A Cyber-Socialism at Home and Abroad: Bulgarian Technical Assistance to India and the National Road to Modernity 1967-1989

In 1967 Indira Gandhi visited the People’s Republic of Bulgaria as one of her first trips abroad as the new Prime Minister of India. This meeting inaugurated a long-lasting program of cooperation in scientific, trade and cultural matters between the two countries. It came at a time when Bulgaria, by now industrialised after Stalinist-style five-year plans, was looking to carve a niche for itself in the COMECON economic hierarchy and also stake a claim on the newly emergent “development market” in the Global South. India became a major trading partner for the socialist republic, but also a recipient of technical assistance and expertise in a variety of projects.

My paper, borne out of my dissertation research, will give an overview of the links between the Bulgarians and Indians, which deepened in the 70s and 80s, as Bulgaria strove to present itself as the “Silicon Valley” of the Eastern Bloc. It advertised itself as a country that had skipped from the agricultural economy of its 1940s past straight into the scientific-technological revolution – by 1980 the Soviet space program was flying with Bulgarian computers. It thus proposed to its Indian partners that it was much better placed than the Soviets or Americans to solve their underdevelopment problems, as it had undergone this transformation within the preceding generation – it could even offer India the experts that had facilitated the Bulgarian modernisation project.

In the course of these interactions, Bulgarian planners became fascinated with the possibilities for total social control and information awareness that computers and cybernetic systems of control could offer a centralising state. This was influenced by their experience of tackling Indian planning and development problems, on a scale hitherto unknown to them. Thus the experience of assisting Indian planners fed back into Sofia, where by the mid-1970s
the party was staking a claim to a unique Bulgarian modernity based on cybernetics and information systems, elaborated in its 1975 program. The paper will thus sketch out the ways a self-fashioned Bulgarian modernity was influenced by the state’s attempt to modernise not just itself but a much larger country, problematizing our understanding of Second-Third World interactions and the role of small states in global affairs during the Cold War.