



# **A** fly in amber? Nordic-Balkan citizen diplomacy and cultural connections then and now

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## **Abstract**

*Active citizen diplomacy and cultural connections between the Nordic countries and the Balkans date their beginnings to the eighteenth century. The contacts between ordinary people in Finland and Bulgaria, Sweden and Serbia are a little researched but important aspect of the common history of Europe, created not by states or officials, but by individuals and associations. In the first period until World War II, cultural actors such as writers and artists contributed to the dialogue, but after the change of regimes in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, cultural friendship associations maintained non-formal connections beside the official diplomatic relations. Individual contacts were scarce and exchange mainly channeled through these structures. Today, the politics have changed, but where does citizen diplomacy stand? The role of associations has been significantly reduced in comparison with the Communist era and the friendship model appears antiquated in the time of Internet, increasing individual tourism and growing possibilities for cultural exchange within the European Union framework. This historical overview and conceptual article argues that both a fresh approach and a critical review about citizen diplomacy are needed. Looking in the rear-mirror of the past and into the present and future, it becomes clear that earlier relations and today's contacts must be mapped*

## **Rezumat**

*Diplomația cetățenească activă și conexiunile culturale dintre țările nordice și Balcani datează din secolul al XVIII-lea. Contactele dintre oamenii obișnuiți din Finlanda și Bulgaria, Suedia și Serbia sunt aspecte mai puțin cercetate, dar importante ale istoriei comune a Europei, fiind inițiate nu de state sau oficiali, ci de persoane și asociații. În prima perioadă, până la cel de-al doilea război mondial, actori culturali precum scriitori și artiști au contribuit la acest dialog, dar după schimbarea regimurilor din Bulgaria și Iugoslavia, asociațiile de prietenie culturală au menținut conexiuni non-formale, pe lângă relațiile diplomatice oficiale. Contactele individuale au fost rare și schimbul a fost canalizat în principal prin aceste structuri. Astăzi, politica s-a schimbat, dar unde se află diplomația cetățenească? Rolul asociațiilor a fost redus semnificativ în comparație cu era comunistă, iar modelul de prietenie pare învechit în era internetului, sporirii turismului individual și creșterii posibilităților de schimb cultural în cadrul Uniunii Europene. Această prezentare istorică și articolul conceptual reprezintă o pledoarie pentru o abordare nouă, dar și pentru o revizuire critică a diplomației cetățenești. Privite prin oglinda trecutului, dar și a prezentului și a viitorului devine evident faptul că relațiile întreținute în trecut și contactele de astăzi trebuie să fie cartografiate într-o măsură mai mare decât s-a făcut până acum.*

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*out to a larger extent than has ever been done before.*

**Keywords:** citizen diplomacy; cultural exchange; friendship societies; Bulgaria; Finland; Sweden; Serbia

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This paper has been presented at the Eleventh International Conference on Baltic and Nordic Studies in Romania: ReThinking Europe in Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea region, hosted by the Romanian Association for Baltic and Nordic Studies, May 28–29, 2020.

## **Introduction: Historical connections**

In ancient times, amber was one of the trade items imported from the Baltic Sea to Southeastern Europe. “A fly in amber” means something that has been preserved from the past to the present. In this article, the saying is used as a symbol for the historical connections between the Baltic Sea region and the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas. In the National Museum in Belgrade and several other museums in the Balkans, pieces of amber, often with trapped flies inside, testify to the exchange.

Archaeological finds showing connections date back to prehistory, but documented historical contacts between the southern and northern parts of Europe have existed for at least two millennia. Besides amber, also copper and other articles were traded between towns around the Mediterranean and Black Seas and what is today the Nordic countries. During the Viking period, relations became especially active and northerners even served in the imperial Byzantine lifeguard. In Sweden, archaeologists discover remnants of silk and ornaments from the south; one of the theories is that southern traders visited and also lived and traded in the north.<sup>1</sup>

After a break of several centuries, relations between the North and South were activated again during the expansion of Sweden in the seventeenth century. Ambassadors such as Claes Rålamb were sent to the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Swedish king Charles XII was a virtual prisoner of the Sultan. He remained for

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<sup>1</sup> For general historical information we will not provide sources, in order to keep the references list within reasonable boundaries. The reader can easily find descriptions of the historical periods and details we have chosen to highlight here in printed publications and on the Internet.

several years in present-day Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, having fled to the Ottoman Empire after losing a crucial battle against the Russian army at Poltava in July 1709.<sup>2</sup>

The older history carried little significance for the new state relations founded in the twentieth century. Official diplomatic relations between the Nordic countries and the Balkan states were mostly established after World War I. Bulgaria became a principality, vassal of the Ottoman Empire, after the Russian-Ottoman war in 1877–1878 and independent in 1908. Official relations with Finland were established in 1918 after the independence of Finland.<sup>3</sup> Diplomatic relations between Sweden and Serbia were established a year earlier, even though the Principality of Serbia had been elevated to a kingdom already in 1882. After World War I, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Macedonia, and Montenegro united. In 1929, the new kingdom changed its name to Yugoslavia.

Most of the contacts before this period were sustained by official or semi-official representatives or in the case of Finland and Bulgaria, by the military. A few individual visitors from the North to the Balkans will be discussed here, but it took almost three decades and a second World War before connections were established between ordinary citizens on a larger scale. By then, however, individual contacts were not encouraged. In September 1944, Bulgaria was invaded by the Soviet army. A Communist regime was established and in 1946 the People's Republic. After 1945, Yugoslavia became a Federal People's Republic, renamed in 1963 as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which remained the official name of the country until its demise in the 1990s.

Private and non-formal exchange enabled among many other possibilities a free flow of information. The new totalitarian regimes in the

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<sup>2</sup> Sabira Ståhlberg, *Färden till Bulgarien. Svenska och finländska resenärer från medeltiden till våra dagar* (Varna: Lecti Book Studio, 2017), 12–28; *Finländska fotspår i Bulgarien och Rumänien* (Varna: Lecti Book Studio, 2016), 39–42; Claes Rålamb, *Kort beskrifning om thet som wid then Constantinopolitaniske resan är föreluppit* (n.p.: Stockholm, 1679); *Diarium under resa till Konstantinopel 1657–1658* (Historiska handlingar 0347-9579: Stockholm. Ed. Christian Callmer, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Most states recognized Finland as an independent state only after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on 3 March 1918 and Russia resigned all claims on the territory.

Balkans did not approve of anything that reduced control over their own citizens or foreign visitors. In the Nordic countries, anybody with connections to the Eastern Bloc was kept under surveillance. Between the end of the 1940s and 1989, chiefly semi-official cultural friendship associations were responsible for keeping and channeling citizen connections between the Nordic countries and the Eastern Bloc. Especially the status of Finland from the end of World War II until 1989 was a peculiar one. The country was officially neutral, like Sweden, but around 60% of its economy was tied to the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. In contrast to many other neutral or Western countries, Finland had a visa-free or light visa regime for several Eastern European countries, which facilitated travel. Still, visitors were much fewer than today, mostly because of other limitations such as lack of foreign currency and the difficulty to obtain travel permissions.

Then came the turbulent year of 1989. Politics and official relations changed radically. Financial, political, and social support for the friendship associations evaporated with the fall of the Communist regimes. The 1990s saw a drastic decline in membership, significance, and activities. The associations did not disappear completely, they simply became less important. On the other hand, with new freedom and a growing use of the Internet, individuals could meet without restraint or control and create their own connections. With an increasing number of European Union member countries and candidate countries like Serbia, today also the EU framework provides a wide range of possibilities for citizen contacts, exchange, mobility, and other joint projects.<sup>4</sup>

### **Citizen diplomacy**

Official contacts between countries are usually well documented in diplomatic reports, newspapers, interviews and memoirs of ambassadors and other similar sources. For unofficial contacts or citizen diplomacy there is far less information. The question of how ordinary people have contacted and connect today remains, in fact, a vast and unexplored territory.

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<sup>4</sup> Sweden and Finland joined in 1995 and Bulgaria is an EU-member since 2007. Serbia is expected to join in the 2020s.

Citizen diplomacy, as generally understood, is a political concept within the field of foreign relations. It means that ordinary citizens act as representatives for a country. They can work consciously and with the support of a state, or not intentionally, but in both cases they influence state relations. If the states for some reason cannot contact directly and officially, individual citizens without an official mandate or title can be useful. In addition to political representations, citizen diplomacy can also contain scientific, cultural, sports, tourist, educational and other kinds of exchanges.

To include all aspects of ordinary people's contacts between the Nordic countries and the Balkans, the concept of citizen diplomacy must be broadened. It should include several other activities and the large field of rarely documented connections, ranging from personal relations (intermarriages, friendships etc.) to all kinds of non-institutional exchange, including personal networks and hobbies (for instance stamp collectors or radio amateurs) and also business and company contacts (franchising, outsourcing of services and others). Further, modern forms of exchange, such as mobility within the European Union framework or online connections (Internet gamers, joint interests, etc.) should be contained in the term. For us, citizen diplomacy is any form of contact, which has an individual, social, cultural, educational, political, or economic impact.

Why is this generally overlooked question of citizen diplomacy important at all? The role of official diplomacy is to establish and maintain contacts and political relations between countries. They facilitate travel and exchanges of different kinds, mainly economic and political and to a lesser degree other forms of interactions. The citizen or people's diplomacy, non-official contacts, have more significance on other levels, individuals and groups, rather than for the state. In specific cases, they can certainly contribute, even crucially, to the official relations and also to the attitude towards another country among the general audiences. Certain individuals and groups, especially famous travelers, cultural actors such as painters and writers or journalists, have a unique possibility to contribute to the knowledge and understanding among the public. They can also have a

serious impact on the views which ordinary citizens hold of the other country.

### **Four countries, multiple links**

*Realpolitik* might have been more important than history when official diplomatic ties were established in the twentieth century between Finland and Bulgaria, Serbia and Sweden. History has, however, been rediscovered to support the narrative of friendship between the four countries analyzed in this study. We discuss the modern historical background of citizen relations in two pairs of countries, of which one is in the Balkans and the other a Nordic country. Our study can be defined as an overview and a conceptual discussion of the relations between citizens of Sweden with Serbia (Yugoslavia in historical perspective) and Finland with Bulgaria.

Serbia and Bulgaria are often supposed to have a similar development and therefore comparable diplomatic contacts. Both were parts of the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia less strictly adhering to Communism than Bulgaria, and both changed political systems after 1989. Sweden and Finland, at the other end of Europe, declared neutrality during the Cold War. They are considered to be welfare states with stable political systems. Our research shows, however, that the differences in the citizen diplomacy between these pairs of countries are significant, and they are heavily influenced by different political situations and historical contexts.

For Finland and Bulgaria, one of the main narratives since the end of the nineteenth century has been the participation of the Finnish Guard in the Russian-Ottoman war 1877–1878. In other words, there is a historical legacy. For Sweden and Serbia, the Yugoslav migrants who moved to Scandinavia since the 1960s play the main role and the relations are not deeply ingrained in history. The migrants try to keep their language and culture and simultaneously to adapt into Swedish society without losing their identity; the present is more important than the past.

Today it seems that diplomatic and unofficial contacts between the countries are more varied and individualistic than before. But are they really? Thousands of tourists from Finland flock to the Black Sea beaches

every year. They have done the same since the first charter flight landed in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 1960s. Cultural events are still organized mainly by the embassies in cooperation with friendship associations. These societies continue to claim that they gather and represent the people who are interested in the other country.

Analyzing the historical connections and the present situation of cultural contact between Serbia and Sweden, Bulgaria and Finland, we see that today there are several new actors in the ecosystem of cultural exchange: individuals with personal contacts, students and academics, honorary consuls, owners of summer villas and apartments, businessmen and others, who move and connect between the countries with or without official support. The concepts of culture and citizen contacts are expanding and a greater variety of cultural, scientific and other forms of exchange seem to occur. Contemporary relations between citizens in Serbia, Bulgaria, Sweden and Finland reflect modern views and ways of connecting – or do they?

### **Aims and previous research**

Globally, citizen diplomacy is scarcely researched at all when it comes to smaller countries. Political scientists deal mostly with the political aspects and citizens who act in the capacity of non-official diplomats. The broader concept of exchange is much less understood and studied. Our view of citizen diplomacy as an umbrella concept, covering all kinds of relations down to the individual levels, is not yet a part of mainstream social science. Our study should therefore be seen as an innovative proposition introducing the concept of a broader citizen diplomacy. In this article, we show the relevance of studying all levels of citizen connections and the need and importance for diversifying the picture of international relations in the case of our four studied countries as well as for other countries.

As history is part of the present narrative and it plays a significant role for the citizens and their understanding and interest in the other country, in the first part we analyze the nineteenth century, an era of independence and nationalist movements. Moving through the Communist

period after World War II and reaching 1989, we follow several lines in the second part, focusing on the different forms of citizen diplomacy, tendencies, elements, and factors, which influenced and still have an impact on relations: historical narratives, aspects of contact, the role of cultural actors and travelers in creating a picture of the other country, friendship associations and their role. The study ends with the situation today when friendship societies have become less important and a diversified ecosystem is emerging. How the cultural exchange scene has changed is one of the issues we analyze.

A crucial question, without a clear answer as yet, is how far friendship societies were a Communist regime and Cold War product. The societies founded in the 1950s were controlled and used by the states for channeling information and contacts, but some friendship societies existed already before World War II. Clearly their role changed in the 1990s and their future perspectives, too. What is the role of the associations today and will they survive in a growing competition?

Citizen diplomacy between Serbia and Sweden, Bulgaria and Finland has not been researched before in depth. This the first study from a historical point of view for these four countries. It certainly does not claim to be an ultimate piece of research, but we see it more as a conceptual discussion and a historical overview, aimed at inspiring also other scientists to work in this highly interesting field. Pioneer research has been done by Sabira Ståhlberg, who has written an article about citizen diplomacy in Finland and Bulgaria and gathered, commented and published travel narratives by official and private travelers from the Nordic countries to Bulgaria and Romania.<sup>5</sup> Dorijan Hajdu has documented

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<sup>5</sup> Ståhlberg (2017); *Finländska fotspår* (2016); *Finska Gardet på Balkan – Suomen Kaarti Balkanilla* (Varna: Lecti Book Studio, 2015); *Resan till Kolkis – Matka Kolkhiiseen – Journey to Colchis. Göran Schildts resa på Svarta havet 1963* (Ekenäs: Villa Schildt, 2014); editor, *Från Munksnäs till Konstantinopel. Familjen Ramsays brev under kriget på Balkan 1877–1878* (Varna: Lecti Book Studio, 2016).

A book on official diplomacy and historical connections on the state level between Bulgaria and Finland has been published recently by the previous Bulgarian ambassador to Finland, Venelin Tsachevsky, *Stranata na belite lilii. Severniyat priyatel na Bulgaria* [The country of white lilies. The northern friend of Bulgaria] (Sofia: Studia Transmedia, 2019). This work includes the article by Sabira Ståhlberg. 'Rolyata na grazhdanite i obshtestvenoto

Swedish-Serbian relations since the 1990s. Both authors have been active for almost two decades in citizen diplomacy on several levels, teaching, creating cultural, academic and economic exchanges, events, seminars, conferences, student and staff mobility and working with book translations, writing and publishing and many other activities. We as authors are thus both researchers and participant observers in this study and much of the information originates from personal experiences, private talks with other actors and official diplomats, as well as other non-published, often fragmentary or hazy sources. This kind of information cannot be referred to clearly in a scientific way and therefore has to be labeled under the general concept of field notes.<sup>6</sup>

### **Methods, sources and source criticism**

The methods for covering such a vast field as citizen diplomacy must necessarily be varied and adaptable. When needed, the approach has to be modified according to the available sources and materials. In many cases, no existing method can be used, because they are too limited. Therefore, we use a wide range of methods from many disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, psychology and others, finding it impossible to adhere to or to classify our study within one single scientific discipline; our study could therefore be classified as multidisciplinary. Often, we also combine several methods, relativize and use a non-standard source criticism.

There is not only an almost total lack of research, but also very few sources. To find reliable sources about citizen diplomacy is a huge challenge. Official documents can be found in archives and libraries, but this is mostly not the case with unofficial information. Personal contacts tend to remain private and only in the case of persons who make their

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mnenie v diplomatsiyata mezhdu Finlandiya i Bulgaria' [The role of citizens and public opinion in the diplomacy between Finland and Bulgaria], 253–275.

<sup>6</sup> We make abundant use of our experience in the field in this study, but to keep footnotes at a minimum, we have chosen not to indicate the field notes separately. When no other source is given and the information does not concern generally known historical events, all data come from Sabira Ståhlberg, field notes 1995–2020; Dorijan Hajdu, field notes 1999–2020.

archives available, such as cultural actors, we can find scraps of information. For the modern period, the present European Union personal data laws protect individuals, but they also bring much information out of reach for scientists.

The friendship associations have not written their history. If any records are still present, they are often forgotten in some previous chairperson's attic. Only the Finnish-Bulgarian association (Suomi-Bulgaria-seura) keeps a website.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Swedish-Serbian associations, some articles were published on a website which does not function anymore.<sup>8</sup> Public archives and libraries hold very few non-official items; often the publications (magazines and bulletins) of the associations were and are circulated among a limited group of people. Many personal and especially politically sensitive archives are still closed, and they will be opened and analyzed only some time in the future.

Another factor limiting the transmission of information is the fact that time is running out for interviews. Most individuals, who were active before 1989, have either passed away or are already very old. Those who are alive and remember, often tell stories which tend to be of the glorious and golden past: Cold War Europe was for them a less chaotic place than the world is today. They often believed to some extent the political propaganda or agreed with it. This should not be surprising, as key persons in the friendship associations often held convictions close to the official ones and consequently, due to their ideological position, were permitted to hold higher or significant positions in the semi-official structures.

Political propaganda is not limited to the Communist period and should be analyzed throughout the period and also today. Nationalist views have been actively propagated since the first half of the nineteenth century in all four countries. They figure strongly in the minds of any citizen, who confronts other cultures and different political, economic and social systems. We can only speculate how a person, free from nationalist conditioning, could react to the Other.

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<sup>7</sup> Suomi-Bulgaria-seura, <http://www.suomi-bulgaria-seura.fi/>

<sup>8</sup> The website disappeared during summer 2020, <http://svenskserber.se>

The main sources used in this study are travel narratives, literary descriptions of encounters, a few other publications and finally a large part consists of our own observations and experiences. All publications and field notes have been subjected to source criticism and comparative analysis.

Confronting biases and limited sources, could we claim to revise the official and popular versions of citizen connections between the countries? Possibly in the future, but for this study we can only scratch on the surface. Much more work needs to be done by many more researchers. We will have to sneeze in many more dusty attics, digging among old documents, before we can present a complete picture. What we have found so far indicates a far more varied field of ordinary people's contacts than expected, including both private and socially influential individuals and groups. In addition to personal visits and semi-official delegations throughout the past century, and although friendship associations held something of a monopoly on contacts for around forty years after World War II, also several individuals met and connected in a multitude of ways.

We hope this article will interest and prompt also other researchers to turn their attention to the manifold manifestations of citizen interaction in the shadow of politics and global development. As previous research is mostly absent, source criticism, relativization and the understanding that there are many more things to find is of utmost importance. Information on citizen contacts is scarce even today and neither of the four countries studied here has been a priority for the other. We are well aware that each period requires a separate study, but our aim here is to provide an outline of the main trends and developments.

### **Analysis: Connecting people – the role of historical narratives**

'Connecting people' is a famous slogan of the Finnish (nowadays international) mobile telephone company Nokia. The tagline can be used to illustrate the way in which historical narratives have been (re)created based on historical facts to bring ordinary citizens closer together. Historical narratives are also widely used to support official diplomatic and political

speeches confirming amiable relations between countries. Creating a common bond through the past is in our view one of the flies in the amber, a relic from the past.

In the case of Finland and Bulgaria, there are very few other things than history to bind the peoples together. The countries have no common borders, not many economic ties and seldom any joint interests even within the European Union family. Geographical, political and economic differences create a gap in understanding and policy. Interest toward Bulgaria and other Balkan countries is minimal in Finland; the lack of attention is in fact mutual, as Finland is too far away from the Balkans physically and mentally. The rare students of Finnish are seen as heroes in Bulgaria, because they bravely try to learn an impossible language; in Finland the attitude is similar towards learners of Bulgarian. The number of experts and students preoccupied with the other country is very close to nil.

In the nineteenth century, the feeling of belonging together was somewhat stronger than it is today. One reason is the political and racial discourses of the nineteenth century. Both Bulgarians and Finns were building a nation and they found themselves in the position of the odd ones, considered not completely European. By some writers they were classified as more Asian than belonging to the “civilized races” of (Western) Europe. Their supposed homeland by the Volga River was considered enough proof of a common origin. The Finns had allegedly migrated from there to Finland and the Bulgarians were also considered to have moved to the Balkans from this region in today’s Russia. The older historical migration theorists were deeply confused: modern archaeology and historical research show that after the westward migration of the Bulgars to the Balkans in the seventh century, the remaining Bulgars north of the Black Sea migrated *to* the Volga region. Further, the Finnish “nation” consists of several waves of migrants, who did not necessarily appear in Finland from the banks of the Volga River.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This theory has been forwarded in several publications in Finland about Bulgaria during the nineteenth and early twentieth century and quoted among others in the influential publications from the Russian-Ottoman war in 1877–1878. See for instance the

By 1918, when official relations were established between the two states, the idea of a joint history had already become part of the national consciousness among citizens in both countries. Possibly the view of the common past contributed to the swift recognition by Bulgaria of Finland as an independent state. The Slavist J. J. Mikkola (1866–1946) visited Sofia and the Bulgarian King Ferdinand I (1861–1948, ruled as prince 1887–1908 and king 1908–1918) together with a colleague in 1918.<sup>10</sup> Diplomatic relations were established soon after. Bulgaria was however not considered important and the economic ties valuable enough for keeping an embassy. For several decades, the ambassadors from Finland shared their time between Bucharest and Sofia and sometimes even Moscow. The Bulgarian ambassador, on the other hand, was usually based in Helsinki and traveled to Tallinn in Estonia.

The idea of a joint Finnish-Bulgarian past focuses on a specific period, the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877–1878. Even today still many Finns can sing the war propaganda songs (“Long we have suffered cold and hunger” and others). Publications in Swedish and Finnish were published after the war by some two dozen officers, civilians and soldiers – the soldier narratives were mainly copied from the previous or from Russian propaganda texts. Together with nation-building propaganda they contributed to establish a national tradition with songs and myths about heroism and a popular version of the Finnish-Bulgarian relations originating in real historical actions. Diplomats and ordinary citizens alike in Finland and Bulgaria tell as the first thing when they meet each other that the Finns liberated Bulgaria in the Russian-Ottoman war. Certainly,

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doctor of the Finnish Guard, C. F. Wahlberg, *Från en härfärd i Turkiet. Vid Lifgardets 3:dje Finska Skarpskyttebataljon och Ryska Gardeskåren. Anteckningar från rysk-turkiska kriget 1877–1878* (Helsingfors: Hufvudstadsbladets tryckeri, 1878). Compare Aira Kemiläinen. *Suomalaiset, outo Pohjolan kansa: Rotuteoriat ja kansallinen identiteetti* (Historiallisia Tutkimuksia 177; Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1993); Ståhlberg (2017), 57–63; *Finländska fotspår* (2016), 155–160. In Bulgaria there are far fewer allusions and publications about this relationship.

<sup>10</sup> Ståhlberg, *Finländska fotspår* (2016), 222–223; ‘Po stupkite na general Ernot’ [In the footsteps of General Ehrnrooth]. In *The city of Omurtag and its region* 3. Ed. Miroslav Toshev. (Veliko Tarnovo: Omurtag Museum, 2004), 146–198. See also J.J. Mikkola, *Muutamia tietoja kenraali Casimir Ehrnroothin toiminnasta Bulgarian hallitusmiehenä* (Helsinki: Historiallinen Arkisto XLIV, 1938).

the Romanians and Russians and many others fought in the war, too, but the 1,400 men of the Finnish Guard are seen as the chief heroes and their contribution as the factor which changed the course of history.<sup>11</sup>

In reality, the Finnish participants were a mere fraction of the almost one million strong Russian and international army. Serbian, Romanian and other participants outnumbered the Finnish troops by many thousands. One thousand soldiers cannot have much impact on the destiny of a major war, but the narrative keeps silent on this point. For national pride a hero story is much more convenient. The role of other military than the so-called Finnish Guard (Third Sharpshooters' Battalion of the Emperor's Lifeguard) in the Balkans is often forgotten.<sup>12</sup> One intriguing and little known visitor to Serbia in the nineteenth century was Swedish-speaking officer and international military adventurer from Finland, Waldemar Becker (1840–1907). In the 1870s, he served in the Serbian military staff and tried among others to convince the government to declare war against Turkey. In 1877, when war was declared by Russia, he resigned his post as commander after a quarrel with the Serbian king, moving onward to other countries to fight and mix into their politics.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Finnish national myths about Bulgaria, based mainly on Russian propaganda for saving the poor and repressed (and ignorant) Christian brethren in the Balkans, have been successful in a historical perspective, the popular and nowadays also official version is problematic in many ways. The narratives speak mostly negatively about the Bulgarians, who are seen as less civilized, not only in comparison with Western Europeans, but also with Finns. The Finnish writers had no scruples in using the same epithets that Western Europeans used for them

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ståhlberg (2004 and 2015); Ståhlberg (2017), 46, 96, 113–131; 'Finlandski putepisi za Bulgaria po vreme na vojnata 1877–1878 g.' [Finnish travel narratives about Bulgaria during the war 1877–1878]. In *Hilyadi momtsi sa trugnali na pohod* [A thousand boys went to war]. Ed. Venelin Tsachevsky. (Sofia: Studia Transmedia, 2018), 113–136; 'The music played as the boys marched to the ramparts of Gorni Dubnik – Finnish views on the Ottoman-Russian war of 1877–78'. In *The Ottoman-Russian war 1877–1878*. Ed. Ömer Turan (Ankara: METU, 2007), 139–164.

<sup>12</sup> Ståhlberg (2015 and 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Waldemar Becker's adventurous life has been documented by Erik Becker: *Becker-Bei – suomalainen sotilas ja poliitikko* (Hämeenlinna: Karisto, 1968).

when relating to other peoples. A condescending attitude toward the Bulgarians raised the self-esteem of the Finnish public, who was struggling with its identity from the second half of the nineteenth century. The heroic version, used by politicians and diplomats, does not express such attitudes clearly, but they are present in the implication that the Bulgarians should remain forever grateful, staying in a lower position. They are in other words not equal with the Finns. This attitude can be met with even among persons who have long-standing connections with Bulgaria.

During Communist times, the topic of the Finnish Guard became recurrent or a kind of mantra in official relations.<sup>14</sup> Bulgaria expressed gratitude to Finland and the Finnish people for their liberation from the Ottoman/Turkish and Muslim “yoke”, following a tradition created by the Russian propaganda machine at the end of the nineteenth century. This line of propaganda was useful for the Communists, who tried to deal with the question of a large Turkish (Muslim) minority in Bulgaria and the strong influence of Turkey, their neighbor supporting the minority and a NATO-member. For Finland and Bulgaria, the “liberation” has been a source of pride for ordinary citizens and a way for politicians and diplomats to tell how close the relations between the countries are.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that during World War II, the village of Gorni Dubnik and a few neighboring villages in northwestern Bulgaria sent food aid to “suffering” Finland has slipped the national memory and the common narrative. The letters have been rediscovered only recently in Sofia. During World War II, Bulgaria and Finland found themselves on the same side, as both were allied with Germany, which facilitated the sending of large packages of food and other necessary items. On 19 June 1942, “schoolchildren and citizens” of the villages Gorni Dubnik, Dolni Dubnik

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance a joint official publication published by state travel agencies in Finland and Bulgaria for the promotion of Finnish tourism in Bulgaria, *Balkanin retki* (Helsinki: Matkailun edistämiskeskus ja Bulgarian valtion matkailutoimisto, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> The rhetoric against the “yoke” and Turks still exists today and few critical voices have been raised against it as yet. One of the few, who have challenged the myth in a popular book, seeing the Russian-Ottoman war as the beginning for Bulgaria of the “Russian yoke” or “Russian slavery”, is the journalist Ivo Indzhev, *Izmamata “San Stefano”. Rusko-turskata porobitelna vojna* [The deception of San Stefano. The Russian-Turkish enslaving war] (Sofia: Ciela, 2018).

and Krushovitsa near Pleven dispatched beans, wheat and soy flour, wheat grain, tobacco, home-made soap, orange *rakia* (brandy), cognac, matches and hand towels through Germany to Finland. Despite the official view that the Bulgarians did this out of gratefulness, Finland had occasion to be grateful to the villages and the Finnish Ambassador wrote a kind letter to the senders.<sup>16</sup>

The village of Gorni Dubnik has left a deep imprint on the national narratives and historical consciousness in Finland. The Finnish Guard participated there in its only real battle on 24 October 1877. A monument in the Lavrov Park, erected in 1881, as well as one in Helsinki remind of the battle. The Finnish Guard was actually kept in the background by the Russian commanders, as more than half of the battalion consisted of fresh volunteers who had received only a few weeks of training. The bullets left 22 soldiers dead on the battlefield. A few months later, outside Constantinople, typhoid fever killed several hundreds of soldiers and officers from Finland. Until recently, only the heroic (Russian) version of the war was public in Bulgaria and in Finland it has been challenged only by Sabira Ståhlberg.<sup>17</sup> The date 3 March is celebrated as a national holiday in Bulgaria and the Finnish participants in the war are mentioned alongside Russians and others. Recently, some Bulgarian historians are beginning to challenge the tradition, asserting that this is not really a national celebration. In the future hopefully more critical research will be published in both countries.

Bulgaria also had a prime minister from Finland in the 1880s. Only in the past few decades this narrative has become part of the common historical narrative. Previously it was considered too delicate a matter, as General Casimir Ehrnrooth (1833–1913) was not completely acceptable

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<sup>16</sup> Ståhlberg (2015), 16, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ståhlberg (2015; *Finländska fotspår*, 2016; 2017) has been able to show through textual comparisons that the soldier narratives largely copy officer and civilian narratives and propaganda publications aimed at the ordinary soldiers. All other authors without exception follow the nineteenth-century tradition, using mainly the Finnish-language writings by soldiers and ignoring the Swedish-language accounts by officers and civilians. See for instance Teuvo Laitila. *The Finnish guard in the Balkans: Heroism, imperial loyalty and Finnishness in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 as recollected in the memoirs of Finnish guardsmen* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2003).

politically. Ehrnrooth participated in the war of 1877–1878 on the Eastern front. He was sent as the new non-Russian war minister to Bulgaria in 1880, in an effort to calm political turmoil due to previously misbehaving Russian officials.

In Bulgaria Ehrnrooth soon became a controversial figure. Despite putting a stop to robber bands, who roamed in eastern Bulgaria after the war, restructuring the Bulgarian army and starting several other reforms, he was until a few decades ago considered to be something of a puppet of Prince Alexander Battenberg (1857–1893), a cousin of Russian Emperor Alexander II. In the spring of 1881, the Prince decided to suspend the “too liberal” constitution created in Tarnovo in 1879. Ehrnrooth was instrumental in implementing the suspension despite his own misgivings and he soon after left Bulgaria. To discredit him as a ruthless dictator, who crushed Bulgarian freedom, both scientific and less scientific writings have been published since the 1880s. Only a more recent Bulgarian work has brought his actions into a new light. A Finnish myth claims that he is depicted on the pedestal of the statue of Emperor Alexander II in Sofia, but there is no reason to believe that this highly symbolic statue would depict a less significant general, who did not even participate in the main battles or sieges during the Russian-Ottoman war.<sup>18</sup>

National narratives have a connecting function in retrospective, but there was hardly any direct contact between the officers and soldiers from Finland with Bulgarians; the only exception was Casimir Ehrnrooth, who daily worked with local officials and politicians. Finnish ambassadors to Bulgaria met mainly official representatives and had very little contact with ordinary citizens.<sup>19</sup> The Balkan wars and the interwar period, however, shortened the distance.

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<sup>18</sup> Venelin Tsachevsky. *Casimir Ehrnrooth. The Finn who made history* (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2013); Ståhlberg (2015); *Finländska fotspår* (2016), 207–216; (2017), 134–142.

<sup>19</sup> See recently available online Foreign ministry reports from Finland between 1918 and 1945, <https://um.fi/opendata/raporttiarkisto/1918/#navi>

### **Interwar period: curiousness and disappointment**

During the Balkan wars (1912–1913), a number of Scandinavian journalists visited Bulgaria, Serbia and the other countries involved in the war. They reported mostly on military issues, battles and army movements and actions, but they also transmitted their own experiences of hospitality, kindness and integrity among ordinary people. One of the journalists was the Swede Valdemar Langlet, who like many of his colleagues tried to correct through their writings the prejudices formed in the Western press about the Balkans.<sup>20</sup> Some of the reporters disputed openly the negative attitudes towards for instance the Serbian soldiers in the British, German and Austrian press, claiming that the soldiers were brave, disciplined and highly motivated. Sweden, a neutral country, protected Serbian interests in the Ottoman Empire during World War I, especially pertaining to the prisoners of war and their living conditions.<sup>21</sup>

In 1914, after the Balkan Wars and on the eve of World War I, one Swedish journalist wrote an informed narrative about Bulgaria and Serbia and the difficult situation following the wars. Johan Lindström Saxon (1859–1935) was known for his leftist views and his descriptions differ both in topics, insights and political understanding from other newspaper articles and reports during this period. His interests ranged from social to economic issues, not forgetting political and other current questions, and he could provide the reader with hands-on experiences. Saxon traveled for his research in Albania, Greece, the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria and Serbia, often staying with local people in towns and villages.<sup>22</sup>

Serbia and Sweden hold quite a different historical narrative than Bulgaria and Finland. In 2017, the two countries celebrated one hundred years of diplomatic relations and many media outlets as well as officials – politicians and diplomats – used this opportunity to remind about the common past. They pointed out and emphasized that the first Serbian

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<sup>20</sup> Valdemar Langlet and Iwan T. Aminoff. *Kriget om Balkan* (Göteborg: Åhlen & Åkerlunds förlag, 1912). Aminoff was a Swedish-speaking photographer from Finland.

<sup>21</sup> G. Latinović: *Istoriya srpsko-švedskih odnosa*. <http://svenskserber.se>, accessed 20.04.2020. The website is no longer available.

<sup>22</sup> J. L. Saxon, *Balkanländernas folk* (Stockholm: Nutiden, 1915); Ståhlberg (2017), 143–159 (about Bulgaria).

ambassador to Sweden in 1917 was the famous poet, Milan Rakić (1876–1938). Rakić occupied the post for a very short time, being sent elsewhere as early as the following year. Contrary to the famous *Letters from Norway* by author Isidora Sekulić (1877–1958), there seems to be little record of Rakić's life and work at the Embassy in Stockholm.<sup>23</sup> No personal correspondence or artistic writings can be found in the archives. This could probably be explained by the fact that he stayed in Stockholm for a short time only and in a stressful period during World War I. Sweden was not a priority for his government, although in 1882 Serbia had tried to gain the northern country as an ally. King Milan needed support for the newly formed Kingdom of Serbia; the Swedish king responded positively, and a trade agreement was signed, mostly to arrange the export of Serbian raspberries to Sweden.<sup>24</sup>

For economic reasons, the Serbian government continued in the following decades to maintain active diplomatic relations, but only at the honorary consular level, naming Scandinavians as consuls. Sweden, Denmark and Norway mostly followed suit, choosing Serbians (later Yugoslavians) as their honorary consuls in Belgrade. After World War I, the relations with Sweden appeared to be of less interest for the Serbian government. In 1919, it concluded that there were no economic or political reasons for keeping an embassy in Stockholm. A parliament representative and Milan Rakić's successor, Boško Čolak-Antić (1871–1949), most likely inspired by the two years he had spent in Stockholm, pleaded with the Government to reevaluate this decision, citing the possibility of strengthening the trade relations with Sweden as well as keeping the connection with "medium-sized and smaller countries, in order to preserve the common interests in front of the great powers in the League of Nations". The plea resulted in a postponement of the decision, but only by a year. All three Serbian embassies in the Scandinavian countries were closed in 1920. The honorary consuls, being exclusively the citizens of the host country, performed their role and forwarded Serbian interests without getting paid. It was not unusual that rich and successful businessmen

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<sup>23</sup> Isidora Sekulić. *Pisma iz Norveške* (original 1914; Belgrad: Prosveta, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> *Politika* 5.12.2017, <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/393863/U-Svedskoj-se-jedumaline-iz-Srbije>

(bankers, traders and others) were chosen for the position of honorary consul.<sup>25</sup>

Cultural and other kinds of citizen exchange was very scarce and few in between before World War I, but the 1920s and 1930s saw new visitors: writers and artists. One of the more notable visits to Yugoslavia was made by the Swedish Prince Wilhelm (1884–1965) in 1934. Upon his return he published four illustrated articles in the Swedish press. After this, in the years before World War II, around 2,000 Swedish tourists visited Yugoslavia annually; in the opposite direction the visitors were scarce. The Prince was an extremely prolific and versatile writer and photographer, publishing books and articles over five decades. In the year of his visit, a Swedish-Yugoslavian society was established in Stockholm with the purpose of strengthening relations between the two countries in economy, literature, arts and technology. Later it was renamed as the Scandinavian-Yugoslavian Club, when it enlarged its activities to Denmark and Norway. Its first president was Andreas Lindblom (1889–1977), professor of art history and manager of famous museums in Stockholm, including Nordiska Museet and Skansen.<sup>26</sup>

In the interwar period several Swedish companies invested in Yugoslavia. In 1936, the diplomatic relations were once again elevated to embassy level. A year later, a Yugoslavian commerce delegation traveled to Sweden in an attempt to sign new commercial treaties between the two countries. The consular offices, maintaining political and economic citizen diplomacy in the other Nordic capitals, Copenhagen, Oslo and Helsinki, were from 1939 under the jurisdiction of the Yugoslavian embassy in Stockholm. During the war, the Stockholm embassy was very important for the exiled Serbian government in London, as it was one of the rare places

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<sup>25</sup> Krejić, Predrag. 'Poslanstvo Kraljevine Srbije i Kraljevine SHS za Dansku i Norvešku – Kopenhagen 1918–1920' [Embassies of the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of in SCS in Denmark and Norway – Copenhagen 1918–1920]. *Arhiv Jugoslavije* V:I (2004), 104–177; 'Poslanstvo Kraljevine Srbije i Kraljevine SHS u Švedskoj – Stokholm 1918–1920' [Embassies of the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of in SCS in Sweden – Stockholm 1918–1920]. *Arhiv Jugoslavije* III:3 (2002), 80–90.

<sup>26</sup> Goran Latinović: *Istorija srpsko-švedskih odnosa*. <http://svenskserber.se>, accessed 20.04.2020. The website is no longer available.

where information could be shared on the situation in Yugoslavia, war prisoners in Germany and the situation in other Scandinavian countries.<sup>27</sup>

In 1929, a young student from Finland, Mika Waltari (1908–1979), boarded a train to Istanbul and passed through Belgrade and Sofia.<sup>28</sup> This journey became crucial for his authorship: he became fascinated by history and went on to write internationally acclaimed works such as *The Egyptian* (original *Sinuhe egyptiläinen* 1945), novels about ancient Rome and a Finnish sixteenth-century adventurer in Europe and the Ottoman Empire (*The Adventurer* or *Michael the Finn*; original *Mikael Karvajalka* 1948, and *The Wanderer* or *The Sultan's Renegade*; original *Mikael Hakim* 1949).

Mika Waltari stayed for a few days in Sofia after arriving by train from Belgrade. He was not impressed by the previous city he had visited and found the Bulgarian capital a poor, dusty and dull town, where old advertisements for emigration to America decorated the walls and beggars asked for money in the street. In his travelogue *Yksinäisen miehen juna* ('Lonely man's train') he confirmed the Finnish stereotype of miserable Bulgaria. His disillusion reflects the earlier Finnish soldiers' reactions on finding out in 1878 that Bulgaria was not the wonderful, famous Rose Valley they had read about in newspapers and imagined to be a scented paradise. Nobody had informed them that there would be snow and that roses do not bloom in January at the latitude where Bulgaria is situated.

Waltari expressed clearly his disappointment in the fact that neither Belgrade nor Sofia was the romantic East he had expected. He wrote: "Damn, Belgrade – Belgrade is not the Orient, it is not Europe either – it is a Slavic girl from the countryside, who sits in the cinema with artificial silk stockings on her feet, watching Wild West bandit films." Sofia was similar in his eyes, but "less rigid, dirtier, almost lovable". Only a nightly adventure with a Hungarian dancing girl contributed some glamour and

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<sup>27</sup> Goran Latinović, 'Švedski kapital u jugoslovenskoj privredi u periodu između dva svjetska rata' [Swedish capital in the Yugoslavian economy in the period between the two World Wars]. *Arhiv Jugoslavije* XV:1–2 (2014), 130–137; Predrag Krejić, *Inventar sumarno-analitichki AJ-382. Poslanstvo Kraljevine Jugoslavije u Švedskoj – Stockholm, 1918–1920, 1937–1945* [Summary-analytic inventar AJ-382. Embassy of Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Sweden – Stockholm, 1918–1920, 1937–1945]. Beograd: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Mika Waltari, *Yksinäisen miehen juna* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1929); Ståhlberg (*Finländska fotspår*, 2016), 225–232 and (2017), 164–175.

excitement. Waltari was aggrieved to leave her, but not to depart from Sofia for Istanbul next morning.

As in the case of Serbia and Sweden, Bulgarians visiting Finland were far fewer than individuals from Finland visiting Bulgaria in the interwar period. The artist Olga Shehanova-Shishkova (1895–1978) spent some years in Finland as the wife of the Bulgarian Embassy secretary, painting and arranging several individual exhibitions at the end of the 1930s. Shehanova-Shishkova was forgotten in both countries for several decades, but a retrospective exhibition opened in Helsinki in November 2019 on the initiative of the Bulgarian Ambassador, historian Dr. Martin Ivanov.<sup>29</sup>

The interwar period can be described as constructive to citizen diplomacy; the connections were at least partly non-official. Relations include travels by artists, scientists, writers, economic counselors and students. In the case of Serbia and Sweden there was also classic citizen diplomacy in the political sense of the term, implemented by honorary consuls. Some of these connections can somewhat critically be regarded as important only on a small scale, but others had larger implications. Travel was relatively free between the World Wars and citizen diplomacy was an important indicator of the general spectrum of relations between the four countries. A conclusion is that a certain amount of liberty is necessary for citizen diplomacy to operate.

### **“Dear friend”: bridging the post-war gap**

The period after World War II changed the regimes in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and the political positions of Finland and Sweden. The two Nordic countries declared neutrality, but Finland was in fact closely connected to the Eastern Bloc and especially the Soviet Union. Sweden was ruled by the Socialist Party for several decades; it was continuously in the government between 1932 and 1976. The fact that both Sweden and Yugoslavia had Socialist governments played an essential role in the relations. The fairly free travel possibilities offered by the less strict regime

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29 Bulgarian Embassy in Helsinki (Foreign Ministry of Bulgaria),

<https://www.mfa.bg/embassies/finland/news/23440>

in Belgrade, compared with other Eastern Bloc countries, also supported contacts. Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme (1927–1986) visited Belgrade in 1975 and was by his own admission “impressed” by the Socialist self-management. The Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito responded by saying that he will not address Palme as “Mr.” but with “Dear friend”. Palme even has a street named after him in the Serbian capital.<sup>30</sup>

As a non-participant in World War II, Sweden and its industries were basically left intact. This had a huge impact on the development of its economy after the war, contributing to the highest GDP globally for many years. One of the consequences of the post-war situation was the need for more work force in Sweden; the demands of the markets soared and the country was compelled to invite foreign workers. There were at least two big waves of emigration to Sweden. In the first wave, between 1950 and 1973, as many as 34,000 people left Yugoslavia to work in the Nordic country. The second wave of emigration took place during the 1990s, when almost 50,000 new immigrants moved to Sweden, further strengthening the minority. Migration in the other direction, to the Balkans, was for all intents and purposes non-existent.<sup>31</sup>

The infrequent presence of Sweden and Swedish culture in Serbia (Yugoslavia) can also be observed through the prism of literary translations. Most works of Swedish authors into Serbian (among them August Strindberg) were translated from German, which reflects the fact that there were no Swedish-speaking translators in the country. The situation changed only in the 1980s with the establishment of the Scandinavian department at the University of Belgrade. The cultural relations based on intermediary languages and personal connections were transformed into more institutionalized education and contacts and the Scandinavian department has developed continually during the years. Today it has more than fifty new students every year and the department functions as the main source for new cultural “ambassadors” in Serbia. The

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<sup>30</sup> Blic, <https://www.blic.rs/slobodno-vreme/vesti/bio-je-titov-prijatelj-primio-je-tudmana-a-njegova-smrt-promenila-je-tok-politike-da/vgh3785>, accessed 20.04.2020.

<sup>31</sup> Åke Nilsson, *Demografiska rapporter 2004:5: Efterkrigstidens invandring och utvandring* (Stockholm: Statistiska centralbyrån, Enheten för demografisk analys och jämförelse, 2004), 22.

amount of students has resulted among other things in an increased number of translations from Scandinavian languages in the past couple of decades. Especially popular with Serbian readers are *Nordic Noir* crime novels.

At the University of Helsinki, Bulgarian has been taught in periods at the Slavic languages department and Finnish has been in the curriculum at the Sofia University, but the students are very few. Swedish and other Scandinavian languages attract far more students in Sofia, and other Slavic languages, mainly Russian, catch the main the interest of students in Helsinki. The language courses in Finnish and Bulgarian respectively have been interrupted several times over the years since World War II, often because of lack of interest, teachers or funding. The support for university-level teaching almost completely disappeared after 1989 in both countries.

A few cultural personalities influenced the view of Bulgaria in Finland between 1945 and 1989. Each of them only visited Bulgaria once and none dealt with the topic for more than one publication. An unofficial visitor arrived by sea, surprising Bulgarian and Romanian authorities in August 1963. Swedish-language writer and art historian from Finland, Göran Schildt (1917–2009) appeared at the Black Sea port of Burgas with his yacht.<sup>32</sup> *Daphne* was probably the first private vessel to visit Bulgaria and Romania after World War II. Schildt had a plan to follow in Jason's antique footsteps and the itinerary of the *Argo* on the Black Sea, but his journey was cut short by the refusal of the Soviet authorities for a visit to the Georgian coast (ancient Colchis) or even Odessa (now in Ukraine).

Schildt was very interested in local conditions. He was able to communicate without restraint with local people on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, then still largely conversant in Greek. Schildt's book *Det gyllene skinnet* ('The Golden Fleece', 1964) did not become as popular as his other books, which tell about the Mediterranean. The journey was largely

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<sup>32</sup> Göran Schildt, *Det gyllene skinnet* (Helsingfors: Söderströms 1964); Ståhlberg (2014); *Finländska fotspår* (2016), 257–266; (2017), 192–199.

forgotten until 2014, when an exhibition and a seminar on the Black Sea journey were organized in Finland by Sabira Ståhlberg and Villa Schildt.<sup>33</sup>

Göran Schildt found the Bulgarians “charmingly careless” and the Danube Delta in Romania a highly interesting place, but he had visited the Soviet Union earlier and was critical of the Communist system. He could not completely avoid politics, despite focusing on culture, people and history, and in his narrative the Cold War confrontations can be perceived.

Most other cultural personalities from Finland visiting Bulgaria had more sympathetic views towards the regime and their visits were tinted with politics. Socialist and Communist cultural actors from the West regularly visited countries in Eastern Europe. They enjoyed a wide range of pleasant activities during their journeys, because in the Eastern Bloc they were considered friendly and received much attention and hospitality; far more than if they had gone on a charter trip or traveled privately, or visited a place somewhere in the West.

The famous Finnish comic writer Arto Paasilinna (1942–2018) was brought in the 1980s by his Bulgarian hosts to Lake Dospat, a picturesque site located in the Rhodope Mountains. Here he could indulge in his favorite pastime occupation of fishing. Paasilinna had worked for a leftist magazine in Finland and was sympathetic to the Eastern Bloc. His contribution to citizen diplomacy was a book about an old monastery above the Dospat Lake. In the book, God goes on a holiday and leaves the job of managing the world to a Finn, who takes up his abode in a defunct monastery by the lake. In Paasilinnas view, God lived in Bulgaria.<sup>34</sup>

Bulgarian writers probably visited but did not write about Finland in this period. The famous author Jordan Radichkov (1929–2004) wrote a book about a journey to Sweden in 1980.<sup>35</sup> Even today there are very few books about Bulgaria in Finland, except guidebooks, country overviews,

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<sup>33</sup> The situation in Bulgaria changed in the 1980s, when the younger Greek-speaking generation lost their knowledge of the language.

Villa Schildt, <http://www.villaschildt.fi/en/>

<sup>34</sup> Arto Paasilinna. *Auta armias* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1989); Ståhlberg (*Finländska fotspår*, 2016), 269–270, and (2017), 200.

<sup>35</sup> Jordan Radichkov. *Malka severna saga* [A small northern saga] (Sofia: Alba, 1980). The book was translated into Swedish as *Träskorna. En liten nordisk saga* [The wooden clogs. A small northern saga] (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1981).

EU reports and publications about the Finnish Guard. In Bulgaria the situation is similar. Only two persons actively write about Finland in Bulgarian, previous Bulgarian ambassador in Finland, Venelin Tsachevsky, who has written a biography of General Casimir Ehrnrooth and publishes books about diplomacy and official contacts. Sabira Ståhlberg, who writes in Swedish, Finnish, English, and Bulgarian, focuses on the joint history, national myths and citizen diplomacy as well as historical travel narratives. Ståhlberg has also created exhibitions and documentary films.<sup>36</sup>

After 1963, when the first charter flight landed in Bulgaria, the Finnish public has been creating a new image of Bulgaria, that of a sunny, care-free holiday country, on the basis of stories and experiences by tourists on cheap package tours.<sup>37</sup> Mass tourism has brought hundreds of thousands of tourists to the Black Sea coast, but their interest in the country itself is limited. A few Finnish tour guides have married Bulgarians and stayed in Bulgaria for at least some years, but others have moved to Finland or elsewhere. Memories of holidays and souvenirs of Finnish tourists to Bulgaria were exhibited in the Hotel and Restaurant Museum, Helsinki, and in several towns in Bulgaria at a retrospective exhibition in 2018 called *Sand castles and concrete – a mini holiday in Bulgaria of the past*, initiated by the Bulgarian Ambassador Martin Ivanov. The exhibition showed that the Finnish tourists in general have positive feelings towards Bulgaria, but they have very little idea about the country outside the tourist resorts.<sup>38</sup>

This is also the overall picture in media in Finland before 1989. Mass media have been responsible for much of the view ordinary people keep of

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<sup>36</sup> Exhibition about Bulgarian history for the National Library in Helsinki during the first Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2018, <https://www.kansalliskirjasto.fi/fi/kauan-sitten-bulgaria-0>; *Finska Gardet på Balkan*. Documentary film, manuscript Sabira Ståhlberg, director Tonislav Hristov (Making Movies, Yle Fem, 2013).

<https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/2013/04/24/finska-gardets-aventyr-pa-balkan>

<sup>37</sup> A film about the first Finnish charter tourists visiting Bulgaria is available on YLE Areena (in Finnish), <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2007/03/12/bulgarian-aurinkorannalla-1963>

<sup>38</sup> Hotel and Restaurant Museum, Helsinki. *Hiekkalinnoja ja betonia – miniloma muunneessä Bulgariassa*, 2018, <https://www.hotelliaravintolamuseo.fi/nayttely/hiekkalinnoja-ja-betonia/>

the other country since the 1870s.<sup>39</sup> A closer look shows that historical narratives are sticky and that the images transmitted by the media are conflicting. Although there is no need to bring up the Russian-Ottoman war anymore, the nationalist myth of the Finnish Guard keeps appearing, not only when official visits occur. Also in citizen diplomacy and media they pop up every time someone mentions Finland or Bulgaria. Only Santa Claus or Sunny Beach receive good ratings in Bulgaria and Finland respectively, but both touristic destinations and the happy connotations they awaken come in second after the heroic feats of the Finns in Bulgaria.

As a contrast, in Finland after 1989 and especially after the EU accession of Bulgaria in 2007, the remote Balkan country is presented as the poorest and most miserable European Union state. Only Romania competes with it for the position of worst performer. Pictures of donkeys pulling carts in the streets of Sofia is a usual press photo. Finnish tourists visiting Bulgaria get a cultural shock when they find glossy shopping malls and observe brand new luxury cars in the streets. On the other hand, Bulgarian audiences learn from media about the perfect Finnish school system and the hoards of free money awaiting anybody moving to Finland. Disappointment is rife: when Bulgarians emigrate, they find the Finnish society not too welcoming to foreigners and the salary evaporates quickly into high taxes and living costs. Pensioners in Finland pay tax; in Bulgaria, pensions are exempted from tax. Bulgarian teachers visiting Finland understand that the school system is society- and culture-specific. The Finnish system focuses on support for the weaker pupils and often ignores the better ones; the Bulgarian school does exactly the opposite.

In comparison, Serbia and Sweden have gained more knowledge and shown much more interest in each other. Familiarity with the other country goes both ways, but most of it has not been written and there are few sources other than verbal. The migrants return since the 1960s to the Balkans for summer holidays and talk about Sweden. In Sweden, many people have come into contact with Yugoslavian and Serbian migrants. In

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<sup>39</sup> A deeper media analysis is impossible here due to space limitations; Finnish- and Swedish-language digitized newspapers are available and can be searched at the National Library in Finland, <https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/>

Serbia the interest toward Scandinavia continues unabated and in Sweden the interest towards the Western Balkans is much bigger than interest in the Eastern Balkans, for instance in Bulgaria.

### **Neutral, or not so neutral? Organized contacts**

The early Swedish-Yugoslavian Society, founded in 1934 by Swedes, did not accommodate the Yugoslavian minority which became substantial in the 1960s. Given the figures, we would expect more organized activity. The migrants created several local associations to keep their culture and language alive in the foreign environment. Today, *Serbernas riksförbund* or the 'National Confederation of Serbs' is the umbrella organization in Sweden. It was founded in 1970 as the Yugoslavian Council. In its heyday, it boasted as much as 25,000 members and over 120 regional societies. Presently it claims around 7,000 members and 43 regional associations. No friendship organization of similar size has ever existed in Serbia. Most ex-Yugoslavian, nowadays Serbian, Croatian and other associations and also football clubs are still functioning in Sweden.<sup>40</sup> They are not of the Eastern Bloc friendship association type like in Finland, because their goals, membership, interests and political situation were and are still different.

After World War II, Finland came heavily under Soviet influence. From the 1950s to the 1970s, several societies for friendship with Eastern Bloc countries were established, for instance Hungary (1950), East Germany (1954) and Albania (1971). Some friendship societies, such as the Finnish-Polish Society (1928) and the Finnish-Romanian Society (1943), had been founded earlier with the aim of increasing exchange and travel. *Suomi-Bulgaria-Seura* (Finnish-Bulgarian Society) was founded in 1952.<sup>41</sup> A Bulgarian-Finnish Society in Sofia was also established. A model for these friendship associations was in Finland probably the Finnish-Soviet Association, founded after the armistice in 1944. This organization had the goal of promoting friendship and the cultural and economic cooperation between the two countries.

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<sup>40</sup> The association website <https://svenskerber.se/> does not function anymore; accessed 20.04.2020.

<sup>41</sup> Website <http://www.suomi-bulgaria-seura.fi/>; Ståhlberg (2019).

The Finnish-Bulgarian Society arranged meetings and events and sent delegations to Bulgaria. The Society kept in contact with embassies and officials and the states kept tabs on the people interested in the other country. On the surface, exchange and promoting friendship, peace, understanding and dialogue on political, economic and cultural levels were the aim. Apart from political rhetoric and formal meetings, it appears that the individuals involved saw the trips and the meetings as possibilities for travel and enjoyment. Especially for Bulgarian citizens, the touristic part of the program was a great opportunity for seeing the outside world and for buying items not available at home. The state limited foreign travel in many ways and ordinary tourists had few opportunities to visit abroad.

Finnish visitors from the Society were often more interested in visiting the Finnish Guard monument in the village of Gorni Dubnik and to partake of Bulgarian food and drink. Except for visiting the capital Sofia and other major towns in Bulgaria, the representatives of the friendship society traditionally brought flowers to the Finnish Guard war monument. The Finnish Embassy still participates in the annual celebrations in the Lavrov Park. The park was built by the villagers in Gorni Dubnik in 1950–1954 and hosts more than a hundred monuments from the battle in 1877. A small museum and the Finnish Guard monument have been restored with support from Swedish-Finnish associations and groups connected with descendants of officers in the Finnish Guard and private donations in Bulgaria after 2012; the Society, however, was not part of the project.<sup>42</sup>

Outside the semi-official and official connections, the villagers from Gorni Dubnik also created personal contacts with members of the Finnish-Bulgarian Society and twin towns outside the official Sofia-based Bulgarian-Finnish Society. Delegations in the 1970s and 1980s from Bulgaria visited Lahti and other towns and were reciprocated by visits from Finland. The village of Gorni Dubnik, with a few thousand inhabitants, has become besides two other places, the capital Sofia and the tourist resorts along the Black Sea coast, a Finnish connection point in Bulgaria. In

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<sup>42</sup> Main actors for restoring the monument and the small museum and putting up signs etc. in the park were Sabira Ståhlberg and Venelin Tsachevsky. Ståhlberg (2015); *Finländska fotspår* (2016), 147–150 and (2017), 123–124.

Finland, Helsinki and especially Lahti, where a Bulgarian restaurant was opened in 1978 (now defunct), were the points of reference for Bulgarian visitors. After 1989, however, the contacts between Gorni Dubnik and unofficial Finland disappeared. New connections were established only in 2012 with the visit of a first Swedish-speaking group from Finland, but they do not involve the Society or members of it, who mostly visit with official delegations and do not involve the local people.

Friendship societies were needed for several reasons during the Cold War. From the viewpoint of the authorities, the transmission of official policies seems to have been at the forefront. State permission and financial support were needed so that the organizations could function. The societies can therefore be viewed as a kind of semi-official platform for the states despite the officially unofficial profile. Ordinary citizens were encouraged to contact within a politically defined framework. The delegations discussed politics and friendship in terms which were permitted by the states. The visits and visitors, the associations and their members were controlled and reported on by members and hosts, despite the hospitality and the illusion of openness on both sides.

Supposedly all or most individuals who took part in the activities knew where the border of this political citizen diplomacy ran and tried not to tread on or jump over it. The participants were persons who might or might not have been genuinely interested in the other country and who saw or did not see the game they were playing or were being used for. There were certainly also many who saw opportunities in using the structures for their own interests.

How big was the impact of the friendship associations on society as a whole in Finland and Bulgaria? Without a deeper analysis it is difficult to define the influence, but it seems that the associations were and still are limited to an extremely small group. Mass tourism has reached much more people and tourist narratives have changed the views about the Other in both countries more than the associations. It also appears that there were different interests at stake and surely also inconveniences, but this system was advantageous for both parts. For Bulgarian members of delegations, the visits gave an opportunity to experience another country and gain

prestige by having traveled. For the Finnish visitors, the trips confirmed their often positive, leftist-colored views about the Eastern Bloc. Those who wanted to enjoy Bulgarian food, beach and sunshine without the political aspects could easily board a charter flight without the hassle and the elaborate rituals connected with official or semi-official visits, but they would not get the same kind of reception as those who represented an institution.

Another reason for asserting that the friendship societies did not reach a larger audience is shown in a comparison between the situation of the societies before and after 1989. That year changed many things in the lives of people both in Bulgaria and Finland. The economy crashed in both countries; in Bulgaria immediately after the fall of Communism and in Finland some time later during the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. The crash in Finland came as a surprise for many, because the fact that over half of its economy was connected to the Eastern Bloc and especially the Soviet Union had escaped public attention. In the difficult years of the 1990s, contacts between citizens did not flourish. The friendship societies lost their political support, and also the economic situation did not allow for much activity. Personal relationships continued to exist to some extent through letters, telephone and later e-mails, but only in the 2000s contacts and activities were again created on a larger scale. After 1989, an estimated one to two million citizens emigrated from Bulgaria. A small part of them went to Finland, but they were a tiny minority in comparison with those who moved to Western European countries or the USA. Finnish citizens living in Bulgaria are mostly pensioners; many of them have bought a house or an apartment but spend most of their time in Finland. Only a handful of Finnish citizens are constantly living in Bulgaria.

### **Challenges in a free world**

Both in Finland and Bulgaria, the friendship societies continue to exist, but they are much reduced and still decreasing. Their decline has, however, not caused much change in the attitudes or concepts of the general audience or even been visible, except for those interested in the topic and close to or inside the societies. The Finnish-Bulgarian Society

organizes events for celebrations, events and group travels to Bulgaria. The association claims around 700 members, which in Finland is a mid-size organization, and five regional associations which function as meeting points for Finns interested in Bulgaria or Finns married to Bulgarians, but less for Bulgarians living in Finland. The Bulgarian-Finnish Society does not publish any figures, but it organizes sometimes events in Sofia in cooperation with the Embassy of Finland; otherwise it is mainly invisible.

The website of the Finnish-Bulgarian Society informs in Finnish about events and Bulgaria and also provides links to other sites with history, economy, folklore, wines, literature, language learning, how to watch Bulgarian TV, travel and other topics, as well as information about traveling and contacts with embassies and official information about Bulgaria, mainly interesting for tourists. In the magazine *Bulgarian Viesti* (Message from Bulgaria), embassy information and greetings are mixed with similar topics as the links on the website, new books, translations and personal portraits as well as interviews.<sup>43</sup>

Observing pre-1989 and present patterns of citizen diplomacy between Serbia and Bulgaria with Sweden and Finland respectively, we find that there are more innovative actors in the ecosystem of cultural exchange today: students and academics, honorary consuls, businessmen and others, who work with or without official support from embassies. Companies from the Nordic countries have outsourced services to the Balkans, especially in the IT sector, and there are franchises such as Hesburger, a Finnish fast food chain. The economic aspects of citizen diplomacy have not been studied before, but in addition to economic relations they could yield a wealth of information.

The concept of culture has broadened from a politically colored and mainly folkloric view before 1989 to include all kinds of cultural forms. With increasing interest in Balkan music, exotic food and individual tourism, at least some parts of the Nordic audience have gained more

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<sup>43</sup> The last online issue is from 2016, see "Bulgarian viesti" on <http://www.suomi-bulgaria-seura.fi/>

knowledge about the Balkans.<sup>44</sup> Can we in this case argue that contemporary relations between citizens in Serbia, Bulgaria, Sweden and Finland reflect modern views and ways of connecting? The future of citizen diplomacy looks a lot brighter, does it not? Liberty is there, money can also be found, but the question remains: without state support, does citizen diplomacy become anything more than a personal project of a few inspired and engaged individuals?

Today there is a number of bigger and smaller organizations focusing on intercultural relations between Scandinavia and Serbia. *Seura* is the Serbian-Finnish society operating in Belgrade. *Scandinavian Corner* is an organization founded by a former student at the University of Belgrade. A number of non-governmental organizations, such as for example *Kvinna till kvinna* ('Woman to woman') are actively developing cultural and other contacts and relations between Scandinavia and Serbia. The Scandinavian embassies and SIDA are also highly active and present in Serbian media.<sup>45</sup>

Official diplomacy and much of the cultural exchange continue to be carried out by the embassies and vary according to the ambassador or embassy staff and their interest in organizing or participating in visits, concerts, exhibitions or festivals. In contrast to Norway and Sweden, Finland has retained its embassy in Sofia. Folkloric groups, artists and authors appear sometimes on the scenes, but their visits are often arranged through official channels. There is a Bulgarian weekend school in Finland; a Bulgarian restaurant in Lahti has ceased to exist. Balkan pop-folk music was especially popular in the Nordic countries in the beginning of the 2000s, when several clubs played Balkan music; some still do. In Bulgaria, a small group of heavy metal music fans and also Moomintroll followers continue to be interested in Finland. Finnish heavy metal groups like *Apocalyptica* and others have played several times in Bulgaria and still perform at festivals.

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<sup>44</sup> See for instance a Balkan food website adapted to Swedish conditions, <https://www.balkanmat.se/>

<sup>45</sup> *Seura* in Serbia, <https://www.facebook.com/Seurabeograd/>; Scandinavian corner (Skandinavski kutak), <http://www.skandinavskikutak.org/index.php/en-gb/>; *Kvinna till kvinna* in Serbia, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.se/om-oss/vart-arbete/europa/serbien/>

Tourism continues to be a major field for contacts today, with a peak of around 70,000 Finnish tourists yearly before the global economic crisis in 2008.<sup>46</sup> The tourists mainly meet staff in hotels and restaurants, but there was an increasing number of individual tourists, especially younger travelers and participants cultural and wine tourism before the 2020 pandemic. The future will show if the trend can pick up again or traveling is changed forever.

A special place remains the village of Gorni Dubnik, where descendants of the officers and soldiers as well as members of the Finnish-Bulgarian and Bulgarian-Finnish societies visit and the Embassy of Finland participates in the yearly celebrations on 24 October organized by the village authorities. Some families in Finland also adopt children from orphanages and to a lesser degree street dogs in Bulgaria. For both, however, Romania seems to be a more popular destination.

Academic exchange is a new citizen contact point. The Erasmus+ students, teachers and staff who stay for weeks or several months in the other country gain deeper understanding and create their own networks. On average a dozen Erasmus+ students from different disciplines go on exchange for at least three months each year from several universities in Finland, Sweden, Bulgaria and Serbia to one of the other countries. Often the mobility participants continue to be in contact with the destination country for years afterwards.

Membership in the European Union has created new possibilities for citizen relations, but among the general public stereotypes remain. Media in Finland keep to the “poorest EU-country”-image of Bulgaria and in Bulgaria media transfers the message that Finland is a wealthy paradise or at least close to it. But only a handful of individuals are working on a long-term basis for cultural exchange and changing stereotypes. Articles, books and other publications about the other country appear still only sporadically.

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<sup>46</sup> National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria, provides current and historical statistics on tourism, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/7058/arrivals-visitors-abroad-bulgaria-months-and-country-origin>

### **Conclusions: Similar, but not the same**

So what has happened in the past century in terms of citizen connections? Before Communism, individual or citizen relations had mainly political, economic or private goals (travel, adventures). There were few individual contacts which could be termed cultural or based on ordinary people's interests. Some cultural personalities visited and wrote about the other country, but their impact was fairly limited except in a few cases such as Mika Waltari or Prince Wilhelm.

During the Communist period, relations were channeled through friendship associations, but there were also personal relations based on professional contacts or private such as marriages or hobbies. The growth of mass tourism provided a common ground for meetings, although within a well-defined framework which excluded much of direct contact of the visitors, except with selected locals working in the tourist resorts in Bulgaria. The states tried to define with varying success who could and should (not) connect.

After 1989, the field became open for everybody, but connections were slow to appear. Only in the 2000s a new kind of citizen diplomacy can be identified: the time of the Internet relations and the individual contacts, based on common interests, EU mobility and professional exchange. A new phenomenon is the game players and other young people who have similar interests and meet online. Students from Nordic countries go to the Balkans to study for example medicine, because it is cheaper and easier to get into medical universities than at home and the other aspects of youth mobility has not been studied but could be an interesting topic for students, skilled in Internet and social media research and completing their bachelor or master studies.

Looking at the Nordic-Balkan relationships from a historical perspective of the past century, personal interest, profit, political convictions or a wish for adventure and experiences are among the main reasons why individuals decided to engage in activities about the other country, except in the case of the Yugoslavian emigrants whose aim was and is to try to preserve their language and identity. Political beliefs, especially Socialist and Communist supporters in the Nordic countries play

a smaller role than before, although nowadays extreme right and left groups are connecting throughout Europe.

The fall of the Soviet Union changed the political pattern and the attitudes towards the former Eastern Bloc countries were altered after 1989, but in fact not that much. The Balkans are still, just like in the nineteenth century and since then, a dangerous part of the world where anything can happen. This is not a Nordic viewpoint but global – the Eastern Question, created by the superpowers to justify the carving up of the Ottoman Empire is still defining the attitudes towards the Balkans. Coupled with distance, the connections between the Nordic countries and the Balkans remain limited; even in the EU context they seldom find themselves on the same side due to differences in economy, regional interests and politics.

Two important prerequisites are necessary for creating more active contacts: freedom and resources, both financial and human. Without freedom and with political pressure, connections remain limited to certain frameworks like friendship associations. The 1990s showed that with freedom but without funding, activities remained at low ebb. Only when freedom and financial resources were available, the human resources and exchange being a result of both, a broader ecosystem of contacts became possible in the 2000s.

The individuals and groups creating citizen diplomacy and cultural relations are highly important, because in the case of the four countries, Sweden and Serbia, Finland and Bulgaria, they play the key roles, but they are often ignored, left out of official reports or not well understood. Their political convictions can be a reason for leaving out specific persons, but also personal ambitions can highlight some actors and neglect or reduce the significance of others. The Communist period in fact did not break the individual engagement pattern, it only shifted the mutual connections into a more collective direction. The difference is that today the friendship associations have to look for funding just like any other non-governmental organization and their significance is limited. Travel has become easier and keeping contact is just a click away with new technology and the collective associations have become an interest or hobby just like any other organization.

As a summary, in the pre-World War I period there was little but sometimes significant contact between ordinary people. The Finns in the Russian-Ottoman war had contact with Bulgarians only when they needed food or a guide. Throughout the twentieth century, there was a growth in both individual and collective contacts with emphasis on collective between 1945 and 1989. Today there is a mix of both and the situation can be defined as a *smörgåsbord* or Swedish Table with multiple dishes and servings, in comparison with the *skorpor* or hard-baked and tasteless rusks the first visitors in the nineteenth century received.

The fly is still in the amber at least in some parts of the citizen diplomacy. The friendship associations and embassies continue to create cultural exchange and activities much in the same way as before, although with less resources, because the four countries do not see each other as priorities. At the same time, another part of the cultural, scientific and other activities move on completely other lines and create connections that would have been unthinkable for much of the twentieth century.

This study has tried to map out general trends for the past century, but for more details and especially for a full history a whole book would be needed. Many questions remain to be researched about citizen diplomacy and especially individuals creating connections between the Nordic countries and the Balkans. We as researchers are part of citizen diplomacy and often also actors, which offers us the unique opportunity to both participate and observe. We should document and preserve the history we are living and acting in, because it will be important for the coming generations, just as the previous historical events and activities are important for our understanding of the present and past of citizen diplomacy.

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