Football
Politicized

CSKA Sofia as a tool for ideological hegemony in Socialist Bulgaria

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Football today is a billion dollar business. Transfers of players range between the GDP of African countries to the annual profit of multinational companies. Commercial and TV rights have caused football players salaries and football clubs turnover to be ridiculously high. The economic impact of the sport today is in the centre of football discussions and on many people’s lips due to the enormous rise it has endured in the past 10 years. Yet little social studies ever have taken sports and football seriously. Usually football and sports analysis tend to be left for the front covers of sport magazines concentrating mainly on the economic and physical attributes of the game. Rarely has the impact of the sport on society been every analyzed.

I believe strongly that football is not only a multi million financial phenomenon; it is also a social phenomenon, which affects millions of lives. Football is the most followed cultural and social event in the world, it is the most watched and followed sport.

*Probably more than any other area of social life, with the exception of religion, sports are replete with ritual activity and powerful symbolism- which is, no doubt, why the idea that sport has replaced religion as the opium of the people is appealing to some theorists.*


The social identity that people have towards their club/ national team is second to none. With this social identity comes also loyalty; ones loyalty to his/her teams’ city, teams’ colour, teams badge even teams’ “political ideology”.
1.1. Aim of Thesis

My aim for this thesis will be to analyze one small portion of the social impact that football has had in the terms of political ideology. At the end of this paper I hope to have shown that football and sports in general deserve a place in our theoretical and academic interpretations of politics. And they too can be used as case studies to analyze discourses as well as to use analytical tools taught to us from previous political academics.

This thesis will be about how football was regulated and “ politicized” during the 40 or so years of communism in Bulgaria and more specifically what were the signs that politicized it. A lot of changes happened after the socialist revolution of 1944 that were meant to seem as if they promoted political equality and freedom. The promotion that happened were mainly, based on uniting people’s identity with a communist ideology through ВСР (Българска Комунстическа Партия/Bulgarian Communist Party). The “puzzle” or problem is that even though the changes did have some positive effect on uniting Bulgarians under a certain ideology what also happened was significant protest against the regime.

This thesis will go deeper and show how the ВСР used the football club of CSKA to uphold the ideology of communism as victorious and glorious between 1944 and 1989. Various political connotations were linked with the image of CSKA. These connotations were linked not only with the socialist ideology and ВСР, but also with signifiers that supported the ideology as the most powerful and successful one. I will see what kind of organizational changes happened to Bulgarian football, and how they were set to make CSKA the champion and the people’s favourite, whilst being a constant threats to rivals. With this I will also answer a question that has been on many Bulgarian’s lips, “Why was CSKA supported by the ВСР so fiercely?”

By the end of the thesis my aim is to show how the political theories of Ernesto Laclau can be used to analyze what happened in Bulgaria. And as mentioned above my personal, will is to show how sports and football have a place in academic studies regarding politics.
1.2. Research Question

My main research question will answer, “How was CSKA supported by the BCP? And more importantly what were the motifs behind this support”.
I will answer the “how” question by showing empirical facts on organizational changes that were enforced by the BCP between the period 1944-1989 regarding sports and football. I will concentrate mainly on the teams of “Levski” and CSKA, which were the biggest actors as well as the biggest clubs being impacted by the BCP. Also they are the clubs that have the biggest fan base, as well as the biggest fame.
The other research question will answer what were the motifs and tools for BCP to support CSKA, and to link it to a socialist ideology.
This last phenomenon will be analyzed using Laclau’s theory on the forming of hegemony and the emptying of signifiers to symbolize something different from its physical form.
I will use Laclau's theory to explain how hegemony as a socialist ideology is developed by the BCP and how it is spread out within society and more precisely how it can be seen to function in a microcosmic social structure such as football. I will show how signifiers common in Bulgarian socialist ideology were used in football as positive connotations (such as constant victory) to uphold hegemony as well as ideological content.

1.3. Structure of Thesis

The thesis will be structured in 4 main parts starting with the history of Bulgarian socialism and ending with the analysis of the Bulgarian football situation during the socialist period.
The way I plan to formulate my essay is that I will start with giving a history of Bulgarian communism and the changes that came with the new socialist regime.
The history will concentrate on facts such as important institutions, dates as well as important events that happened relevant to my thesis. I will not mention sport that often in the beginning, as I want the reader to understand how the socialist ideology was imposed upon the Bulgarian public as a whole. At this point I want to inform that
I will talk about a totalitarian and single party based regime, so some things I will not explain deeply (for ex. Why was there censorship of press related material).
I also want to point out that I will concentrate my thesis on how Bulgarian socialism formed on a general level as well on how it was on a microcosmic level (football).
I will end chapter 2 with details on the leading symbols and institutions that the BCP used to signify the socialist ideology to the public. I will give a brief history of which symbols were popularized as well as the history behind them. I will also point out the main institutions that were responsible for spreading propaganda and culture. The end of this chapter will help me back up later my case study of CSKA.
The 3rd chapter will be a history of the main political theories I plan on using to analyze my case study. I will be mainly interested in how the term of hegemony and empty signifiers have been defined by theorists such as Gramsci, Laclau, Stavrakakis etc. I will give explanations on the terms and how they come in play within different societies and political meanings. I have used for this thesis a numerous authors who have written and studied the theories of Laclau, as his work will be also the main material for my thesis. I hope that from the analysis I will do in chapter 3 the reader will be better prepared to understand the linkage between the symbols in chapter 1 with the case of CSKA in chapter 4.
Chapter 4 will be “total football” as I will get into the history of Bulgarian football and the main protagonist of my thesis, the football team, of CSKA. I will start by giving a history of the formation of the club along with some general background of the Bulgarian league. I will show which clubs and institutions helped form the CSKA of 1948 (even if the names were different) as it was a complex network of deals and name changes. I will also give a history of CSKA’s main rival “Levski” Sofia, the main team to ever threaten CSKA in the championship (and the BCP’s politics).
The chapter will end with detailed description on the different symbols and signifiers used to link CSKA with a socialist ideology as well as the BCP. This will give gateway to the grand finale of my thesis where politics and sports meet.
Chapter 5 will be the final and the conclusive chapter; I will use all of the above chapters to answer my research question. I will show through Laclau and co. how the regulations and symbols linked with Bulgarian football were done to signify in a microcosmic level the power of the socialist ideology and thus uphold hegemony for the BCP. My conclusion will end with an answer to the research question.
Ch.2 History

Before going into football I want to give a history of the emergence of socialism in Bulgaria. I will try to show through historical facts what the symbols related to the Bulgarian socialist ideology were as well as how the socialist ideology was so deeply imposed on to people through state run institutions. At this stage I want the reader to understand what the main traits and symbols of (Bulgarian) socialism were as it will be crucial in understanding why the signifier of CSKA was linked to the BCP and socialist propaganda. Also through this historic presentation I would urge the reader to get a feeling of Bulgaria under the socialist ideology, and more concretely of how strongly the leading party BCP imposed the ideology amongst the public through symbols and propaganda.

2.1. Socialist Regime in Bulgaria

On September 5th 1944 the USSR declares war on Bulgaria, which till then was a member of the pact of the Axis Powers. Just four days later, on September 9th, 1944 Bulgaria is shaken by a military coup d’etat and leaves the alignment of the Axis (Rome-Berlin-Tokyo). Bulgarians find themselves under heavy Soviet military presence as well as ideological influence, yet they remain an independent state and do not become an official member of the Soviet Union. Until the end of the 2nd World War in 1945, Bulgaria fights as a part of the Anti-Hitlerist Coalition.


The military coup of September 9th is lead by Kimon Georgiev and aided by the 3rd Ukrainian Front of the Red Army, which successfully brings down the government of Konstantin Muraviev and establishes a new authority. The previous night armed troops take over key positions in the Bulgarian capital – the Ministry of War, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the national television and radio stations, the post, the telegraph and the train station - the key organizations for spreading propaganda.
messages and overall media control. The next day the newly proclaimed Prime Minister Kimon Georgiev makes the following announcement on the radio:

With the complete awareness that it is a true and full voice of the popular will, the Fatherland Front assumes in that fateful hour and difficult conditions the government of the country in order to save it from destruction.

(Kimon Georgiev - 1944)

Up to 1971 this event is described in the Bulgarian chronicles and history books as a “national rebellion” but later on, the date is marked as the “socialist revolution”. Even though the days after the rebellion are marked with bloody fights across the country where the population refuses to accept the new order, the events are still praised in media. This according to Prof. Ivanov was just one of the propaganda tools with which the newly empowered socialists used to make the public feel closer and more accepting of the events. In Sofia, Plovdiv, Shumen, Pernik, Haskovo and other towns’ Bulgarian soldiers and local police oppose the forces of the new government but eventually give in. Haskovo is the last town in Bulgaria to give up the fight and pass full control to the socialist armed troops.


In the months to follow the Bulgarian police is disbanded and the “People’s Militia” takes its place. In the meantime the country is torn apart by acts of crime and violence. Political opponents of the new government are hunted down and killed. Various members of the new authority use this as an opportunity to settle personal matters in a violent way or establish themselves as activists of the new order. Unfortunately between 20 000 and 40 000 people are killed during this period, which are deemed to be “threats” or fighting against the working class person as well as the socialist led army.

(Методиев, Момчил. Машина за легитимност: Ролята на държавна сигурност в комунистическата държава. София: Сиела, 2008. Стр. 26 – 27. – Metodiev,

Dissident writer Georgi Markov, exiled from Bulgaria, writes some of the most brutal and hidden facts about that period:

*I do know of any other political religion, which has, worked so strongly upon the most basic human instincts’ and emotions and has been promoted to crush human toughness as the communist ideology. There has come a time where there is a necessity for people to do only evil to express themselves in the dialectical realm of the party (BCP). And exactly in doing this evil, in causing the pain and misery of others, some in our society have learned that they can raise their social status and maybe even be noted down in the history books. I even knew an old general who was in charge of national security. Extortions, unlawful arrests, torture, interviews and his position in the Militia had pushed him to the high ranked position he was in now. In a dramatic confession, he told me that he had been ordered to arrest his closest friend, who was innocent yet proven guilty*  

In addition to these army-backed attacks, Kimon Georgiev’s government organizes the so-called “People’s Court” (Народен съд) – a non-constitutional court of justice, which is active from 19 December 1944 till April 1945. The court serves as an instrument for the left revolutionaries from the Fatherland Front; using the court they justify the murders of members of the political and intellectual elite of the Bulgarian Kingdom. The “People’s Court” puts on trial unreliable and untrustworthy mayors, clerks, local authority members, intellectuals, journalists, reporters, teachers, priests, landowners and anyone else deemed a threat to the socialist ideology (and to the leading member’s personal interests). The trials take place in the University of Sofia, in the Palace of Justice, as well as other public institutions around the country. For a period of just four months the People’s Court announces 9550 sentences from, which 2680 people are sentenced to death.
One of the many paradoxes of that grim period is the trial against Dimitar Peshev – the man famous for opposing the transportation of the Bulgarian Jews to the Nazi concentration camps and saving thousands of lives is sentenced to 15 years in prison for “fascist activity and anti-Semitism”.


On September 8th 1946 under the vigilant eye of the Soviet military a referendum takes place in Bulgaria. About 95% of the votes are against the monarchy and for turning the country into a republic. The monarchy opposes this decision and blames the Red Army for pressuring and manipulating the majority of the votes. Still, a week later, September 15th 1946, Bulgaria is declared to be a People's Republic. The representatives of the Royal family, Queen Joanna and her children, Simon II and duchess Maria-Luisa are exiled to leave the country in a matter of days.
For decades to follow, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria is ruled by the “Fatherland Front” coalition, represented by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). Vasil Kolarov is announced as the first leader under the name “Chairman of the Temporary Republic Government”. He remains in this position until November 7th 1947, when a new constitution starts being drafted as well as introduced.


The constitution mentioned above is the first socialist constitution of Bulgaria; it is written under the supervision of Georgi Dimitrov and modeled after the USSR’s constitution from 1936. According to it all citizens of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria are equal before the law, free from discrimination and granted the rights of social care, freedom of speech, press and committee, as well as the right of a home. The constitution also forbids legally all activity that opposes or threatens the “accomplishments of the September Revolution”.

Georgi Dimitrov becomes the first communist leader of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, until his death in 1949. The ex-provisional president Vasil Kolarov, who dies just a few months later, succeeds him. The leadership finally is transferred for a longer period to prime minister, Vulko Chervenkov (who happens to be Georgi Dimitrov’s brother-in-law).

Chervenkov follows closely the Soviet Union’s political example during his days in office, which earns him the nickname "Little Stalin". Chervenkov makes attempts of creating a Big Brother-like personality cult, where all forces of society are watched and controlled carefully. The Church, for example, was seen as a fierce competition to this cult and severe actions were taken to limit and diminish its ascendency. During his reign many of his political opponents are sent into labor camps never to be seen again.


At the same time, massive industrialization along with a strong wave of collectivization comes to place, which heavily increases all agricultural production around the country. Public healthcare and education were made free for everyone – an act, which still to this day makes many representatives of the older generation of Bulgarian citizens to hold dear memories and look with nostalgia at the Communist rule.

On March 4th 1954, Todor Zhivkov, the most influential political dictator of Bulgaria, succeeds Chervenkov. Zhivkov. An ex-leader of the People’s Militia, Zhivkov remains on this post for the next 35 years and is credited with the biggest influence on Bulgarian socialist history.

The election of Zhivkov is highlighted on April 1956 as the “April Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party”. Zhivkov follows the example, which Nikita Khrushchev sets in the USSR with his speech against Stalin. He accuses Chervenkov of conducting a policy, which leads to a cult centered on his persona and that by this way he gains the actual power over the country and not the people like it is supposed to be. Ironically enough it is Zhivkov himself who later turns into an iconic dictator for Bulgaria, and has popularity matching Gen. Tito of Yugoslavia.
In 1971 Todor Zhivkov updates the constitution again, adding the so called “article 1”, which states that BCP is the only ruling power of authority in the Bulgarian society and country. With this newly added adjustment to the constitution the BCP reassures that all possible opposition is diminished, and BCP made the sole player in politics. (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. Zhivkov Constitution. 1971)

In the middle of the 80s, similar to the rest of the countries from the Eastern Block, the Bulgarian economy turns unstable and eventually ends up in a financial crisis. Reacting to Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms and the famous USSR Perestroika, Zhivkov also brings in changes to the Bulgarian financial policy. In 1989 Zhivkov issues a decree, which allows private citizens to register firms for the first time. November 10th 1989 Todor Zhivkov is removed from his post of a Secretary General. On December 17th the same year he is also replaced as a Prime Minister. Both posts go to Petar Mladenov, who prior to election acts as the Bulgarian Minister of External affairs for 18 years. (Христоматия Омда. Българската Комunistическа Партия. 1998 - Wonderland Bulgaria. Bulgarian Communist Party. 1998)

Following a new change in the constitution, on April 3rd 1990, the State Council is disbanded and Mladenov takes the post of Chairman (or president). Protests organized by the opposition follow all over the country. Petar Mladenov leaves the post and resigns from his political activities. (Ташев, Ташо. Министрите на България 1879 - 1999. София: Министерство на Отбраната. 1999 – Tashev, Tasho. The ministers of Bulgaria 1879 – 1999. Sofia: Ministry of Defence. 1999)

Zhelyu Zhelev, ex-member of the Bulgarian Communist Party, expelled for political reasons in 1965, becomes the first democratically elected president of Bulgaria. Later that year, on November 15th, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria is officially renamed to the Republic of Bulgaria. (Vatahov, Ivan. Zhelyu Zhelev - The dissident president. Sofia Echo. 17.04.2003)
2.2. Socialist Propaganda

As noted above the BCP legitimized its power in government through their institutions, which in times used terror and violence. But as we will see from Laclau further down, violence is not enough to make the socialist ideology “liable”, for which other, less violent, means were also present.

Communism and totalitarian regimes in general rely and control over information and media. The systematic usage of information and the organized and aimed disinformation about past governments and political regimes reshape events and people’s memories of them. Bulgaria was no exception, as the BCP used propaganda, symbols and the media to portray the communist ideology as superior, whilst ridiculing other thoughts.


Between 1948 and 1956 the socialist regime in Bulgaria takes shape. The slogan of the one and only ruling Bulgarian Communist Party is “Dictatorship of the Proletariat”. During this period all features of a totalitarian dictatorship start being present – full mobilization and nationalization of the masses, monopoly of information combined with aggressive propaganda, heavy bureaucratic machine, fully state-owned industry, development on all levels of industry in order for the country to be self-sufficient in the state of international isolation, etc.

Immediately with the establishment of the new regime the Socialist ideology and symbolism are introduced and spread in the sphere of everyday life in Bulgaria. Common themes are the glorifying of the working classes and the army, depiction of agriculture and industrialization, representation of topics such as the brotherhood of the socialist republics, the revolution, the proletariat, etc. Widespread are symbols such as the red flag, the red star (as well as the red colour in general), and the USSR hammer and sickle symbol.

2.2.1 Symbols

The red star has its origins in political movements during the Russian civil war and the end of the First World War. According to history Russian soldiers fleeing from the western fronts arrived in Moscow in 1917 and spread among the local Moscow troops. Russians officers gave out then tin stars to the Moscow garrison soldiers, to wear on their hats in order to be distinguished from the retreating soldiers. Later when these troops join the Red Army they painted their tin stars red. (Khvostov, Mikhail. The Russian Civil War (1): The Red Army. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1996)

There is also another version which states that the red star’s birth was during a meeting between Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Krylenko, who, was wearing a green star badge to show his affiliation to Esperanto; Trotsky was explained that each arm of the star stands for one of the five traditional continents, which made him decide that a red star should be worn by Red Army soldiers. In one of his speeches Trotsky states:

*For the seventh time since the overthrow of tsardom, for the sixth time under the sickle and hammer of the Soviets and the Red star of battle*

(Leon Trotsky - 1923)

After the October revolution the 3rd Petrograd regiment wore their usual uniforms with their shoulder boards removed and with Tsarist insignia on their hats replaced by the red star.
The red flag as a Socialist symbol and its general association with left political ideas goes back to the French Revolution. It was used during the Revolutions of 1848 and so it became communism insignia due to its use by the Paris Commune of 1871. (Avakian, Bob. Story of the red flag. Revolution #45. 2006)

The red flag gained its widespread popularity in 1917 during the Russian Revolution. The Soviet flag, with a hammer, a sickle and a star on a red background, was adopted in 1923 and the red field is “symbolism of the blood” that has been spilt by workers the world over in the fight for their emancipation”. Except the USSR, China and Vietnam are among the other communist countries, which adopt the original red flag and create different variations of it bringing their own slight changes and symbols. (Weeks, Andrew. Flags of the world: Soviet Union. 2011)

The hammer and the sickle, as often as they could be seen during the Socialist period of Bulgaria, remain a trademark of the Soviet Union. They represent the unity and the brotherhood between the proletariat and the peasantry. However this unity is also represented on the national flag of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria with the use of other common images from the Socialistic symbolism – the cogwheel and the ears of wheat. The first stands for the power of the industry and the second for forming and agriculture.

All the above elements are present on the official coat of arms of the country as well as part of the Bulgarian flag for the time period 1948-1990. On top of the coat of arms is the ever-present Socialist red star. On the bottom are presented two dates – 681, the creation of the first Bulgarian country and 1944, the year of the Socialist revolution.

2.2.2 Institutions

Similar to all countries from the Eastern Block, the communist ideology in Bulgaria is closely connected and strengthened using symbols and propaganda through arts, culture and sports. The **Bulgarian Ministry of Culture** actually starts in 1941 under the name “Department of National Propaganda”. The department was started during World War II in order to coordinate the state propaganda materials as well as to handle censorship in the country. After the coup of September 9th 1944, the Department of National Propaganda is declared a ministry, and exists under this name until 1945. The ministry has three sections – “Press”, “Propaganda” and “Agitation”.


After 1945 its name is changed again and again numerous times throughout the years, but the functions of the institution stay the same. What changes is mainly its jurisdiction over the different spheres of culture and thus – the different means of national propaganda. During 1945-1947 it is known as The Ministry of Information and Arts; 1947-1954 – Committee of Science, Art and Culture; 1954-1957 – Ministry of Culture; etc.


The Socialist regimes’ propaganda invades every field of **culture and art**, including relatively new mediums such as film and comics. Soviet culture is extremely popular; films, magazines and all sorts of literature are translated and published in Bulgaria. Art and culture in Bulgaria during that period can be mainly categorized as Social realism (or Soc-realism for short) the main artistic movement associated with socialism worldwide.

There is an extensive “purge” of all that contradicts, opposes or ridicules the social realism and has been even categorized as “bourgeoisie literature” or consisting of democratic ideas, which are proclaimed decadent. Thousands of volumes are taken away from private and public libraries, reading clubs and bookstores and then burned. There is a raging campaign against free thought in art and culture. Many writers and poets, both Bulgarian and international are banned and their books destroyed. The writers who managed to squeeze their works through the tight censorship are analyzed and presented as socialist writers for decades to come. Literary critics put political colors all over their works and put them in the context of the Communist party ideology.


Yet following the ancient Roman principle of “give the people bread and circuses”, the Bulgarian Communist Party tries to satisfy the basic needs of the masses through entertainment as a part of their political strategy to uphold hegemony; Cinema gains popularity through during the first years of Bulgarian socialism as the writer Georgi Markov states in his works:

*Cinema and football were our main forms of mass entertainment. But both spheres were considered, by the regime, to be ideological fields. It was a time when the cinemas projected very soviet based films. For years to come not even one western film was projected or allowed. This is the period when the sharp minded phrase “is the film Soviet or is it good?” was born*


In 1962 the motion picture studio “Boyana” opens in the outskirts of Sofia and soon becomes the biggest film production house in Eastern Europe. Owned, funded and controlled by the State, up to 1989 “Boyana” produces 20 motion pictures, 25 TV features and more than 50 animated short films per year.
A significant part of the films are historical or ideological, and those which are not still portray the Communist society, way of life and authority in a very positive light. There is harsh censorship and strict control over the content of the films and some of them are heavily re-edited or even taken off screen and banned until the fall of the regime.

(Европейски депутати: Студия “Бояна” е част от културното разнообразие на Европа. Business Post. 17.03.2006 – European politicians: Studio “Boyana” is part of the cultural difference in Europe. Business Post. 17.03.2006)

Comics are considered a western art and are highly disregarded. The few Bulgarian comics that are drawn and printed throughout the Communist regime are closely observed and censored by authorities and published mainly in newspapers ridiculing Western democracies. Peter Stanimirov, one of the most prolific Bulgarian comic artists and illustrators, shares memories about the limitations that were imposed on the artists during those days. As he states in an interview “the ideology and the comics were intertwined”. He describes the story motives and Socialist symbols that the authorities required be present in the comic pages:

During totalitarian times the comic in Bulgaria was a “taboo”. Not because of the artists themselves, but because of the market and more so the Art Academy where this was to be studied. Sketches were accepted very hard and always had to fit requirements as well as be examined specially by the academy’s commission. The ideology and comic went hand in hand. That is why all free minded artist rather concentrated on the science fictional genre – in science fiction anybody can name something in a twisted sort of way. Partisanship (other then to the communist party) stories existed but they were conflict free. The real struggle came when the communists imposed strict regulations on names, colors and symbols on science fiction as well as modern history writings. Do you know how many times work was rejected because a star “looked too much like an American star and not the Soviet one”?

Lets not even mention the forcing usage of a particular shade of red because anything else would be deemed a characteristic of the capitalist camp. The Russian red had one shade, which we had to learn by heart. And the good hero or person in the story always had to be either Bulgarian or Russia"
Communist architecture, yet, is one of the biggest and most visible reminders of the socialist ideology. Until the very end of the BCP rule in Bulgaria, there was an active regulation known as the Obligatory Work Duty (Трудова повинност) and it was used for the creation of the so called Construction Troops (Строителни войски). These Construction Troops aided in the blooming of construction buildings and many new neighborhoods which were built in the big cities, as well as factories and industrial complexes in the suburbs. For the needs of the citizens and in tune with the BCP’s policy of encouraging physical education and sport activities many gyms, sport tracks and training halls were built, along with parks and stadiums. New roads, bridges and tunnels were built all over the country, greatly improving the infrastructure. After the fall of the regime many of the factories are sold to the private sector and reformed, or bankrupted and abandoned. But the panel type blocks of flats (or “panelki” as they are known in Bulgarian everyday speech) are still in use, despite their arguable esthetical values, and grim facades, which are a constant reminder of the Bulgarian communist past.

The architecture style followed the popular style of Brutalism, mixed with heavy Soviet influence and symbology (generally referred to as Stalinist Gothic, or Socialist Classicism). Through this form of architecture the ideological symbols noted above are heavily made visible as large paintings of them are placed on the sides of buildings, while each statue lifted has either a star or hammer and sickle on it. Examples include CSKA’s home stadium “Bulgarian Army” which was built with symbols around its entrance as well as placed next to one of the most emblematic buildings of Bulgarian socialism; Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum. The mausoleum was built in the centre of Sofia in 1949 to serve as a tomb where the mummified body of the dead party leader was kept.

The building starts immediately after the death of Dimitrov and takes the record time of only six days to be completed. The Mausoleum is an expression of the totalitarian cult towards the “Chieftain and the Teacher of the People” and is often used as a
tribune during the republic’s parades and official holidays, which simultaneously pass through “Bulgarian Army”.

Curiously, right after the fall of BCP in 1990 the body of Georgi Dimitrov is cremated and buried. Nine years later the government of SDS (СДС - Съюз на Демократичните Сили, Alliance of the Democratic Powers) decides to tear down the Mausoleum so it won’t turn into “a monument for communist worship”. (Събчев, Константин. Мавзолеят, който разделяше хората. Стандарт, 19.08.2003 – Sybchev, Konstantin. The mausoleum, which divided the people. Standart. 19.08.2003)

It should be noted also that there is a youth organizational structure that functions’ all over the People’s Republic of Bulgaria. ““Chavdarche” is the term with which they call children between 1st and 3rd grade in primary school (6-9 years old).

““Chavdarche” comes from the male name “Chavdar”, and its close connection to the Socialist order in Bulgaria will be explained later on in the next sub-chapter. After the age of 9 each ““Chavdarche” is promoted into a “Pioner” or “Pionerche” (Pioneer), a title that stays until they are 14 years old. The main visual mark between the two ranks (despite the children’s obvious difference in age) is the color of their cravats of their uniforms – it is blue for a ““Chavdarche” while the Pioneer’s is in red. While they are Pioneers, the children, have the opportunity to become part of the prestigious Dimitrov’s Pioneer Organization “Septemvriiche”.

The “Septembrians” were created after the “Octombrians” in the USSR (the names come from the months of the respective communist revolutions). Their activity includes parades and public manifestations, as well as the publication of youth newspapers and magazines.


The names listed above are important when we go through the team of CSKA, and more specifically the changes the team has experienced regarding its name and its sport complexes.
Finally **sport** is greatly encouraged, and special attention is paid to football, weightlifting, wrestling, volleyball, etc. Bulgaria takes part in several Football World Cups (England 1966, Mexico 1970, Germany 1974, Mexico 1986). As well as the Olympic Games where Bulgaria is also very active – 21 medals in Munich 1972, 22 Montreal 1976, 41 in Moscow 1980, 35 in Seoul 1988. Ironically the Olympics in Los Angeles, 1984, were boycotted due to a fear that the athletes will run away from camp.

**The High Committee of Physical Culture and Sport** is created in December 1947, under heavy government supervision. Its purpose is to organize and direct the state sport organizations and clubs throughout the country and to conduct propaganda and military training among the children and the youth (part of which is the youth organization mentioned above). In 1968 it is regrouped into a Committee of Youth and Sport, and in 1971 it is promoted into a ministry under the same name. The committee is directly responsible for enforcing regulations on to sports, even if these regulations come indirectly from the central committee of the BCP.


I will show some of the main regulations of the committee of physical culture and sport in chapter 4 where I will analyze football as well as the team of CSKA. At this point I want to draw attention to the main political theories and terms that I will be using in my analysis, which will be the basis of chapter 3 – Political Theories.
Ch.3 Political Theories

This chapter will be the so-called “backbone” of my work, in where I will present the political theories and theorists that I will use to support my thesis. As noted earlier my political thoughts will be concentrated on the theories of “hegemony” and more specifically Ernesto Laclau's interpretation of the phenomena. I have divided this chapter in two sub parts, one that discusses “hegemony” and the other “empty signifiers”. There will be other terms, which are important and will be mentioned, but I will still use them to mainly support my understanding of the two terms mentioned above. I want to make both terms as clear as possible to then easily move on to chapter 3 where I will show how CSKA and football in Bulgaria was used to uphold the socialist ideology through emptying signifiers.

3.1. Hegemony

During the 19th century hegemony in a sociopolitical aspect is attributed mainly to the “Great Powers”. Hegemony described the political influence of a certain country over others, and vice versa – the dependence of the other countries under the domination of the Great Powers. Hegemony and imperialism were intertwined, as political hegemony was in fact a form of indirect imperial rule.

In the beginning of the 20th century the Italian linguist, politic and political philosopher Antonio Gramsci further developed this concept. The Marxist writer described theories and methods of cultural domination and included in them social and economic classes. Marxism talked about hegemony long before Gramsci’s writings on the subject. Lenin had previously used hegemony in order to depict the dominant authority of the working-class in a democratic revolution. In his works however Gramsci approached the topic from a different angle - he analyzed the weak points of Marxist hegemony and tried to answer the question why capitalism was spreading and gaining power throughout the world.

(Holsti, K.J. The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory. Unwin Hyman 1987)
According to Gramsci, capitalism relies not just on brutal enforcement in order to gain and maintain control, but its means stretch also beyond the typical political and economic coercion. Gramsci observed that capitalism makes extensive use of ideology and propaganda through culture. Capitalism roots itself in every aspect of life and constantly bombards its subjects with in-direct suggestions and shapes their views and attitude for its purposes. Through a hegemonic culture, capitalism equalizes the values of the bourgeoisie with the values of the working classes.

Gramsci underlines that the main strategy that capitalism uses to establish itself is to turn the bourgeoisie views and goals into a common sense ideology of the entire population. Or in other words – cultural hegemony paves the way for the political ideas and turns the subjective views and aims of the party into an objective truth and common sense. Amongst many of his examples are those of Henry Ford’s ideology and his alleged way of controlling employees to spend their “high” wages. The question was were wages really high, or was it just an ideology that Ford had imposed upon his workers.


This way it is not long before the consensus culture becomes widespread and makes the people in the working-class identify their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie – a typical example of this capitalist principle nowadays is the famous “chase of the American dream” and the “pursuit of happiness”. Practicing such principles helps the authorities to maintain the status quo rather than provoking a revolt among the working classes.


As a counter-action against the cultural invasion of capitalism, Gramsci suggests that the working class needs to develop a culture of its own, one that will stand for itself and will oppose the trend that bourgeois ways are representation of the natural or and the normal values of the entire society. The working-class culture also aims to attract the artists and the intellectuals, as well as different representatives of the oppressed social and ethnic groups.
A clear manifestation of this idea is for example the use of slogans such as “Brotherhood and Equality Among All Nations!” and emblematic posters depicting racial equality or condemning racism especially during the times when the black communities were fighting for civil rights the United States. This crusade against racism provides a context and opportunity for a direct attack against the capitalist country which regime allows it.


Gramsci recognized what Lenin failed to see – that art and culture are fundamental in order to attain political power. Cultural hegemony must be achieved before the sociopolitical one. Gramsci writes that any class that aims to dominate the modern society has to reach beyond its own personal economic goals and to exert cultural and ideological leadership, inserting and spreading its interests and goals throughout the society, but at the same time to unite, merge and compromise with a variety of other forces. Gramsci names this alliance of social forces a “social bloc” and claims it builds the foundations of a certain social order, which paves the way for the hegemony of the dominating classes and its authority through a chain of institutions. In fact Gramsci describes a superstructure not unlike the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.

The principles and strategies he talks about can be clearly seen in practice by the Bulgarian Communist Party and will be referred to in the upcoming chapter when we analyze the use of the CSKA football team as a tool of Socialist propaganda.


**Ernesto Laclau**'s main point of interest is post-Marxist political philosophy. One of his most influential and important works is “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy”, published in 1985 and co-written together with the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe (and Laclau’s wife). The book reviews, analyses and discusses the works of various theorists of the Marxist philosophy - Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, Georges Sorel among others, as well as Gramsci’s definitions of cultural hegemony (a subject that we are very much interested in, since we discuss the usage of sport as a tool for political propaganda).
The book also expresses Laclau and Mouffe's own ideas and observations on political hegemony, its efficiency and the means of its establishment and uphold.
(Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal. Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics. Verso. 1985)

Laclau claims that hegemony should be the main object of study for any political science, as it serves as a basis for all forms of strategic thinking and political tactics. Still Laclau updates Gramsci using postmodern thinking and applies it to the context of post-Marxism and post-War Europe. According to Laclau’s work, class conflict is no longer the main social problem as it was for Marx and Gramsci.
Class conflict might have been crucial in the past, but the royalty, aristocracy, nobility or bourgeoisie are anachronisms in the modern society, and so is the old concept of a “ruling class”. Gramsci’s theories imply cultural hegemony over the civil society in order to establish, ensure and secure the political strength of the ruling class and its monocratic control over the entire state.
Laclau however notes that historical circumstances have changed and events such as the formation of the European Union for example have shifted the perceptions of “the state” and so have shifted the function of hegemony. Old antagonisms (struggles) are erased and replaced by new ones. In present days political isolation has become incomparably harder to uphold and foreign influence almost impossible to control, which have resulted in the fall of Communism throughout the Eastern Bloc. Still, Laclau claims that hegemony has transformed into a tool extensively used by and needed for modern democracy.

Morozov puts Laclau’s theory in simple words by quoting:

*The current global political struggle around the notion of democracy illustrates the idea of hegemony very well: democracy is simultaneously accepted and challenged, and even while it is accepted as an empty signifier, a growing number of political forces is*
struggling to fill it in with a content which would empower them and liberate them from the dominance of the West.


Even though Morozov writes and argues about current democracies, this is not far from what happened during socialist Bulgaria and can be used to analyze the situation then.

Basically for Laclau hegemony is not just a straight imposition of authority and ideology over the people by the political elite. It is an ongoing struggle for unification and generalization. Hegemony includes in its context not just the direct and indirect enforcement of a regime, or the transformation and the manipulation of the people in order for them to accept the regime as the one and only possible functioning system. Hegemony is also characterized by a never-ending effort of various groups to guarantee acceptance and ascendancy of their philosophy, ideology and worldviews. Stepping on previous theories on the subject, South-African born political theorist (and student of Laclau) Aletta Norval concludes that hegemony must adapt itself from the specific to the general. This is important in order for it to function effectively and sustain its power by meeting the demands of the majority. This is achieved by unifying the needs of the various social and ethnic groups. Norval writes:

_The very process of constructing hegemony thus has a two-fold character. On the one hand, demands are always specific, even particularistic, in that they arise from the experiences and conditions of particular and limited groups. On the other hand, for those demands to become universalized, to function as a horizon in which more generalized demands may become inscribed, they need to be marked by something transcending their particularity._


The Slovenian philosopher, political theorist and cultural critic Slavoj Žizek adds to these observations the principles of division and opposition between the current regime and the previous one or rival political ideologies.
The most obvious example of such strategies applied in national politics is the rivalry between East and the West, Communism versus Capitalism, where each side is demonizing and anesthetizing the other one. In fact Zizek points at history and associates these tactics with Marxism, but actually they are almost always fully valid for any two opposing political ideologies (or in my work two opposing football clubs). Zizek writes:

*In the history of Marxism, the tension that defines the concept of hegemony is best exemplified by its oscillation between the radical revolutionary logic of equivalence, which had to have recourse to different contingent groups to realize the universal task of global social transformation.*


### 3.2. Antagonisms

Yannis Stavrakakis uses Lacanian psychoanalysis when it comes to the political use of antagonisms. He declares that the strive for a "sociopolitical institution of society as a harmonious totality" is nothing more than a mirage - a utopia. Yannis Stavrakakis speaks of an “ever-preset hegemonic play between different symbolizations”. For him many antagonistic fractions are not only “fantasmatic conceptions”, but also the very idea of a unified society under the hegemonic rule.


Laclau and Mouffe do not leave this problem uncovered either. They underline the (sometimes aggressive) antagonism between the established order and the rival regimes, be them forged fantasmatic conceptions or real threats. Or to put in other words – in order for a hegemony to sustain itself it needs an external conflict, which to attract (or shall we say distract) the population’s attention (this is seen more in my analysis of what the opposing team “Levski” meant for the BCP). It mobilizes the people and channels their resistance against a factor, which is outside their governing political system.
If one is to build a chain of equivalence among democratic struggles, one needs to establish a frontier and define an adversary.


This “adversary” helps the hegemony party to remain in power, at the same time uniting the people and giving them a “common enemy”. This common enemy serves for directing their discontent or opposition against this external hostility (which is often fabricated by the party itself for this very same purpose). At the same time this creates “fear from the enemy” and allows the party to strengthen its grip and acquire extensive executive powers in order to be able to react quickly and “protect”.

“Hegemonic struggle” is another concept of the political studies, which we will now explain. In order for a regime to maintain its power and sustain hegemony it has to constantly convince and persuade the population in its values and qualities. The regime is forced to update itself according for every new generation and to adapt quickly to the global political situation. This process of a slow but steady evolution of the regime prevents social uproars and actions against its authority. Laclau writes:

Hegemonic aspirations can never consider itself as repetition, as taking place in a space delimiting a pure internality, but must always mobilize itself on a plurality of planes.


In other words, the regime has to revolutionize itself at all times in order to prevent a revolution among the population. Mouffe contributes on the subject, observing that throughout history the political “Left” often fails and forgets to continue this struggle, which results in its imminent failure.


Deviating from Laclau’s formalism, Butler uses a post-structuralist approach in her definitions of hegemony. But apart from those obvious differences in her works, we find similar ideas in their thoughts. She writes that a regime’s success is never truly
constant and steady. Instead the authority is locked in an endless string of actions, which try to prolong their provisional success. Butler notes that often these actions are simply “echoes of prior actions” which were proven effective in the past.


The hegemonic struggle is one of the main reasons for Laclau to identify hegemony as un-achievable utopia of unity that is upheld through antagonisms and “empty signifiers” (a concept we will explore in detail after a couple of pages).

*For Laclau, hegemony is to be understood only on the terrain of discourse: a hegemonic relation is a certain kind of articulation of meanings, namely an articulation that takes place “in a field of crisscrossed by antagonisms and therefore supposed the phenomena of equivalence and frontier effects”*


Yannis Stavrakakis comments on utopianism and lists the circumstances for its existence and spreading and the ways in which it aids the establishment of political and cultural hegemony. He basically points out that for hegemony to form it must be constructed from the lack of security for the public. He illustrates his observations with the painful historical example of German nationalism and Hitler’s hegemony, which can be also seen in work when explaining Bulgarian socialism in a time when war and fascism had torn the country apart:

*The first condition of possibility for its (hegemony) emergence is the dislocation of traditional forms of organizing and making sense of society, a dislocation inflicted by the increased hegemony of secularism, liberalism, socialism, industrialisation, etc. Faced with such disorientating developments, people can very easily resort to a promise for the re-establishment of a lost harmony. Within such a context Hitler proved successful*

3.3. Empty Signifiers

In his works Laclau borrows a term from semiotics – “empty signifiers” (or as they are also known – “floating signifiers”). In semiotics this term specifies signifiers without referents, such as a word that doesn’t point or correspond to any actual existing object or agreed upon meaning. The term originates from the French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who analyzes the theories of Marcel Mauss. Lévi-Strauss gives examples with words such as “mana” (magical mystical substance of which the magic is formed), or “oomph” (American slang term for taste or flavor in the figurative sense) to show how their definition is “empty” as even though their usage might not be so.


Later on the term is expanded and other scholars broaden its uses. Nowadays it is commonly applied in non-linguistic fields. By “signifier” we understand not just words, but any other means of communicating symbols, meanings and ideas. A more recent definition of the term is:

*An ‘empty’ or ‘floating’ signifier is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, un-specifiable or non-existent signifier. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifier; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. Those who posit the existence of such signifiers argue that there is a radical disconnection between signifier and signified.*

(Empty Signifier - http://www.termwiki.com/EN:empty_signifier)

As it can be deduced from the term’s original meaning, when Laclau applies it to politics he usually attributes it to signifiers used for populism by a certain form of authority such as a political party, government or ruling class. Some of the examples that Laclau gives are "emancipation" and "democracy", which represent very general and abstract ideas and their meanings tend to vary according to the times, people that use it and the political situation.
In order to escape turning the term “empty signifier” into an empty signifier itself, Laclau makes the concept of it clear. He also clears the notion of symbology and what the relationship between its physical form and representation actually is:

Remember that any identity is ambiguous insofar as it is unable to constitute itself as a precise difference within a closed totality. As such, it becomes a floating signifier whose degree of emptiness depends on the distance that separates it from its fixedness to a specific signified. The degree of fixity of a signifier varies in inverse proportion to the extent of its circulation in a given discursive formation.

A signifier is emptied when it is disengaged from a particular signified and comes to symbolize a long chain of equivalent signifiers.

The relationship between a foundation and what it founds is quite different from a symbolic representation and that which is symbolized.


The above quote is important, if yet confusing, because the term “empty signifier” is somehow misleading; an empty signifier is by no means a signifier without (or “empty from”) meaning. Otherwise it would not be a signifier at all. But to claim that it is a signifier with multiple meanings is also not exactly accurate, even if for different groups it could have different meanings (but then its meaning would be a “emptied” in different context – such as “democracy”).


Laclau often relates empty signifiers to hegemony and thus to totalitarian regimes. He states that the hegemonizing party or authority group generally attaches its policy to one or several empty signifiers. But in order to do so first they have to “empty” the signifier from its particular content, its previous meaning which is associated with the regime before them. Laclau underlines that often in such situations the empty signifiers are antagonistic – for example (a demand for) order or (a search for) justice in times when they lack in society.
Laclau explains how the word “order” becomes an empty signifier:

“Order as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder “order” is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those, which carry out the filling of the lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function.


Or in other words – a term, which in a particular situation and political context becomes a signifier for its own lack or inexistence, is an empty signifier. According to Laclau these empty signifiers represent the society’s constructive impossibility, they serve as a cover, which masks its fundamental failures.

To illustrate this claim, we can take a look at the non-constitutional court of justice, organized by the Bulgarian Communist Party straight after their military coup d’etat in 1944. The name that the party gave to this institution was “People’s Court”. This is a fine example of an empty signifier. First of all the party was by no means a representation of the entire Bulgarian nation. The court was not voted for, there was no referendum or any whatsoever connection between this court and the people. BCP though, claimed it represents the proletariat and the commonwealth, so all its actions were an expression of the will of the people and done in the name of the people. The event was also by no means a true court of justice. Actually it is categorized by some as one of the biggest mass murders in the history of the country and genocide against the Bulgarian political elite, intellectuals and clergy. The use that the Bulgarian Communist Party made of both the words “people” and “court” is quite similar to the examples of “order” and “justice” given by Laclau.

Or if we are to give a present day example, we can easily find one in modern American politics – a widespread current empty signifier is “terrorism” or “terror”. It is extensively used in concepts such as and “the global war against terrorism” or “the war on terror”, and often combined with phrases like “threat for the national security”.
As we can see, in most of the cases the empty signifiers used for political purposes are in fact taking a term with a broad, often universal meaning and then summarizing it down to a specific purpose for the needs of the party. Words with generally positive or generally negative charge can be interpreted and reinterpreted. When they are “filled” with their new meaning, or when they signify what the party needs them to signify, they become widespread, cited on every occasion and used in every sphere of life. Such “empty signifiers” are usually employed in political propaganda and become stock phrases for the media controlled by the party. Jelica Sumic writes:

According to Laclau the universal at stake in politics is always a particular universal, always, the result of a pure hegemonic intervention. That is, there can be no intrinsic relations between the universal as the empty form of totalizing and the particular qualities of the instance “chosen” to fulfil the tasks of representing the absent universal. (Critchley, Simon and Marchart, Oliver. Laclau: a critical reader. Routledge. 2004. Pp. 193)

However we never have a truly “empty” signifier – even in the process of disconnecting a signifier from its previous meanings, we have it simultaneously being filled with new meaning. This process could be described as a gradual switch, or shift of meanings. In his later works Laclau himself states:

If we would have an absolutely empty signifier, “universality” would have found its true and final body, and hegemony, as a way of constructing political meanings, would be at an end. The chains of equivalence are always disturbed, interrupted by other hegemonic interventions.

Other scholars also underline the close connection between establishing hegemony and the use of empty signifiers. Inevitably the political power which seeks to establish its hegemony has to “reset the values” of the terms connected with its ideology, which were used by the previous regimes and adjust their significations. But since it is rarely possible merely to “erase” the older significations, the hegemonic party usually
makes a generalization of the terms and then twists them and reinterprets them in a way they represent their own political agenda. In a way, the party reinvents the terms in order for them to match the new political ideology introduced by their regime.

*Hegemony involves competition between different political forces to get maximum support for, or identification with, their definition of “empty signifiers”, such as a “order” or even “democracy”*  

Speaking of a universal unity, created for the purposes of hegemony, we can refer to another definition of an “empty signifier” which Laclau provides. He speaks of empty signifiers, created by the regime in order to summarize and unify the demands and the claims that the different social groups have towards the authority. Laclau states that an empty signifier is in fact a “signifier of the cancellation of all differences”. But since all the differences simply cannot be cancelled the empty signifier represents the impossible. Or as Laclau puts it, this generalized universal unity that the regime seeks to create is actually “an always receding horizon resulting from the expansion of an indefinite chain of equivalent demands”. Laclau also writes that in order for the signifiers to serve for the establishment of the homogeneity, they have to be separated from their attachments with other different signifiers. In this way they “empty themselves” from their many associations and interpretations and “assume the role of representing the pure being of the system”. By being strictly defined and charged with whatever meaning the party needs them to carry, and by excluding and even denying any definitions and elucidations different from the ones defined by the party, these very same signifiers become a unity, which represents the homogeneity of the regime.  

According to Laclau and Mouffe the presence of a wide range of floating elements and the possibility to give these elements new articulations (often to opposite factions) and eventually their persistent redefinition is what gives a political force the opportunity to establish its homogeneity. If instead of such floating elements we had
permanently fixed, constant elements, there would be no room for a dominant hegemonic practice.

(Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal. Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics. 2nd ed. Verso. 2001)

This is closely related to another concept described by political studies – the “chain of signification”. Zizek gives an example with communism, which takes on pre-existing signifiers, which are filled with new meaning and later on articulated with new meaning around another signifier (“democracy”, “state”, “freedom” – attributed to “communism”).

*Democracy acquires the meaning of “real” democracy as opposed to “bourgeois” democracy, freedom acquires an economic connotation and the role and function of the state is transformed. In other words, their meaning is partially fixed by reference to the nodal point “communism”.*


In “Hegemony and Social Strategy” Laclau and Mouffe talk about the fundamental social classes which are used by the homogenizing power to represent ideological elements. In this process empty signifiers such as “the people” and “the nation” are created. They often serve as constructors of identities and help form the basis of the new social status. Such pivotal signifiers stabilize the flow of meanings and the redefinition of terms, which surround the establishment of any new hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe refer to this process as “the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning”.


Yannis Stavrakakis links the nodal points to Lacanian concepts such as master signifier, also known as point de caption. Laclau himself admits the important role Lacanian theory has played for his works and its increasing influence throughout the
years. Stavrakakis says that the creation of an empty signifier is in fact a production of a signifier of the lack in the Other. This production serves as an attempt to institutionalize the empty signification. It is an act of re-conceiving the signifier in a way, which is radically different from the entity (or the definition), which existed before the act.


Having written all of the above we will now switch directions to explaining what this has to do with football and more precisely politics.

**Ch. 4 CSKA**

**4.1. History**

At this stage I will move my concentration on to football and CSKA. Till now I have written about the over all history of socialist ideology in Bulgaria and how it was enforced. In this chapter I will try to show how the team of CSKA was born and through pure facts what were the changes CSKA and football in Bulgaria encountered. This will be used then in later chapters where I analyze what these changes actually meant, and how they were linked to politicizing football and CSKA.

*Sports and youth activities were always supported in Bulgaria, even during times of war, even with the changes of regimes. It was mainly the Left parties that arranged the first clubs, but they always were supported and gave young people a chance, even in fascist times.*

(Ilia Patronev. *Interview.* May 2012)

Football grew in Bulgaria approximately the same time that other sports around Europe and the world started becoming famous and organized. In 1924 the first national football league was created (called National Football Competition) and it was based on direct play-off style eliminations until 1937 when the competition took the more common league format.
Until the September revolution of 1944 the league was played amongst 10 teams, which were mainly compromised from the 4 big cities of Sofia, Ruse, Varna and Bourgas.  


The change in the Bulgarian politic regime after the September coup of 1944 sweeps through all spheres of life and it does not take long before it affects sports as well. According to the new leadership’s policy numerous teams have their names changed. The new names are usually closely connected with propaganda and the Socialist ideology and carry revolutionary or military references.

*The regime had decided that football would be one of the main tools for political propaganda and to show that the socialist way is the strongest. For these reasons the whole structure of the football league and the teams had to be restructured. Names were changed and new clubs were formed, whilst political connotations were given to different teams.*  
(Ilia Patronev. Interview. May 2012)

Several different teams from different countries of the Eastern block share the same name. One of the popular names is “Torpedo” for example. Apart from the Bulgarian team Torpedo Pleven (founded in 1949) there are also: FC Torpedo Kutaisi (a Georgian Football Club), the Russian teams FC Torpedo Moscow, FC Torpedo-RG, FC Torpedo-ZIL (a defunct Russian Football Club, now FC Moscow), FC Torpedo Zaporizhzhya (a Ukrainian Football Club) and FC Torpedo Zhodino (a Belarusian Football Club).  

Yet from all teams **PFK CSKA Sofia** (abbreviation for Professional Football Club „Central Sport Club of the Army” / ПФК ЦСКА София – Професионален Футболен Клуб “Централен Спортен Клуб на Армията”) is the most successful Bulgarian football team. CSKA has won 31 domestic titles and 20 national cups. Internationally, CSKA has reached two European Cup semi-finals, four European Cup quarterfinals, and one Cup Winners’ Cup semi-final. Curiously enough the team wins its first Champion of Bulgaria title in 1948 – the very year of its foundation. But in order to see how this was possible we have to trace the team’s history and the circumstances around its creation.

On October 28th 1923 two clubs “Atletic” (founded 1910) and “Slava” (founded 1916) join with the Officers’ Sport Club under the name Officers’ Sport Club “Atletic Slava 1923”, called just AS-23 for short. The patron of the new club is the Ministry of War, which supplies the players with their outfits.

(Сп. ЦСКА, брой 15. 2003 - Magazine CSKA. Ed. 15. 2003)

In 1931 the team wins Bulgarian Championship, in 1941 it conquers the National Cup and in 1944 the 1st Division of Sofia. The teams’ stadium “Atletic Park” is completed in 1938, only to be replaced a few years later by the CSKA stadium “Bulgarian Army”.


Later the leaders of the teams AS-23, Shipka София, Shipka Pobeda and Spartak Orlandovtzi unite their teams into a new club – “Chavdar”. The unifying protocol is signed on November 9th 1944 in Sofia. A new chairman is elected – general Vladimir Stoychev from AS-23 and Ivan Bashev is elected charge of football matters.

Asen Pavlov, the right-wing of “Shipka” and later “Chavdar” remembers about the changes that the merge of teams brought:

“We formed a new Sofian team called “Chavdar”, which after 3 seasons became the Ministry of Wars’ club, an idea enforced by Mihail Mihailov. I still have the formal protocol, with which he made it happen.
It is important to underline at this stage that while “Chavdar” is still a popular Bulgarian male name, it is also closely connected with the Bulgarian Socialists. Including the youth ranks mentioned above it is also associated with the guerilla brigade “Chavdar”, which is a well-known movement organized by the Bulgarian Communist Party. “Chavdar” was mainly an anti-fascist movement and it was active during the period between June 24th 1941 and September 9th 1944. The members of the guerilla brigade “Chavdar” are considered to be “heroes of the September Revolution” and in their honor the name is given to four other teams apart from “Chavdar” Sofia (a similar reference can be taken from the “Partizans” who acted in other parts of the Balkans, from which the Serbian team FK Partizan Belgrade is named).


The new football team “Chavdar” Sofia plays with sky-blue outfits and uses the “Athletic Park” stadium. By the end of 1944 the stadium is renamed “Chavdar”. Meanwhile in charge of training is the famous Bulgarian heavyweight boxer Ivan Nikolov (popular under the nickname Zamorata) a move highly successful in popularizing the team.

Despite the several minor successes of the team, the overall performance of “Chavdar” is unsatisfactory and finally in 1947 the team finishes 10th and falls out in Second Division. The two options for the team are either to slowly develop and regain its previous positions or to merge with some of the teams from First Division.

“Chavdar” chooses option number two;

First the management of “Chavdar” approaches “Sportist” – a team, which was at that time at the top of its glory and often wins against the strongest “Levski” Sofia but “Sportist” declines the offer.

Right after that a new idea comes from Mihail Mihailov, working at that time as an accountant for the Ministry of War. He suggests that “Chavdar” should go under the jurisdiction of “CDV” (Central House of the Army) this idea is welcomed and on
February 15th 1948 “Chavdar” officially joins “CDV” and accepts the abbreviation as its new name. The chairman of the club is the head of the “CDV”, major Ivan Mirski, who then helps the Ministry of War to become a dominant factor in the team’s management. Later that year, just before the beginning of the battle for the championship title of Bulgaria, there is a new merge.

After long negotiations between the leaders of the two teams “Chavdar” and “Septemvri” (named after the month when the Socialist Revolution in Bulgaria took place) they join forces. The contract is signed on May 5th 1948. The name of the new team is “Septemvri pri CDV” (or “CDV’s September”) “CDV’s September” is the original name under which CSKA is created. The team uses this name for two seasons - 1947-1948 and 1948-1949.

The organizers of the club are chosen to be the minister of national defense, Gen. Georgi Damianov and other members linked to the ministry of defense and army.

*With this background, background of the fact that “Chavdar” (run by the ministry of defence) offered cooperation with “Sportist” and other clubs...leaves us to one question. The question (is), what would happen if CSKA were born not from long and complicated negotiations but as opponents claim, from clear political pressure? (Суровянски, Петко. С рогите срещу историята. Спорт 1. 13.02.2007 – Surovyanski, Petko. With horns against history. Sport 1. 13.02.2007)*

From February 15th 1948 the “Chavdar” stadium becomes property of the CDV and naturally the new team inherits the facility. In 1965 the old stadium is demolished and on its place a new one is being built for the next two years. The new stadium is named “People’s Army”. The stadium remains CSKA’s home to this day (although after the fall of the Socialist regime of BCP in 1990 the name is changed into “Bulgarian Army”). As noted earlier the stadium was built in down town Sofia right next to the emblematic Dimitrov mausoleum. The location of the stadium was vital for a number of reasons, but the biggest one being that it was the only club stadium, which was located in down town Sofia, thus easily accessible.

(Bulgarian Army - [http://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Българска армия (стадион)](http://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA_%28stadium%29))
The summer of 1949 “Septemvri” leaves the union to become an independent team again. The army’s team (heir of “Chavdar”) is renamed again – “CDNV” (Central House of the People’s Army). Season 1949/1950 starts as usual, only to be concluded after just three rounds. The reason is due to the reorganization of the athletic and sport movement of Bulgaria “according to the Soviet model”. After a quick tournament there are 5 teams from Sofia, which qualify to compete for the title. “CDNV” gets position number six, which should have left it out of the championship, but the Ministry of War makes an executive decision – to create a new team, gathering the strongest and most skillful players from “CDNV”, “Botev” Plovdiv, “Cherno More” and “Sliven” and put the team in the competition instead of “Botev”. The name of the new team is “Narodna Voiska” (People’s Army).

The team finishes second, right after “Dinamo” (the new name of “Levski” Sofia, after the interference of BCP, which will be discussed a few pages later).

In 1953 the team changes again its name, this time to “Team of the Sofia Garrison” (Отбор на софийския гарнизон).

In 1954 the club is renamed to “CDNA” according to the new name change of the institution (From “CDNV” to “CDNA”). The period under this name (1954-1962) is the most successful in the team’s history – the team wins 9 championship titles in a row. Many of its players are transferred to the newly formed national team and play in the local Bulgarian championships just to warm up for international tournaments.

*The paradox of the whole situation was that for a period of 7-8 years the team of CDNA was de facto the national team of Bulgaria.*

(Ilia Patronev. Interview. May 2012)

In 1962 “CDNA” is united with DSO “Cherveno Zname” (Red Flag) and the new name of the alliance is called CSKA “Cherveno Zname” (Central Sport Club of the Army “Red Flag”). CDA is no longer related to the team’s management and instead is transferred under the patronage of the Ministry of National Defense (Министерство на народната отбрана).

Curiously enough, just two years earlier, in 1960, a Moscow team previously known by several names (the last one of which was 1957–1959 – Tsentral’nyi Sportivnyi Klub Ministerstva Oborony (Central Sports Club of the Ministry of Defense) is renamed Tsentral’nyi Sportivnyi Klub Armii (Central Sports Club of Army). The Bulgarian management of the ex-CDNA follows the Soviet example, whether under pressure or not from USSR is not known.

Season 1963-1964 is a real disaster and the team ends up 11th in the final positions. In 1968 CSKA is united once again with DSO “Cherveno Zname” under the name CSKA “Cherveno Zname”. CSKA remains one of the most successful Bulgarian teams for the next two decades and plays on several European football tournaments and wins against major international teams.

The biggest disturbance in the team’s history comes on 1985, when on June 19th during the final for the Cup of Bulgaria there is a brutal fight between the players of CSKA and their contender ““Levski”.

The rivalry of the two teams by this point is legendary and is already known in Bulgaria as “The Eternal Derby”. The foul play results in a raging campaign of the sport journalists as well as the leading men in BCP against the two teams – the media demands severe punishment for all the players involved in the fight. With a decision of the Central Committee of the BCP both teams are disbanded and numerous players receive harsh professional penalties (only to be revoked later, when the media turmoil is over and the scandal is forgotten). New teams are formed from what remained of the old ones. “CSKA” becomes “Sredets” and ““Levski” becomes “Vitosha”.

Ivan Slavkov, then official Bulgarian representative of the IOC (International Olympic Committee) remembers how large-scale decisions were made and revoked by the BCP in matter of days:

*When the scandal between “Levski” and CSKA happened many people including Hristo Stoichkov (Bulgarian football legend) went down, even though they were not to blame…. Then the names of the teams were changed and 5-6 players were suspended. I spoke to Zhivkov (Todor) at the time, as I was member of BOC (Bulgarian Olympic Committee), and told him that if they disband the club and academy of CSKA they will also disband the future of Bulgarian sports (as the whole elite of 400 Bulgarian athletes was from*
that academy). That’s why instead of stopping the whole club they (BCP) decided to start the whole name changing business.


In 1987 “Sredets” adds to its name CFKA (ЦФКА – Централен Футболен Клуб на Армията / Central Football Club of the Army). For three seasons in a row the team wins the Title of Bulgaria. In 1989-1990 the team gets back its previous name CSKA and wins the title again. With the fall of the Socialist regime in Bulgaria in 1990 more changes await the team.

4.2 Ideological Connotation

*Formed by the state authorities, CSKA was always a project made by the BCP to show the power of their regime and ideology. Naturally they couldn’t place the club directly under its patronage so they chose the strongest and their most prided institution – the army.*

(Ilia Patronev. Interview. May 2012)

Several factors (some obvious from above) point that the creation of CSKA was in fact not a natural team of sportsmen but an engineered champion intended for political propaganda. Looking back at the history of CSKA we cannot help but notice that many interventions of party members and government officials navigated the course of the team’s development. Most of the merges of the other teams that precede CSKA were accomplished thanks to the connections and the influence of their initiators. Amongst the more obvious interference is the direct involvement of the Ministry of War (under which patron CSKA is) in the qualification tournament of 1950, when the team didn’t make it to Top 5 and was to stay out of the major league, instead the new team “Narodna Voiska” was formed and given the position of “Botev” which had rightfully won its place.

But what else was there and how exactly did CSKA become linked so heavily to the Bulgarian Communist Party? Leaving aside the obvious references from their history and the links towards revolution and military power from the name of the team and
their stadium, there are also numerous **symbols** around the team that are directly connected with the Socialist ideology.

The original logo of AS-23 was a circle with the symbol of the Bulgarian lion standing on its back legs. Ever since the change of the political regime in Bulgaria in 1944 the color of the logo changed from black to red. Out of the context of the political situation in the country it could be assumed that red was a more suitable color for the team since it was going under the patronage of the army.

(Cп. ЦСКА, брой 15. 2003 - Magazine CSKA. Ed. 15. 2003)

After 1948, when the team was renamed to “Septemvri pri CDV” its emblem was completely redesigned. The lion stepped away, giving place to a huge red five-pointed star – the main symbol of the Socialists. The star is surrounded by a circle of green ears of wheat, another popular motif from the palette of the socialist realism movement, as mentioned earlier in the text. For the next 14 years the only changes that are made in the emblem are the abbreviations of the team’s name – CDV („ЦДВ“) (1948-1949), CDNV („ЦДНВ“) (1950-1953), CDNA („ЦДНА“) (1954-1962). In 1962 oak leaves replace the ears of wheat, symbolizing strength and stamina. The abbreviation is changed to CSKA, and under it there are the letters CZ standing for Cherveno Zname (Red Flag / ЧЗ – Червено Знаме). With some slight changes and variations this is pretty much the look of the team’s logo today.


In 1968 a ribbon with the Bulgarian flag is also added to the logo, and the initials CZ are gone, replaced by the words “Septemvriisko zname” (Septembrian flag / Септемврийско знаме) written in a semi-circle on the top. There are two variations of the logo – either the text is red letters on white background, or the other way round – white letters on red background.

The team however has a very different logo design for the European tournaments, which sticks more to the average mainstream football emblem designs of that age; It includes a football and the name of the team is FC CSKA. “Septembrian Flag” is not mentioned anywhere, but the logo is still in monochromatic red, and the ever-present five-pointed star is on top of it. The Bulgarian flag is not included in this logo. Little is known as to why the team uses a different logo for their international games. Some
speculate that it is to do with the “neutrality from politics” that the football governing body of FIFA (and UEFA in Europe) demands from the sport and clubs, which would explain why CSKA would play under a different name and logo.


After the disband of the team in 1985, caused by the scandalous fight on the football field, its successor CFKA “Sredets” has a completely new logo, shaped as a shield instead of the traditional circle from the CSKA logo. The red star though is still in the middle of it and the colour of the logo is red to reassure that distance from the communist symbology is not far. In 1987 a new CSKA emblem appeared – it was an unofficial logo, which was sometimes used by the members of CFKA “Sredets”. The emblem was shield-shaped and consisted of two lions, standing on their back legs and facing each other, upholding a football. The team's name on the emblem was CSKA Football Club.


Due to its unofficial nature this was the first (an the only) team emblem not to feature the five-pointed red star, though the emblem itself was red – a colour that was already strongly associated with the team after several decades of using it on their logos and outfits. A curious fact is that after the fall of communism this logo actually becomes the team’s official emblem for some years, because the red star in their original logo is considered to be a symbol of the overthrown communist rule.


Years later, in 1998, when the team's management is changed the new owners go back to the original red star logo with the oak leaves, but this is done more out of respect for the team’s past and its dedicated old fans, than in order to pay tribute to some Socialist ideology. After CSKA won its 30th title three golden stars were added above the emblem.
The story of the **CSKA outfits** is similar to the one of their logo. There are a great variety of designs throughout the years, but of course the main colour doesn’t stray from red. The first official CSKA outfit dates back to 1948 and consists of a red shirt, white shorts and red socks. Later on there is another variation, the same red shirt and socks, but combined with black shorts. On many occasions the players are dressed entirely in red.

Of course after all that was said about the team it would hardly surprise anyone that all **press** connected to CSKA was also printed with black and red ink. Similar to most of the newspapers, magazines, leaflets, etc. from the Socialist regime, CSKA’s programmes, annuals, albums and other materials were printed using extensively the colour red. During the years when the team’s name included politically associated words like “Red flag” or “Septembrian flag”, almost never were they referred to only as CSKA – the writers used every occasion to rub in the face of the reader the association of the team with the communist ideals. The texts themselves were often relating the sport successes of the team to the state policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The association of the team with the party was sometimes so heavily underlined that it could be even categorized as a deliberate brainwashing of the sport admirers who were bombarded with stock phrases and party slogans in each paragraph. Fortunately many such materials are preserved by fans of the team and private collectors and can be observed nowadays. Examples of such texts will be given in Chapter 5, where we will examine in depth the use of CSKA by BCP as an instrument of national propaganda.

### 4.3 Levski Sofia

Nevertheless, there are others, less known but far more striking interventions on the side of the Bulgarian Communist Party, when it comes to bringing CSKA as a “socialist team”. In order to investigate deeper into this claim I will take a look at the history of CSKA’s “arch-enemy” – “Levski” Sofia and more specifically the connotations they experienced during the reign of the BCP.

Founded in 1914, “Levski” quickly became a fan favorite not only due to its name (Levski is the national hero of Bulgaria) but also because it was the other big team
from the capital (Slavia being the other). Prior to 1948 there were little teams who could challenge “Levski” both on a football level as well as a fan base, An example of the fame “Levski” has can be seen with the fact that they did not have their own stadium at first, and even though they had their outdoor trainings suitable for their needs, they were far from professional football fields. Yet in 1924 the authorities from the Municipality of Sofia grant the team a terrain in the Boris’ Garden Park (Борисовата градина) where their stadium is to be built. The building is absolutely voluntary. The blueprints and the project are done for free by the architect Zafir Abrashev and the fans of the team start a fund, called “Playground” where everyone can donate a small sum for the building of the stadium, which they call the “bricks”. (Нойков, Стефан. С "Левски" по дългия път през времето. София: Труд. 1994 – Noykov, Stefan. With “Levski” on the long road through time. Sofia: Trud. 1994)

Later that year the stadium of Professional Football Club “Levski” is finally a fact, and not long after that a bathroom with running hot water (a rarity back in those days) is also built for the members of the team. Many improvements are made throughout the years and in 1944 the stadium already has a football field with benches for 10 000 spectators, running track with 4 corridors, one basketball and two volleyball playgrounds. In addition there is also a restaurant and a café. The value of the property is declared to be over 1 million leva.

Yet as mentioned in the history of CSKA, “Levski’s” fame is short lived as the political changes of 1944 bring about new changes and new threats. With the first structural changes of football it is clear that the BCP are uncomfortable with the fame of “Levski” as compared to that of their “team”.

*The connotation was made so that since “Levski” played with blue shirts, anyone who supported them was a fascist. Also when they changed the name from “Levski” to “Dinamo” it was done so as to take the positive connotation of Vasil Levski away.* (Ilia Patronev. Interview. May 2012)

The first big blow was regarding their newly built stadium, which was confiscated and taken down in 1949 with the team being forced to play their home matches on
random pitches. In chapter 5 I will analyze in more depth how different regulations led “Levski” to loose its fan base as well as its domination on the football pitch.

Ch. 5 Football Politicized

In Chapter 4 I provided a brief overview of the history of the two teams and how they were linked through symbols to a political connotation. But I will go now deeper as for some of the proofs you have to dig in the numerous actions of the Bulgarian Communist Party to really see how CSKA (and “Levski”) became empty signifiers during the socialist regime.

In this chapter I will analyze all that was said in Chapter 2 though the prism of political science. For this purpose I will use the theories of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Antonio Gramsci, Slavoj Zizek, Yannis Stavrakakis and other political philosophers, whose works on the subject were summarized in Chapter 3. I will also provide extra materials and observations to support my thesis, such as the works of decedent writer Georgi Markov, as well as an interview I made with Ilia Patronev who has worked in numerous positions related to sports, within several institutions functioning during socialist times. The things noted above combined with various press materials and publications connected with material printed during the Socialist regime will explain why the teams had political connotations.

5.1. – Empty Signifiers Connected with CSKA.

We can observe CSKA and the political propaganda surrounding the team on several layers. First of all, as noted in chapter 4, the team itself was connected to the Bulgarian Political Party and the Soviet ways through signifiers such as their logo and their patron to the army. But the team itself is surrounded by and wrapped in several other signifiers of the Socialist regime, commonly used to uphold their rule and adapted (or shall we say adopted) for the context of this particular case – turning a sport team into a propaganda machine.

In other words we can observe and analyze CSKA during Socialism as an empty signifier dressed in (or carried by) empty signifiers, which in their turn are typical symbols, which are in general associated with the regime of BCP and Communism.
worldwide. Thus in this chapter I will examine both the empty signifiers which surround CSKA and the team as an empty signifier itself. Since most of these signifiers were used, not just in Bulgaria, but also by Communist regimes in general it is hard to analyze them without triggering a chain reaction of empty signifiers. Let’s take the color red for example, which is used extensively by the team (outfits, logo, etc.). It is not just a stylistic decision; it is an obvious reference to the regime of BCP. And while the color red doesn’t stand on its own but actually represents a particular political philosophy we can claim that it is charged with extra meaning and following Laclau’s definitions categorize it as an empty signifier. But it is not an empty signifier coined by the Bulgarian Communist Party, it is one, which is common for communism worldwide in general, and it is merely adopted by BCP as a manifestation of its political affiliation and a symbol of its ideology. So if we follow the string of meanings we will certainly trace it back to a BCP enforced move, but we will not stop there. CSKA’s color, which aims to associate the team with the ruling authority, is just the first step. It can be argued that the lines of associations continue farther. The direct continuation will lead us to the Soviet Union under which strong influence Bulgaria is during the Socialist period and the color of its red flag and star, the Marxism symbolism, and if continued, probably all the way back to the French revolution, if not farther. Thus, we will not examine again the Communist symbols that surround the team in a new light and present them as empty signifiers. Their meaning was explored in enough detail in Chapter 4. Instead for this final chapter we will go straight to the point in the start by describing how CSKA was made not only be linked with BCP but also to be perceived as the dominant force in Bulgarian football through propaganda.

The media is our starting point as the roaring success of the team (be it artificially created or not) was reported at all times accompanied by thunderous applause. Rarely outside the realm of political propaganda (or commercial advertising) will you find such a variety of superlatives. They are mixed together with empty signifiers and stock-phrases from the party propaganda, and you can often find sport articles that praise the victories of CSKA as much as they praise the contributions of the Bulgarian Communist Party.
Let’s take for example the booklet, which celebrates the 15th anniversary of CSKA. The booklet is titled “15 years of army football” and is printed entirely in red ink. The very first words in it are a supposed quotation from the decisions taken by BCP:

*The Bulgarian communist party sees physical education and sport as an important mean for communist education of the youth and all workers, for the making of strong, physical adequate and with high fighting spirit builders of socialism and communism. From the Central Committee of BCP.*


Except for the photos of the team members, the booklet contains a paragraph of shameless praise, which declares the team to be the definite best in the country, proven its worth after series of hard football battles. It also describes the team as a propeller for the Bulgarian football, a place where talents emerge and create sport history. At this point it shouldn’t then be a surprise that the department for agitation and propaganda is in charge of publishing a majority of press related material and pamphlets related to CSKA.

In the booklet dedicated to the 20th Bulgarian championship title of the team there is an interview with head of CSKA at that time, Nikola Milanov. Answering the questions, Milanov praises the policy of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party for raising the standards and making the players work with even more determination and for even better results.

(Двадесета Шампионска Титла. 1980 – 20th Championship title. 1980)

Even when the articles were mainly concentrated on sport statistics, technical data, scores and results and there was always room for political messages in the text itself, propaganda was present in the most obvious ways. On numerous sport pages there were party slogans printed in red ink and thick capital letters and pictures of socialist “heroes”. Here is just one of many such cases where in a national sport newspaper the slogan “The physical culture in our land must be seen as a vital and big dead of the proletariat” is placed under a 5 handed star and above Georgi Dimitrov’s portrait.

And in the same way modern newspapers sell page-space and print advertisements along their articles, the CSKA sport journals from the age of Socialism saved fields for messages from the Bulgarian Communist Party. As it can be expected, these messages did nothing but glorify and “advertise” the regime of BCP.

The best and most obvious examples of sports journalism being exploited for political propaganda is the main article from the CSKA Annual in 1974, when the team faced Ajax and scored a major victory while BCP celebrated the 30th anniversary of its rule. The title of the article was placed right after main page of the brochure and is named; “Let us welcome with pride the 30th year of the Socialist revolution in Bulgaria”. The article is full of the extensive use of words such as “people”, “society”, “fatherland”, “revolution”, “socialism”, “communism”, “soviet”, “party”, “army” combined with “CSKA”, which is an obvious example of words emptied from their literary meaning and charged with political context. Following the theories of Laclau and Mouffe these are all the features that we need to categorize as empty signifiers. These empty signifiers are farther empowered by their combination with strong nouns such as “peak”, “development”, “victory”, “success”, “work”, etc. Further more the brochure has a quote inside it, which states “The Army sports club (CSKA) is child of the national power, the Bulgarian national army”. All this gives us the feeling of unfeigned political context, heavily underlined in a generally non-political area such as sports.


The political context was everywhere. It can be traced beyond the leaflets and the articles about the team’s success and another fine example of it is the book “Wearing the red shirt” (С червената фланелка). These are the memoirs of Kiril Rakarov, a well-known CSKA player. It is a tale full of ideology and moral, about an underdog following his dream and struggling to earn his place among the footballers of the champion team. Of course back in those days any form of literature or press had to pass the a special government commissions in order to be published, so we cannot be certain if Rakarov’s original words were not heavily re-edited and “colored in red” to match the ideology of BCP, and the fact that it was published by the State Military
Publishing House says enough on its own, but anyway, here is just a small part of his memories:

*I welcomed the first day of freedom on 9th of September 1944. The September revolution gave the public strength and wings to soar high.*


Apparently, the aim of a large proportion of sport related media was to establish the claim that a success for CSKA was equal to a success for the party (or nation). And thus CSKA was turned into an empty signifier itself, standing for its patron, the Bulgarian Communist Party and its Socialist regime. This brings us to our next point:

5.2 - CSKA as an empty signifier.

The strong connection between sport and politics was already referenced numerous times, where we mentioned that the athletic and sport movement of Bulgaria was being reorganized “according to the Soviet model”. The very term “Soviet model” was used often and on numerous occasions, regarded everything that is good, effective, right, superior, etc. and so it can be considered an empty signifier itself. Indeed the BCP had adopted the famous quotation of the Greek philosopher Thales – “Mens sana in corpore sano” (translated from Latin: “A sound mind in a healthy body”). Of course this was all done for political reasons. The Soviet model was not just a political ideology. Following the ideas of Gramsci (that we already described in Chapter 3), the USSR aimed for a complete cultural hegemony spreading through the entire specter of arts and science, so sport was no exception. The more popular a sport was among the people, the more attention (or shall we say intervention) it received from the ruling political circles.

This example set by the USSR was quickly introduced in Bulgaria as well. Numerous factors point that BCP was aiming for a cultural hegemony from the very beginning of its regime. Many of the atrocious actions of the party around the sessions of the “People’s Court” were taken in order to ensure that there are no intellectuals or
artists who would oppose this notion and struggle against the cultural hegemony of BCP. And after those actions, there were few who were left alive and still had the courage to raise their voice against the new totalitarian rule of the country. This is exactly why the court pursued and put under trial not just political opponents, members of the elite and activists, but also many priests, teachers, writers and other intellectuals.

By conducting this hegemony also in the field of sports, BCP aimed to prove that Socialism is much more than just a political ideology. It was an entire philosophy of life; it was a certain view of the world, and those who used it for their political agenda wanted to leave no room for doubt that this is the only true, right and possible way, which exists in the world. The point that BCP was trying to prove was that socialist model led to better results in every way. So CSKA turned into an example of the socialist model, a signifier for ideological domination.

Thus it is easy to draw a parallel between BCP and CSKA. On one hand we have the supposed liberator of Bulgaria from the fascist oppression, the champion of the people, the upholder of society; the Bulgarian Communist Party, with its wise and just (even if totalitarian) authority, following the Soviet model. On the other side we have the party’s equivalent on the football field – created by the party itself as a manifestation of its success and a follower of its ways and ideology on the football field; the champion CSKA, team of the army, with players in bright Soviet-red shirts and logos with five-pointed red stars on their chests.

Using all sorts of visual and verbal empty signifiers and wrapping CSKA in Socialist symbolism, BCP successfully inserts new content into the concept of a sport team. CSKA seizes to be a mere football team and acquires a Socialist tint. Put in this political context the team becomes a peculiar monument of the victory of the Septembrian Revolution and an empty signifier of the authority of its initiators. The means and the motifs for this were already listed and analyzed, and probably Laclau and Mouffe themselves would agree that without a doubt the Bulgarian Communist Party shaped CSKA in its own image, forging a powerful empty signifier of its regime. We could even say that BCP used a micro-scale cultural hegemony in the sphere of football, turning CSKA in a totalitarian champion of the Bulgarian derby.
With the strong backup of its patrons, CSKA had advantages that other teams could only dream of.

You could never say that there were clear manipulated games or attacks towards other teams. But what you could see was that they (CSKA) were favored. For example they collected all the elite athletes of Bulgaria by scouting young recruits who were doing their military service. If you were good they let you stay and train with them, if you weren’t they’d leave you for some other team.

(Ilia Patronev. Interview. May 2012)

What CSKA basically became was a monopoly for athletic talent; they would either pick up talents from the reserves or from pressuring parents and other teams. CSKA’s competition knew that if they would “stand up” to the big giant they would share the fate of “Levski” (which will be mentioned below). Further more athletes themselves would have found it very hard to refuse to the team, as they could be deemed “traitors” and sent to court.

In fact at some point it looks like the only purpose of many other teams was just to provide a sort of artificial competition, which had no chance but to be crushed either by the team, or by the political pressure applied by those behind it.

This can be clearly seen especially in the cases of stronger teams who could be a threat to CSKA on its way to the next title of Bulgaria. The main threat being CSKA’s eternal rival “Levski” Sofia, which suffered a blow from BCP more than once. As noted above, the first big hit came with the confiscation of their stadium, something that had taken volunteers years to build and finance.

In August 1949 with an executive decision of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party the “Levski” sport club is shut down and transformed. The club is renamed “Dinamo” and all its property is confiscated by the Ministry of Communal Economy. The stadium is torn down and later on its place the National Stadium “Vasil Levski” is built. The team’s patronage is transferred to the state controlled militia.

On January 20th 2011 a copy of the document with which the Central Committee of BCP shuts down “Levski” Sofia was published on the internet and caused again heated discussions decades after the actual event. Up to that date the interference of the Communist Party was sometimes claimed to be nothing more than an urban legend.
But the actual document is a living proof of the party activity against “Levski”. According to the document “On 27.08.1949 sport club “Levski” has transferred from territorial to production principle. The document is with the official stamp and signature of the leader of the capital control and administration”. Nevertheless the team is literally chased out of its home ground and sport facilities.

(Тошев, Ясен. Документът, с който ЦК на БКП закрива Левски. Sportal.bg. 20.11.2011 – Toshev, Iassen. The document, with which CC of BCP shuts down Levski. Sportal.bg. 20.11.2011)

Up to this date “Levski” Sofia has received no compensation for the confiscation of its stadium and all its property back in 1949. Today the management of the team demands that the team is granted the long-term right to use the “Rakovski” stadium, which is a state property.

Among the many semi-official sources, which report about the discrimination, against “Levski” (and other teams) is Ivan Slavkov (generally known as “Bateto”). Slavkov was the president of the Bulgarian Football Union between 1995-2001; he was from 1982-2004 a member and official Bulgarian representative of the IOC (International Olympic Committee) and a fanatic “Levski” fan (one of the few that held a high position due to his marriage to Todor Zhivkov’s daughter). Slavkov’s autobiography was published in two volumes in 2010 shortly before his death the next year. In the books he clearly shows how state politics, local authority and sport were intertwined and involved in the conflict between “Levski” and CSKA:

“When the big derby between “Levski” and CSKA was coming up I suggested the following: “We should act against the red army terror with militia terror”. No one listened because they were disciplined and feared for their reputation. I then said: “They (CSKA) have the right to pick out all the best soldiers from the army reserves for the team for 4 years every month (the minimum time a Bulgarian man must serve in the army before 1989). And us (“Levski”)? What about us? We have KAT (Traffic control), CPP (Control checkpoints) and Customs on our side. Let us act – you’re from CSKA and you parked somewhere – penalty – doesn’t matter if you’re right or wrong! Penalty and fine!” But no one listened, they were scared.
But being a signifier, which represents the party, is a double-edged sword. While to
the fans of the team this is a constant positive association with BCP, for many it is the
other way round. Being a rival of the CSKA football team served as an indirect way to
rebel against the authority and oppose the regime for which the team stands for.
Georgi Markov, a witness of the events of that age, writes:

*Football was a good way for a person to cover up and show his hate towards the regime.
Using power that let them do anything the want, the “comrades”, made the team of
CSKA, which was supposed to be a mirror image of the party’s power and invincibility.
This naturally made many people sympathize with “Levski“ which logically turned into a
symbol for the old Bulgaria*

(Марков, Георги. Задочни репортажи за България. София: Профиздам. 1990.

Of course this is not necessarily bad. After all, protesting or shouting against, or even
attacking an empty signifier is hardly an actual threat for the authority behind its
creation. Just the opposite – the signifier can serve as a shield for the regime, or as a
distraction for the masses which intend to rage and rebel against this regime.
In our case, I would say, the empty signifier serves as a sort of a release for the
people’s dissatisfaction and frustration with the regime. CSKA being a representation
of the Bulgarian Communist Party becomes a target for those who are willing to show
their discontent. This could be actually one of the possible origins of football
hooliganism in Bulgaria.
Georgi Markov further strengthens this notion by writing:

*The games between the two teams (CSKA – “Levski”) were like real war. The Army
commanded the sport and they made sure that “Levski” would fall. On the pitch you
could see often fights, arguments and struggles, which had clear political connotations. I
could still see clearly that one young lad from Koniovica (Bulgarian village) who was*
forced out of the stadium for shouting bad words and beating up a dozen military officials.


On one hand this serves the party. Channeling the people’s anger and aggression towards an empty signifier is not much different from naming a dummy after your enemy and beating it instead of the actual enemy. And while BCP or any other authority would never (at least not officially) encourage or support any form of vandalism on the football field, they would certainly prefer it to a riot in the streets. The “real wars” waged during the football matches, which Markov describes were certainly preferred by the Communist regime over a real civil war across the country. It is certainly a fine example of using in practice the well-known principle of “choosing the lesser evil”.

On the other hand this situation also serves the people. Instead of gradually accumulating stress and anger they can get all heated up, give a relatively free expression to their feelings, even if winning or losing a sport battle has nothing to do with the politics, which they associate with it. Blowing off the steam at the stadium not only calms the spirits down, but also makes the people feel better about themselves. It gives them a certain satisfaction and draws their mind away from the fact that they don’t have the actual power or courage to stand up against the actual authority, but boo just at its “dummy” – CSKA.

Apparently this worked not only on a national level, drawing away the anger caused by BCP, but also on an international level, when it comes to matches against the Soviet Union. Georgi Markov writes in his articles:

You could see the real emotions and feelings of the Bulgarians towards USSR exactly in the football matches between both sides. When we (Bulgaria) played a Soviet team our public (famous for its passiveness in local matches) turned fanatic against them. Each touch by the Soviets was whistled upon and each dead was deemed as a synonym for bad quality, unfairness, enemy like etc.
As it can be suggested, this phenomenon was not limited just to football matches. It was something typical for any other sport, which could serve the spectators as an expression for their true feelings towards the USSR and its imposed influence. Even more – the Bulgarian audience is often strongly convinced that the sport events are pre-arranged and the results are decided and set in advance.

Castagnola and Barros give us an example of how antagonisms formed in Argentina between Peronists and Anti Peronists. In a similar fashion there was an antagonism of Soviet poles and Anti Soviet poles in Bulgaria, which was expressed also within football. (Howarth, David and Stavrakakis, Yannis. Introducing discourse theory and political analysis: identities, hegemony and social change. Manchester University Press. 2000. Pp. 31)

This was a result of the fact that BCP was strictly and openly following the USSR model on a national level, and, thus, Bulgaria was strongly associated and dependant on the USSR on an international level. Being exposed to the totalitarian features of the regime; lacking freedom of speech and being oppressed in various other ways, it was only natural for the people to expect that such arrangements were done in order to secure the victory over the opponents, which would prove once again the might and the greatness of the Soviet ways. With time this hatred towards the Soviet teams grew so strong that their guest visits in Bulgaria were entirely cancelled and the sport events between Bulgarian and Soviet teams took place mainly abroad. (Марков, Георги. Задочни репортажи за България. София: Профиздам. 1990. Стр. 531 – Markov, Georgi. Judgmental reports on Bulgaria. Sofia: Profizdat 1990. Pp. 531)

Due to these acts of “hooliganism” and “Anti socialism” new militia supervision was introduced to Bulgarian football matches – one to reassure the “best” for the audience. And while the militia often supervised the behavior of the fans at the
stadiums, which by the late 70's and 80's became more rowdy, the press would paint a different picture. Here is an excerpt from the 1981 booklet that celebrates the 21st title for CSKA from the Bulgarian championship:

*Dear fans of CSKA. We are extremely happy, that our team has won not only its 21st title, but also the award for “best sport crowd”. This is to honor our crowd with its great cultural achievement of respecting oppositions.*


The award above was ironic in a sense that the people’s militia handed it to teams, which as already noted was in charge of security of matches. CSKA was under the management of the Bulgarian Army and thus directly associated with the rule of the Communist regime, so it would be ridiculous if the Army would give this award. The irony was due to the fact that the BCP pushed “Levski” under the patron of the national militia. This was something even worse for the opponents of the regime, because while the army was the strong backup of the regime mostly on a global level, the militia was the hand of BCP operating on a daily basis directly into the heart of the Bulgarian society. Especially feared is the department of State Security (Държавна сигурност), which acts as a secret police among the population. As Georgi Markov would write the reason why “Levski” was pushed to be under the militia was to weaken its “power” and fame:

*We can judge by the fact, that, years later the popularity of “Levski” was liquidated in the most casual way possible – they (BCP) made it the team of National security, which everyone feared.*


Once again you can’t help but notice the obvious parallel between the political actions of BCP and the means of establishing and maintaining hegemony described in the works of Laclau and Mouffe. These actions are not just limited to creating and using
empty signifiers for the means of hegemony, but also updating and adapting them to the changing political environment.

Using empty signifiers to represent the hegemonic authority and serve as targets for its opponents among the population is a long time proven political strategy, because as it was mentioned earlier, attacking the signifier is hardly the same as attacking the signified. Of course the authority condemns such actions and takes counter-actions, but of course, this can be all examined as a mere act, which hides the fact that to rebel against an empty signifier of an authority poses very little threat for the authority itself. These observations of mine are confirmed by the words of Georgi Markov:

*Even if these movements were clear protest against years of horrible and meaningless tyranny, protests against a dogmatic ideology it was still, according to me, nothing more but tales inside coffee shops instead of real actions.*


Furthermore, these oppositions can also serve as decoys, which make people take action against the empty signifier and in this way reveal themselves as enemies of the actual political regime which the signifier stands for. This strategy was used numerous times on various occasions and helped the national militia to identify and arrest people who would openly express their discontent for the regime of BCP and at the same time were tend to take action or protest in some way or another. Again, Markov is a witness of such cases:

*Before a match of the two teams (CSKA – “Levski”) the major of MVR (Militia), who was in charge of security in the stadium, gathered all the officers and gave a proud speech where the intro was: “Today our team plays the capitalistic-bourgeoisie team of “Levski”. We will be on top of them, even if one of their fans tries to lift his head arrest and punish him”*

The struggle also involves creating new empty signifiers, sometimes by switching the polarity of the old ones, which were in conflict with the interests of the party. A vivid example to support this claim is the conversion of “Levski” Sofia from a symbol of the old regime in Bulgaria into a representation of fascism and anti-socialism.

As we have observed, BCP’s adoption of sport as a mean of national propaganda has all the typical features of a hegemonic struggle and makes use of the strategies that Laclau and Mouffe write about. And not only – the “Us against Them” opposition that Zizek talks about is clearly visible throughout the entire history of CSKA. The idea of utopianism, touched by Yannis Stavrakakis is also present in the notion of a team, which is the allmighty champion of the party and the people.

**Conclusion**

To conclude if we can detect all these marks of hegemony even on such as small scale as a single football team, one can easily deduce (or maybe barely imagine) the full-blown propaganda going on across Bulgaria on every level of the social life and the culture of its people. Examining the creation of CSKA and its way to the top under the support and supervision of the Bulgarian Communist Party, and the lengths and extremes to which the party would go in order to defend the team and ensure its victory are just a spec of dust on the background of everything that was going on throughout Bulgaria during the age of Socialism.

But focusing on such a minimalistic aspect of the entire propaganda machine of BCP allows us to grasp with more understanding the attention and the effort that the regime paid to every single aspect of the social, cultural and political life in the country. CSKA and its history illustrate what the situation was like on a global level in Bulgaria and throughout the entire Eastern block and the Soviet Union for that matter. The system was never short on funds due to the fact that at all time it could simply justify and legalize the acquisition of any private capitals or property and use them for its own means. There was no sphere that remained unaffected, just the opposite, the party didn’t spare time and efforts to attend to every little detail and exploit it in its hegemonic struggle. And the CSKA football team was just a cog-wheel in its giant propaganda machine.
To end I want to answer my research question simply by saying, that CSKA was supported by the socialist party through different symbols and regulations that reassured a mental connotation with the socialist ideology and BCP. Enforced by regulations that assured domination on the football pitch, these connotations came to also signify socialist domination. At the end CSKA came to signify, even in a very small-scale level, the dominance of Socialism over other political ideologies.

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**Interview**

Done by Dinko Kortzanov and recorded by Ilia Patronev Jr. on May 2012.

The interview was done with Ilia Patronev Sr. born on 1943.

Mr. Patronev Sr. has held the following positions;

- Manager of the youth academy - “Levski” Sofia
- Chairman of the board for player selections – “Academic” Sofia
- Chairman of the board in the disciplinary committee – Bulgarian Football Association
- Assistant chairman of the board for the central committee – Bulgarian Ministry of Youth and Sport
- Head chairman of the board for the Sofian central committee - Bulgarian Ministry of Youth and Sport

NOTE:
All newspapers are courtesy of the Bulgarian national library “St. Cyrill and Methodius” archives.
All magazines, brochures and pamphlets are courtesy of the “Museum of Sport Glory of CSKA Sofia” archives.
Interview was designed by the author of the thesis, Dinko Kortzanov, but recorded by a 3rd party on audio (.mp4 file). The files are available upon request.