possible connection with the proto-Bulgarians was the focus of Dimitrov’s research. He put forward a bold but not well-argued hypothesis that the “Hun-speaking” Bulgarians were not assimilated in the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries but survived as an equal Turkic component until the Ottoman conquest. Furthermore, this component was reinforced by other Turkic settlers: Pechenegs, Uzi and Kumans in the

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<sup>59</sup> *Dujchev I.* Imenik na Bulgariskite hanove i Bulgarskata drzhavna tradiciya // *Vekove*. 1973. No. 8. Sofia, 1981. P.5–11.

<sup>60</sup> *Beshevliev V.* Prvoblgarite. Bit i kultura. Sofia, 1981.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Chukov V., Andreeva-Chukova R.* Central Asian Studies in Bulgaria.

<sup>63</sup> *Eminov A.* Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria. London, 1997; *Kamusella T.* Ethnic Cleansing During the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria. London, 2018; *Neuburger M.* The Orient within: Muslim minorities and the negotiation of nationhood in modern Bulgaria. Cornell, 2004; Deklaratsiia, oszhdashcha opita za nasilstvena asimilatsiia na blgarskite miusiulmani // Narodno sbranie na Republika Blgariia. 28.10.2009. URL: <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/declaration/ID/13813> (accessed: 11.02.2020).

<sup>64</sup> *Nikolov A.* Paraistoriata kato fenomen na prekhoda: preotkrivaneto na drevnite blgari. P. 1–19.

late Middle Ages<sup>65</sup> on conquering Bulgaria, Ottomans found bilingual Bulgarian people, and a large part of them were Turkic-speaking. With changes of 1989, however, the ideas of Dimitrov faded into oblivion. The Turkic element of any theories of the origin of the proto-Bulgarians soon became a stigma for its supporters despite its popularity in the international medieval studies. Thus, Huns also ceased to be a Turkic tribe in the new political reality. In the context of a democratic transition, the search for a self-identity and a market economy, cautious theories of academic historians were not as popular as the boisterous books of amateurs.

According to Alexander Nikolov, para-historical theses and theories in the field of proto-Bulgarian studies after 1991 explored two issues<sup>66</sup>. The first one was establishing the full continuity between the ancient and contemporary Bulgarians. It means rejection of the affiliation of the Bulgarians to the Slavic linguistic and cultural aspects. This direction was connected with the attempts to forget the past of Bulgaria as the most loyal Soviet satellite, and the attempts to rehabilitate it as a new Euro-Atlantic ally. A good example is Plamen Tsvetkov's book "Are the Bulgarians Slavs?". The answer is Bulgarians are a unique ancient people associated with the "Huns" who spoke the Uralo-Altai language strongly influenced by Indo-European languages but being more ancient than the Turkic and Slavic languages. Their migration had lasted "eleven centuries" before they came in the Balkans where they "inherited Slavic population", almost exterminated by the highly cultured Bulgar conquerors, which brought about a "complete change in the national picture" similar to the fate of Indians under Anglo-Saxon settlers in America<sup>67</sup>.

The second issue concerns with the attempt to present the Bulgarian language and culture (of course, direct successors of the ancient Bulgarian non-Slavic language and culture) as the mother of all European and world languages and civilization. Such authors as Georgi Rakovski were rediscovered, whose Indo-European theses about the origin of the Bulgarians were promoted as an alternative to the migration theories accepted in scholarship. Perhaps the most radical implementation of this concept can be considered Yordan Valchev's book "Two Sentences of Jesus Christ", in which the author considers the Savior a proto-Bulgarian-Hun, and the mysterious words uttered on the cross are defined as proto-Bulgarian<sup>68</sup>.

One of the consistent supporters of the Hun theory among contemporary scholars is Peter Dobrev<sup>69</sup>. Holding a degree in economics, working in the Institute of economic studies, he made a name for himself having published a book "Economic culture of proto-Bulgarians" in 1986<sup>70</sup>. In his monography "Bulgarian centers of civilization on the map of Eurasia" brought out in 1998 Dobrev states that proto-Bulgarians managed to establish advanced civilization in Balkh province (northern Afghanistan)<sup>71</sup>. According to Dobrev, the invasion of Nomads led to the migration of proto-Bulgarians towards the Caucasus

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<sup>65</sup> *Dimitrov S.* Niakoi problemi na etnicheskite i isliamizatsionno-asimilatsionnite protsesi v blgarskite zemi prez XV–XVII v. // *Problemi na razvitiето na blgarskata narodnost i natsiia*. Sofia, 1988. P.33–56; *Dimitrov S.* Gagauzkiat problem // *Blgarite v Severnoto Chernomorie. Izsledvaniia i materialii*. Vol.IV. Veliko Trnovo, 1995. P.147.

<sup>66</sup> *Nikolov A.* Paraistoriinata kato fenomen na prekhoda: preotkrivaneto na drevnite blgari. P.23–24.

<sup>67</sup> *Tsvetkov P.* Slaviani li sa blgarite? Sofia, 1998. P.186.

<sup>68</sup> *Vlchev I.* Dve izrecheniia na Isus Khristos. Sofia, 2001.

<sup>69</sup> *Chukov V., Andreeva-Chukova R.* Central Asian Studies in Bulgaria.

<sup>70</sup> *Dobrev P.* Stopanskata kultura na prablgarite. Sofia, 1986.

<sup>71</sup> *Dobrev P.* Blgarskite ognishcha na civilizaciya na kartata na Evraziya. Sofia, 1998.

and the river Don. In the process of migration, they set up a number of states (among which was also Volga Bulgaria, which Dobrev examined in subsequent works)<sup>72</sup>. Both Volga Bulgaria and Balkans Bulgaria inherited political principles of “Great Bulgaria of Kubrat”<sup>73</sup>. Despite an ambivalent attitude of professional historians to Dobrev, it should be noted that his multiple works (we are familiar with more than 30 works devoted to this issue from 1986 until 2010) enjoy popularity in the internet.

After the fall of Communism and cancellation of censorship, a number of books on the history of Bulgaria in the Middle Ages, containing the theory of Hun origin came out: in 1994 a reprinted version of “The History of Bulgarian State in the Middle Ages” by Zlatarski<sup>74</sup> was brought out by the publishing house “Marin Drinov”, books by Sysylov were republished in large number<sup>75</sup>, and other works.

The revival of the Hun theory in the public sphere could be dated by 1995 when a veterinarian Dorijan Alexandrov restored “The Bulgarian Horde”. This new “Horde” was comprised of diverse groups of people, not including historians, but with plenty of public figures, journalists, doctors and representatives of other professions united by right-wing, and oftentimes extremely right-wing, views. The members of the association argue that there is latent genocide of the nation by the conspiracy of political elite and external “globalist” forces. “The Bulgarian Horde” regard themselves as a patriotic organization which protects Bulgarian national interests and, in particular, ancient Bulgarian history by opposing falsifications. The core of the historical concept is that the origin of proto-Bulgarian was autochthonous; the Thracians were more civilized than the ancient Greeks, that there is no Slavic component in the Bulgars ethnos, and contemporary Bulgarians are genetically homogenous. The views of “The Bulgarian Horde” are spread through mass media and by their own periodicals, namely, “Attack”<sup>76</sup> articulating radical right-wing positions of the political party.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the emergence of new ideas concerning the theory of ethnogenesis or resorting to already known images, but forgotten due to a number of reasons, directly manifests the phenomenon of the crisis of self-identification. Within the context of global political transformation, it becomes vital to refer to the past as the main, if not the only, method of asserting one’s uniqueness and primordality. There is no other sphere, apart from the past or, to be precise, the reconsidered past, which can provide answers to the shortcomings of the present. If the political paradigm of the past failed, it is evident that the political elite distorted/concealed certain sacred knowledge necessary for the triumph/revival/successful development of the nation. Apparently, under the circumstances, it is imperative to extend the academic framework. Such tendencies can be exemplified by the theory of Hun origin. Similarly, the debates between supporters and opponents of the Norman theory of the Russian state, arguments about the Gothic theory of the Croatian origins etc. are indicative of the same processes. The theory of the Hun origin of Bulgars is so convenient because its narratives are more adaptable and easier for transformations than other variants. Moreover, the Hunnic narratives,

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<sup>72</sup> Dobrev P. Stopanstvoto i civilizaciya na Volzhka Blgariya. Sofia, 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Dobrev P. Blgarskite ognishcha na civilizaciya na kartata na Evraziya. P. 107–108.

<sup>74</sup> Zlatarski V.N. Istoriya na Blgarskata drzhava prez srednite vekove. Sofia, 1994.

<sup>75</sup> Sslov D.: 1) Ptyat na Blgariya; 2) Blgari v drevnostta otsam i otvd Pamiir.

<sup>76</sup> Doriian Aleksandrov, predsedatel na Sdruzhenie “Blgarska orda 1938”: Istoriyata ni se falshifitsira // ATAKA. Broi 108. 18.02.2006. URL: [http://www.vestnikataka.com/?module=displaystory&story\\_id=7776&edition\\_id=108&format=html](http://www.vestnikataka.com/?module=displaystory&story_id=7776&edition_id=108&format=html) (accessed: 11.02.2020).

being part of the pan-European history, paradoxically are very conducive for building a European identity.

The increasing activity of the right and the far-right in the politics of Europe capitalizing on the 2015 refugee crisis might return to the mainstream of official academic discourse the theory of the Hun. The upcoming challenges of the foreign and internal policy could have a significant impact on this issue in contemporary Bulgaria. The rise of the Euro-skepticism, which gave IMRO — Bulgarian National Movement — one more seat in European Parliament<sup>77</sup>, or ambitious projects outside the European Union framework such as Chinese The Belt and Road Initiative could stimulate interest in the issue. Also, it may be provoked by internal political issues, for example, the question of national minorities in Bulgaria. Such debates inevitably extend beyond the boundary of academic field due to the politicization of the theme of ethnogenesis and appeals to proto-history in search of solutions to modern problems. However, we tend to believe that the scholarly community should sternly respond to such cases and actively oppose them in order to avoid losing control over the discourse and yielding to pseudo-scientific and non-scientific spheres.

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<sup>77</sup> Rezultati ot izbori za chlenove na evropeiski parlament 26 mai 2019 // Tsentralna izbiratelna komisiia. URL: <https://results.cik.bg/ep2019/rezultati/index.html> (accessed: 11.02.2020).

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