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What the Party Wanted to Know:

Citizen Complaints as a “Barometer of Public Opinion” in Communist Bulgaria

Martin K. Dimitrov
Tulane University

Authoritarian governments produce internal assessments of the quality of governance that allow them to identify and address brewing problems before they threaten regime stability. This paper provides a theory of how the information necessary to produce such assessments is collected. The empirical focus of the paper is on pre-1989 Bulgaria, which is used to illustrate how information-gathering channels in communist autocracies differ from those used in electoral autocracies. The theoretical argument of the paper is that citizen complaints rather than elections function as the main channel for gathering information on popular perceptions about governance problems in communist autocracies. Information compiled through the analysis of complaints is valued because it allows the leadership to identify problems with policy implementation, to track corruption, and to monitor the level of popular trust in the regime. Therefore, citizen complaints serve as a barometer of public opinion regarding governance problems. The archival materials on which this paper is based were accidentally discovered in the 2000s, when a closetful of about 2,000 files of the Information-Sociological Center of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party was located during routine repairs of the Central State Archive in Sofia. These files, which were previously assumed lost, give scholars access to a treasure trove of material that provides a rare internal perspective on governance under late socialism. In conjunction with other formerly classified archival materials, they allow us to document what information on public opinion was collected and transmitted to the top leadership in pre-1989 Bulgaria.

Keywords: *information flows; communist regimes; Bulgaria; citizen complaints*

In 1970, the Bulgarian Politburo created a top secret research institute that supplied the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party with classified information on public opinion.¹ One of the main tasks of this institute, which was named the Information-Sociological Center, was to provide regular updates to the top leadership on trends in citizen complaints. This article argues that the party valued complaints mainly because it understood them as a “barometer of public opinion,”² which could reveal popular perceptions of governance problems under late socialism in Bulgaria and thus help alleviate the shortage of information on how ordinary citizens viewed the performance of the regime.

Authoritarian governments need assessments of the quality of governance in order to identify and address brewing problems before they fuel public discontent that can threaten regime stability. To produce such assessments, they have to collect a wide array of information. Certain types of information like economic and social development indicators are relatively easily gathered. Others are not. Trying to assess popular perceptions of the quality of governance is especially challenging, because citizens have incentives to misrepresent their views for fear of retaliation. Obtaining reliable public opinion information therefore becomes a major governance challenge in autocracies. How can such a challenge be overcome? This article argues that authoritarian regimes are aware of the problem and actively devise strategies to mitigate it by fostering channels for gathering information on the popular mood. Communist regimes in particular develop an unusually broad array of such channels. Therefore, the focus of this article is on communist autocracies, of which pre-1989 Bulgaria is an example.

The analysis of citizen complaints can produce information about certain types of governance problems. This information is not readily available in individual complaints. However, when all complaints received in a jurisdiction are read, aggregated, and analyzed, they yield two types of data. The first is about important or representative cases that can provide illustrative examples helping leaders to grasp the impact of bad governance at the level of the individual citizen. The second is about variation over time, across provinces, and by issue area; this type of data provides nuanced, in-depth information about trends in popular discontent that reflect underlying governance problems. The process of aggregation can occur at all levels of the political system, from the county all the way up to the center. When complaints were aggregated at increasingly higher levels in pre-1989 Bulgaria, they yielded correspondingly more comprehensive information about governance problems throughout the country.

Complaints provided the communist regime in Bulgaria with at least three indicators of governance problems: they revealed the level of popular dissatisfaction with policy implementation, they presented an opportunity to track corruption, and they allowed the regime to monitor the overall level of popular trust it had among the general population. Given the extreme versatility of this instrument, understanding the technical aspects of analyzing complaints provides scholars with a privileged view of how the Bulgarian communist party confronted the problem of gathering information about popular perceptions of the quality of governance.

This article addresses the following questions:

- *What is the information problem in communist autocracies and through what channels can it be mitigated?* (first section)
- *What information about citizen complaints reached the leadership in Bulgaria and how responsive was it to this information?* (second section)

- *Did citizen complaints transmit information about governance problems and corruption? Did they serve as an indicator of trust in the regime? And how is declining trust linked to the protests that preceded regime collapse in Bulgaria?* (third section)

The article concludes with a fourth section that summarizes the main findings about the conditions under which citizen complaints have a regime-sustaining function.

A note that situates the sources on which this article is based in the existing literature is necessary. Half a century after political scientists noted the importance of citizen complaints for understanding the mechanisms of communist rule,³ we still lack clear country-specific answers to basic questions about their volume, authorship, regional distribution, content, and, most importantly, the way in which the regime reacted to them. While our body of knowledge about complaints during the Stalinist period in the Soviet Union (as well as during the first decade of the existence of the People's Republic of Poland) has expanded,⁴ serious lacunae exist in our understanding of complaints in post-Stalinist, mature communist societies, with the possible exception of the GDR under Honecker.⁵

Existing studies have generally examined complaints under socialism primarily through the prism of individual citizens and have not systematically addressed the question of how the authorities in communist autocracies perceived citizen complaints. The recent accidental discovery of about 2,000 files of the Information-Sociological Center that were previously assumed lost allows us to shed light on this important question. In the 1990s, archivists presumed that the records of the institute had been destroyed immediately prior to the collapse of communism in Bulgaria in 1989–1990. However, during routine repairs in the former Party Archive in Sofia in the early 2000s, a closetful of these “lost” files was found, giving scholars access to a treasure trove of material that allows us to elucidate regime response to citizen complaints under late socialism and to get at an important, but elusive topic: how the governments in communist autocracies understand their governance problems.

Two additional characteristics of the Bulgarian case that are relevant for information collection should also be mentioned. Bulgaria, in contrast to East European regimes like the GDR, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, had no Soviet troops on its soil. Therefore, the communist leadership could not rely on an external security blanket. This elevated the importance of cultivating channels that allowed the regime to evaluate the public mood and to anticipate and neutralize overt expressions of discontent. The second feature of the Bulgarian case is the unusual integration of sociologists within the center of power. This is reflected not only by the creation of the Information-Sociological Center but also by the presence of sociologists among Zhivkov's assistants and among secretaries of the Central Committee.⁶ In 1970, Bulgaria also became the first (and still the only) communist country to ever host a world congress of the International Sociological Association. The elevated role of sociology stemmed from the importance that Zhivkov attached to

studying public opinion. For this reason, Bulgaria offers an unusually fruitful case for examining how communist regimes approach the problem of gathering information on popular opinion.

The Information Problem in Communist Autocracies

Authoritarian leaders who want to gather information on the quality of governance face a fundamental obstacle: the exceeding difficulty of collecting reliable information. First identified in the classic literature on totalitarianism,⁷ this problem poses a major challenge to governance in dictatorships. Friedrich and Brzezinski argue that in the absence of information, citizens are prevented from revolting through the systematic use of pervasive terror.⁸ Repression only intensifies the information problem, because citizens in autocracies are unwilling to reveal their true level of support for the regime because of fear that criticism will be met with reprisals.⁹ Instead of showing their opposition to the regime, therefore, citizens engage in preference falsification, which manifests itself as reluctant participation in ritualistic acts of public dissimulation (“as if” compliance),¹⁰ such as compulsory mass rallies, manifestations, and elections. Preference falsification makes dictators fundamentally insecure, since they cannot know their true level of support and thus face an incalculable risk of being deposed through revolution or a coup.¹¹ Because dictators who repress are more insecure than those who do not,¹² repression not only does not resolve the information problem but actually shortens the life span of dictatorships. And yet, some dictatorships are especially durable (with communist regimes being the longest-lasting type of nondemocratic regime to emerge since World War I),¹³ which suggests that they have found ways of mitigating the information problem.

Arguments about preference falsification are built on the assumption that the presence of preference falsification affects the ability of the government to get information, because “vulnerable regimes can block the production and dissemination of information potentially harmful to their own survival.”¹⁴ This assumption is problematic. Although the regime may want to block public *dissemination* of results in order to prevent coordination of the masses, there is no good theoretical or practical reason why it should block the *production* of knowledge about popular preferences for internal uses. Autocratic regimes have one advantage over both the citizens of autocracies and over those who study autocracies: they control a range of bureaucracies that can be mobilized to compile the necessary information on the public mood. Therefore, although citizens, analysts, and authoritarian leaders alike are aware of the presence of preference falsification, only authoritarian leaders have the capacity to compile information that allows them to assess the magnitude of this problem and to try to mitigate it. For this reason, the leaders of authoritarian regimes actively search for channels that would allow them to obtain information on the popular mood.

What might these channels be? Existing research on autocracies has highlighted how competitive elections,¹⁵ protests,¹⁶ and the commercialized media can provide information to the regime about its level of mass support.¹⁷ This article argues that albeit important in other autocracies, these channels did not function as main sources for collecting information in pre-1989 Eastern Europe. Although communist regimes indeed derived information about levels of popular support from elections,¹⁸ electoral choice was restricted and outcomes were carefully orchestrated through candidate vetting and district gerrymandering.¹⁹ The experience of Eastern Europe demonstrates that competitive elections can precipitate regime collapse, as occurred most notably in Poland in 1989. With regard to protests, extensive archival evidence reveals that in pre-1989 Eastern Europe, communist regimes extracted information about local governance problems by analyzing protests.²⁰ But Eastern Europe also provides a cautionary tale, since it was such mass protests that ushered in regime instability and, eventually, regime collapse.²¹ Finally, commercialized media present a danger, because to the extent that the information about discontent is disseminated, it contributes to instability by creating a coordination mechanism for dissatisfied citizens (this confirms Kuran's prescient insight).²² For example, the liberalization of Soviet media during perestroika hastened regime collapse by revealing to citizens the pervasiveness of discontent with the communist party. Instead of avenues that promote highly visible and potentially volatile displays of discontent, pre-1989 communist governments wanted to foster channels that allow for regularized transfer of information about governance problems from citizens to the regime without endangering social stability.

One remarkable aspect of information gathering is the *number* of channels that are devoted to it: the public security and state security systems; various departments of the Communist Party; various government bureaucracies; and the mass media, where journalists prepare special internal reports for the leadership. Also remarkable is the breadth of material that is considered a valuable source of information: although monitoring the activities of dissidents and the communication of ordinary citizens alike by state security would come as no surprise, the regular production of top secret reports on the "popular mood," the execution of surveys by both independent and regime-affiliated opinion research institutes,²³ the systematic analysis of citizen complaints, and the ongoing monitoring of rumors and jokes do not fit with standard conceptions of either what communist regimes wanted to know about the masses or how they went about knowing it.²⁴ Among these channels, the analysis of citizen complaints was especially important. Because they are spontaneously produced matter-of-fact requests for services or benefits rather than hollow ritualistic displays of loyalty to the party, complaints provide information that is not likely to suffer from preference falsification.

To promote information transfer through complaints, communist regimes need to overcome powerful *disincentives* to complain. Citizens who have a grievance may

choose to suffer in private because they fear that a complaint will lead to retaliation by the local government. Given these disincentives, it is surprising that citizens of communist societies complain with such great frequency. For example, complaining was so common in Bulgaria that in 1984 one in ten adults contacted the authorities about a grievance.²⁵ In China, the number of complaints in the 2000s stood at well over ten million per year.²⁶ These statistics raise the question of why citizens find it worthwhile to complain despite the possibility of retaliation.

What makes complaining possible is trust. Because rational citizens do not trust the integrity of the local government, their trust resides with higher levels of government, and ultimately with the central government. Opinion poll data indicate that low trust in the local government and high trust in the central government can be found across dictatorships as diverse as current-day China and Russia under Putin, as well as in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev and in pre-1989 Bulgaria.²⁷ This article argues that as long as the public trusts the central government to intervene on its behalf, it will continue to provide information through citizen complaints. For this reason, the Information-Sociological Center in Bulgaria repeatedly stressed the importance of maintaining high responsiveness to citizen complaints.²⁸ Although it faced the reluctance of citizens to complain and opposition from lower-level officials (because complaints were directed against them), gathering information on public opinion was a priority for the party, which continuously incentivized citizens to complain and allocated substantial administrative resources to analyzing and responding to complaints.

By the same token, a decline in complaints can signal an erosion of trust in the system. The interpretation of this trend is not always straightforward. Thus, when a decline in protests occurs under conditions of improving economic performance, it would signal satisfaction with the system. When a decline occurs under high levels of terror, it would signal fear. But when a decline occurs under conditions of worsening economic performance and political liberalization, as happened in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s, it transmits information to the leadership about the eroding trust in the system. This message is reinforced when the decline in complaints is accompanied by an increase in protests, which at once attest both to the diminished repressive ability of the state and to the erosion of trust in the system by ordinary citizens.

To sum up the contributions of this article, a focus on information sheds new light on the inner workings of communist autocracies. It reveals that communist regimes not only want to assess the popular mood but also decide to invest substantial resources into creating the institutions necessary to do so. This decision is driven by practical concerns for regime preservation: information allows for governance problems to be identified when they are still manageable and do not threaten to lead to regime instability. Complaints information is especially relevant for producing such assessments because it does not suffer from preference falsification. Thus, the information that is gathered is used to make governance decisions that are essential for

preventing the rise of regime-destabilizing protests. These findings suggest that our existing theories of communist resilience should be expanded to incorporate insights regarding how a regime's ability to produce accurate assessments of the quality of governance may prolong its tenure.

The Collection and Transfer of Information Derived from Citizen Complaints in Bulgaria

This section addresses three related questions: How did the Information-Sociological Center of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party track citizen complaints? What information about complaints reached the top leaders? And, finally, how responsive were leaders to problems raised in citizen complaints? By answering these questions, we can establish that complaints were indeed perceived by regime insiders as an important avenue for collecting information on public opinion in Bulgaria.

The Information-Sociological Center and the Tracking of Complaints

The Information-Sociological Center of the Central Committee was established following a Politburo decision from March 10, 1970.²⁹ The creation of the Center reflected in part Todor Zhivkov's desire to diversify his sources of information.³⁰ Zhivkov considered abundant information to be essential for effective governance and reportedly showed an avid interest in all types of information (compiled by the party, the media, and the secret police) about the public mood: rumors, jokes, state security reports on the public mood, and analysis of citizen complaints contained in letters to the party and the state.³¹

The Information-Sociological Center tracked complaints extensively and produced a number of indicators, including overall complaints volume, a breakdown of complaints according to the level of government that received them (county, provincial, and central) and their regional distribution across the territory of the country, a breakdown of complaints according to the recipient (the party, the government, various ministries and commissions, the media, the Komsomol, and the trade union), the share of anonymous complaints, the occupations of complainants (workers, employees [*sluzheshiti*], peasants, intellectuals, students, retirees), the mode of complaining (by writing a letter or by making a personal visit to a party or government office), and the party membership of complainants.³² It is worth stressing that these statistics revealed that party members were underrepresented among those who complained: in 1975, for example, party members accounted for 12.7 percent of the adult population but for only 6 percent of complainants.³³ This reflects the preferential access to social services that party members enjoyed.

The Information-Sociological Center also tracked the matters about which citizens complained (housing, jobs, services, legal concerns, and corruption were the main issues) and the handling of their complaints (were the complaints acknowledged; when the initial recipient was not competent to address the issues brought up, were complaints transferred to a more appropriate recipient; and how frequently were complaints resolved in favor of the complainant).³⁴

The reports of the Information-Sociological Center provided the Bulgarian communist party with an instrument for assessing the quality of governance. This instrument differs from currently available indicators of the quality of governance in two important ways. First, it is derived from popular opinion as expressed in voluntarily provided information, rather than from country expert surveys. Second, it is both sensitive (it can provide continuous measures of the quality of governance, in contrast to the standard governance indicators, which are typically binomial variables or have a limited 1–5 or 1–10 scale) and granular, as it provides detailed information on different types of governance problems.

There is no agreement in the literature on how to define (and therefore measure) the quality of governance. The World Bank defines governance as “the set of traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised.”³⁵ Good governance is captured through six aggregate indicators: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Bo Rothstein conceptualizes the quality of government as impartiality.³⁶ The Quality of Government Institute’s definition of the quality of government as “trustworthy, reliable, impartial, uncorrupted, and competent government institutions” is sufficiently broad to accommodate these different perspectives.³⁷ Along these lines, hundreds of governance indicators have been developed.³⁸ Though the Bulgarian communist party relied on its own indicators, surprisingly, these pre-1989 assessments of the quality of governance overlapped with Western scholars’ current understandings of how to define and operationalize this concept.

One charge against this argument might be that it is ahistorical, since governance is a term that only became widespread when the World Bank adopted it after the collapse of communism. However, the term existed during the Cold War: a JSTOR search reveals 258 articles with “governance” in their title published prior to 1989. Thus, rather than being ahistorical, the evidence from Bulgaria allows us to transcend the 1989 divide, which often discounts communist governance practices as irrelevant in the post-Cold War world, despite the survival of single-party communist regimes in Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and most importantly, China. This article suggests ways in which Bulgaria’s attempts to use complaints information to “perfect social management” and to “combat negative tendencies” have direct relevance for understanding current Chinese efforts to institute good governance and to combat corruption.³⁹ Analysis of the Bulgarian archival documents reveals that what the communist party understood as “perfecting social management” (*usuvurshenstvane na sotsialnoto upravlenie*) was similar to what today

would be described as instituting good governance; furthermore, party discussions about “combating negative tendencies” (*borba s otrittsatehnite iavleniia*) would currently be conceptualized as efforts to eliminate bad governance.

In sum, the Information-Sociological Center compiled extensive information on complaints. This information was essential for enabling the targeted response to complaints that was needed to prevent brewing latent discontent from getting transformed into regime-destabilizing overt discontent.

Transmission of Complaints Information to the Leadership

The Information-Sociological Center had the express goal of tracking public opinion and producing reports for the top leadership. These reports had a very limited circulation (with a print run of no more than 160 copies) and were distributed to members of the Politburo, cabinet ministers, provincial party secretaries, provincial governors, and the editors-in-chief of the major publications.⁴⁰ Occasionally, reports were prepared in a single copy, which was meant for the leader’s eyes only. Information about trends in public opinion was kept a closely guarded secret. Reports were always designated “top secret” (*strogo poveritelno*). Their findings were not disseminated to the public, but served to keep the leadership apprised of changes in popular attitudes. Once the public mood was known, leaders could decide what action to take: respond (satisfy demands), not respond (ignore), repress (infrequently), or manipulate (primarily for ideological issues). The next question, therefore, is how responsive leaders were to citizen complaints.

Responsiveness to Complaints

Responsiveness to complaints is essential for continuous information transfer. The logic is simple: although some citizens complain in order to let off steam (this has been called the “Meckerkultur” with regard to the former GDR),⁴¹ most will only complain if they expect that there is a reasonable probability that their complaints will be at least acknowledged and, perhaps, resolved in their favor.

How engaged were leaders with the reports they received? Sometimes, the general secretary himself was involved in the resolution of a complaint. For example, a letter from Todor Zhivkov to the Communications Ministry following a high volume of complaints plainly states: “Comrades, for many years the quality of public post and telephone services has been one of the sources of social evil and of lowering the prestige of the people’s government (*narodnata vlast*).”⁴² One level below the general secretary, both the periodic complaints reports and the issues raised in the top-secret bulletin *Zlobodnevnii problemi* (Problems of the Day) were discussed by the Politburo. One example involves the Politburo deliberating on strategies for alleviating the shortage of metal lids for canning jars at the peak of the canning season in August; another the Council of Ministers contemplating how to alleviate the shortage

of table salt.⁴³ Such seemingly irrational use of the time of top leaders makes sense when we take into account that communist regimes were bound by a social contract (elaborated in party programs and at party congresses) and had to attempt to respond to the needs of the people, even when those needs included mundane items like jar lids and salt.⁴⁴ Thus, complaints information transmitted by the Information-Sociological Center became an important source for apprising the leadership of the extent and nature of latent discontent.

The Bulgarian archives indicate that the rolling out of expansive packages of social benefits was consistent with citizen preferences as expressed in complaint letters. In the late 1960s, the government provided a generous expansion of maternity leaves, engaged in the rapid construction of new housing, and legally sanctioned the private construction and ownership of countryside homes. The response to complaints also featured a further increase of salaries, support for families (child supplements and subsidies for mothers), attempts to increase the variety of domestic and imported goods offered in the stores, an increase in the volume and variety of services, and improvements in health care and education. As the regime itself had promised, “the resolute improvement in the quality of all activities, production, and services is to become the main task in our future socioeconomic and cultural development.”⁴⁵ The reasoning was powerful: “the fulfillment of this task has enormous political, ideological, economic, and social importance for every work unit, for every working man.”⁴⁶ Attempts were also made to provide enough cars, and to thus satisfy the third leg of the socialist consumer dream: an apartment, a villa, and a car.⁴⁷ In the second half of the 1980s, pensions were increased; this decision came in the wake of a growing number of complaints from retirees. In the second half of the 1980s, the Bulgarian government also introduced measures aimed at encouraging private activity (*Ukaz 56*), as one way to alleviate consumer goods shortages.

Therefore, the regime was responsive to citizen demands that were consistent with the socialist social contract. This responsiveness aimed to bind citizens to the system, so that they would continue to voluntarily provide information. As we will see in the next section, when responsiveness declines, citizens may exit the complaints system and turn to protests, which can in turn increase the likelihood of regime instability.

The Role of Complaints in Assessing Governance Problems

This section turns to three questions that form the crux of this article: Can complaints help identify problems with policy implementation? Can they help expose official corruption? And can they provide an index of the level of institutional trust among the general population? The answers to these questions allow us to address the puzzle of how the Bulgarian communist party used complaints to assess the quality of governance.

Identifying Problems with Policy Implementation

One of the most widely accepted metrics for the quality of governance concerns the capacity of governments to engage in consistent policy implementation.⁴⁸ In all polities, policy implementation is plagued by agency problems: policies are formulated by principals at higher levels of the political system but are implemented by agents at lower levels. Higher levels of government face informational disadvantages when trying to assess policy implementation by lower levels: the center has difficulty monitoring the provinces, the provinces have difficulties monitoring counties, and the counties have difficulties monitoring townships and villages. Complaints can help alleviate these problems by identifying the areas where citizens perceive policy implementation to be unsatisfactory. Once these areas have been located, leaders can focus their attention on them. In Bulgaria, three types of reports helped transmit such information: the periodic reports of the Information-Sociological Center on the main issues raised in citizen complaints, the in-depth reports on individual problems provided in the bulletin *Zlobodnevni problemi*, and the reports on reader response to critical media publications.

*Periodic reports on the content of complaints.*⁴⁹ The monthly, quarterly, and yearly reports on citizen complaints produced by the Information-Sociological Center contained a breakdown of complaints by issue. The reports stated that few complainants would adopt an anti-regime position by being very critical of current policies: the proportion of anti-regime letters (the so-called “hypercritical letters and letters with enemy orientation”) stayed constant at 1–5 percent of the postbag, depending on the addressee and the year.⁵⁰ The number of letters exposing official corruption was somewhat higher, constituting up to 20 percent of the postbag directed to central-level authorities. However, what most people complained about were daily-life manifestations of problems with the social contract: lack of proper housing and the legally murky regulation of personally built countryside homes, job difficulties, the low quality of transportation, the shortage of consumer goods, and the low quality of customer service.⁵¹

These periodic reports also discussed exemplary complaints, usually by citing directly from the text of the complaint. These complaints frequently concerned housing matters: in one case, a family of three (including the bedridden mother of the complainant) lived in a tiny attic room and had been waiting for a housing assignment for thirteen years.⁵² Complaints also focused on the provision of benefits: one citizen complained that she could not receive a pension because the number of years she had worked had been calculated improperly.⁵³ The reports also cited from complaints that discussed the illegal destruction of urban housing,⁵⁴ the difficulty of making ends meet given the steady increase in prices,⁵⁵ and even the execution of voting fraud during mandatory voting on increasing local taxes.⁵⁶ These quotations helped transform the otherwise dry statistical reports into textured documents that contained the voices of ordinary citizens.

Information provided through Zlobodnevni problemi. This classified bulletin on “problems of the day” reveals that a wide array of problems was made known to the top leadership in Bulgaria. One was the quality of various services provided to the population, such as telephone services,⁵⁷ residential elevator services,⁵⁸ taxicab services,⁵⁹ general transportation services,⁶⁰ dental care,⁶¹ and health care.⁶² Reports also alerted the leadership to the quality of food served in student and worker canteens⁶³ as well as the quality of organized vacation packages offered to workers.⁶⁴ No matter how small a problem might appear, all reports noted that it was already a source of popular discontent, and, if left unaddressed, it might have larger political consequences, such as creating doubt in the population with regard to the governing capacity of the communist party. For example, a report on housing repair services maintained that “the weaknesses and shortcomings in the maintenance and repair of the housing stock” have “political consequences,” namely, “discontent among citizens”; the report warned that “if no decisive measures for improving this situation are taken, the question of the maintenance and repair of the housing stock will turn from a purely mundane problem into a political question.”⁶⁵ Finally, a report about the poor quality of customer service provided in government offices highlighted the “political consequences” of this problem: “people form a negative opinion about the capabilities not only of government offices but of the governing capacity of the state as a whole.”⁶⁶

Reports of shortages were also frequently transmitted to the government. Shortages ranged from essential items like bread and car gasoline⁶⁷ to medicines, sanitary materials, and household medical devices.⁶⁸ The Information-Sociological Center saw such shortages as having potential economic, social, and political consequences. For example, the shortage of mass-consumption goods like spades, axes, hoes, adzes, pitchforks, wheelbarrows, metal buckets, electric pumps, stoves, door and window hinges, nails, forks, and spoons was understood to produce unfavorable economic, social, and political consequences: “the economic consequences include a slowdown of GDP growth; the social consequences include the creation of unnecessary obstacles for the consistent and full implementation of the [1972] December Program of the Party for Raising the Living Standards of the Population; politically, it gives rise to discontent and prompts public criticism.”⁶⁹

Reports on reader response to critical media publications. A third source of information on citizen perceptions about problems with policy implementation was the bulletin on citizen reactions to critical media publications (*biuletin “Kritichni materiali v sredstvata za masova informatsiia”*), which was compiled by the Information-Sociological Center. The bulletin was published as needed, up to one hundred times a year, and contained summaries of the most critical media publications, such as letters from individuals, editorials, and newspaper articles; these summaries were accompanied by commentary on citizen reactions. The bulletin was sent to

relevant departments within the Central Committee, as well as to provincial party committees. For example, the Central Committee Department of Social and National Security oversaw the responses to all publications criticizing the police, the Procuratorate, the courts, and the army, as it was responsible for directing and supervising their work.⁷⁰ Responding to published critical materials was taken extremely seriously, often resulting in attempts to resolve thorny problems.⁷¹

Opinion polls also provided an avenue for assessing reader response to critical publications. For example, in 1980 *Rabotnicheskio delo*, the official organ of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, polled its readers. The results suggested that readers wanted to see more critical materials, as well as more articles about social policy—daily life, education, trade, and services. The newspaper informed the Central Committee of the results of the poll in 1981, and the Central Committee mandated that the newspaper take specific measures to respond to these reader preferences. *Rabotnicheskio delo* reported that it would increase the number of critical publications by rewarding their authors with moral and material incentives.⁷² This case stands as testimony to the importance that the media attached to soliciting public opinion. It also highlights parallels between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, where newspapers also surveyed their readers.⁷³

In sum, the leadership was well apprised of citizen perceptions of problems with policy implementation by receiving periodic general reports on trends in complaints, as well as specific reports on problems of the day and on responses to critical media publications.

Identifying Corruption

The preceding paragraphs indicate that cadre corruption was often raised as an issue in citizen complaints in Bulgaria directed at the party, at government agencies, and at the media. However, two entities were primarily in charge of dealing with corruption: the Committee for State and People's Control (*Komitet za durzhaven i naroden kontrol*) and the Control and Audit Commission (*Tsentralna kontrolno-revizionna komisiia*) of the communist party.

The Committee for State and People's Control. Established in 1948, the Committee was charged with monitoring state employees working in government agencies, state firms, and cooperatives. It had to ensure that government decisions were carried out promptly, that state funds were not wasted or misappropriated, and that state employees did not engage in undisciplined behavior, bureaucratism (*biurokratizum*), indolence, or attempts at unnecessary expansion of government agencies.⁷⁴

Although the Committee could conduct control checks on its own initiative, investigations were typically prompted by citizen complaints or by critical media reporting.⁷⁵ According to internal reports of the Committee, citizen complaints were

valuable as a source of “social information,” because they allowed the authorities to “take the pulse of public opinion.”⁷⁶ More broadly, complaints revealed “the state of public opinion and the political attitudes of the working class,”⁷⁷ provided feedback about deficiencies in the operation of government organs, and transferred to the government information about brewing social discontent, which could be addressed before it had evolved into a full-blown crisis.⁷⁸ Most importantly, after systematic analysis, the information extracted from complaints could be used to improve the quality of governance.⁷⁹

The scope of citizen complaints was rather broad—from a mediocre university student complaining about being denied permission to major in a prestigious discipline to an academic who justly accused his superior of plagiarism and a whistleblower who exposed the illegal employment of retirees at a state firm in Sofia.⁸⁰ Often, complaints focused on inner-party issues, such as discipline violations and corruption. These complaints were more likely to be directed to the central-level Committee for State and People’s Control than to the provincial committees for state and people’s control. They were also typically anonymous, to mitigate the risk of retaliation.⁸¹ The reports of the Committee regularly reached the top leaders in Bulgaria, thus apprising them of the spread of corruption.

The Control and Audit Commission. This party commission could launch investigations into the behavior of individual communists, either in response to complaints or of its own initiative.⁸² The Commission’s internal reports indicate that it functioned primarily as a reactive entity. It responded to complaints, signals, and denunciations about party members rather than organizing proactive investigations based on information in its possession.⁸³ Party members could be sanctioned for one of five kinds of violations of the Program and Basic Principles of the Bulgarian Communist Party: violations of party discipline and the norms of inner-party life, violations of socialist legality, workplace violations, moral-ethical violations, and political violations. Since the 1970s, a computer program called “System No. 5” was used to track these violations and the punishments imposed for them.⁸⁴ The punishments ranged from the innocuous (“warning” [*beležhka*] and “reprimand” [*mumrene*]) to the relatively serious (“censure” [*poritsanie*] and “severe reprimand with warning” [*strogo mumrene s preduprezhdenie*]) and the truly serious (“expulsion from the party” [*izkliuchvane ot partiata*] and “dropping out from the party” [*otpadane ot partiata*]); individuals in leadership positions could also be punished with “removal from a leading organ of the party” [*otstraniavane ot sustava na rukovoden organ na partiata*]).⁸⁵ In addition to party punishments, those found guilty of violating socialist legality could be subject to judicial punishments imposed by the courts. As individuals were allowed to appeal punishment decisions, even the most serious punishments functioned more like a temporary suspension from the party rather than an indefinite expulsion. The Commission apprised the leaders of its work in periodic top-secret reports.⁸⁶

Because they present a valuable window onto the personnel management policies of the party, we should examine separately the handling of violations of socialist legality by party members. These referred to crimes against socialist property, crimes against private property, personal integrity violations, and crimes against public order. The statistics reveal that although up to 20 percent of all party members received party punishments for violations of socialist legality, the courts showed unusual leniency in prosecuting them.⁸⁷ Most of the time, party members were either exempt from judicial punishment or else were given conditional sentences; a very small number of party members were put behind bars. Unsurprisingly, this immunity from prosecution led to lower levels of incarceration among party members than among the general population.⁸⁸ This leniency notwithstanding, crimes against socialist property and document forgery were still at a higher level among party members than among the general population. Internal reports provided an explanation: party members find themselves in positions of authority, which facilitate committing such crimes.⁸⁹ We have no way of knowing the true level of criminality among party members, but we should note that the Control and Audit Commission itself acknowledged that the statistics did not take into account “latent criminality” (especially in the economic sphere), which was significantly higher than the officially reported criminality.⁹⁰ The high level of economic criminality among party members reflects the pervasiveness of corruption, which only flourished further during the last year of the existence of the communist regime (1988–1989) and in the early 1990s, when party members used their positions to transform their political power into economic capital.⁹¹ Prior to 1989, tips from citizens were essential for identifying violations of socialist legality.

In sum, the Committee for State and People’s Control and the Control and Audit Commission of the communist party provided the leadership with information about the spread of corruption that was largely derived from citizen complaints.

Complaints as an Indicator of Trust

Perhaps the most surprising function of complaints is as an indicator of the underlying level of trust in the regime and its governance institutions.⁹² The logic is simple, but counterintuitive and has not been presented in existing scholarly treatments of pre-1989 Eastern Europe, though it has been suggested by scholars studying complaints in China:⁹³ what makes lodging complaints possible is trust. From the perspective of the central leadership, a steady volume of complaints indicates that citizens trust the system sufficiently to seek resolution of their grievances through the existing formal channels. This is by no means a uniquely Bulgarian phenomenon: archival evidence reveals that leaders of other communist regimes in Europe (East Germany and the Soviet Union) as well as in pre-1989 China also understood trends in complaints in this way.⁹⁴

Just as lodging complaints indicates trust in the regime, increasing unwillingness to complain signals declining trust in the system. Assessing fluctuations in the aggregate stock of trust therefore requires evaluating time-series data on the volume of complaints. Increases in complaints would indicate increasing trust expressed as buying into the system and being willing to present one's grievances to the regime through the official channels. Drops in complaints under conditions of strong economic growth might indicate growing satisfaction among citizens. However, when these drops occur under worsening economic performance (when grievances would correspondingly increase), they indicate a decline in trust, expressed as exiting the formal complaints system. This trend is worrisome for the regime even when it occurs by itself. It is a cause for considerably greater concern when it is accompanied by a rise in protests, as happened prior to the 1989 systemic crisis in Bulgaria.

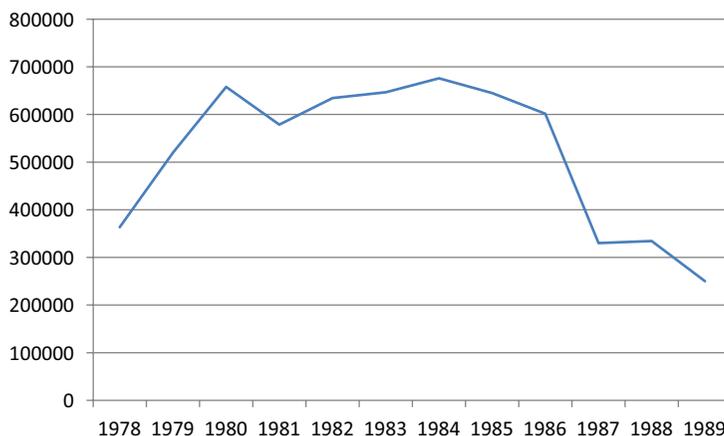
Let us first discuss the origins of this decline in trust. An anecdote that Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov shared with his chief of staff in 1989 encapsulates how he understood the decline in complaints:

I was told a story about a provincial leader. During his day for receiving the public, not a single person came to complain. He wondered what could explain this, and then he said to an aide: "We have either solved all problems that people have, or *else they no longer believe in us*, and so they do not come to us to complain and to look for help."⁹⁵

Zhivkov was a shrewd politician who grasped better than anyone the importance of complaining: as long as people complain through officially approved channels, they are showing their willingness to participate in the system. This was also the official conclusion of the Central Committee, as expressed in an internal memorandum on citizen complaints.⁹⁶

Three additional pieces of information that reached the top leadership underscored the depth of the crisis of confidence in the regime that was unfolding in the second half of the 1980s. First, opinion polls documented a precipitous decline in the citizens' positive assessments of their personal well-being in 1985–1988, which is a logical reaction to the severe shortages of consumer goods and the imposition of regular electricity blackouts.⁹⁷ Second, the Information-Sociological Center reported that by 1988 as few as 14.5 percent of all complaints received a favorable resolution, a threefold decline from the early 1980s.⁹⁸ Finally, leaders learned that a similar reduction occurred in the number of party members punished for corruption.⁹⁹ The consequence of this erosion of effectiveness is not surprising: citizens started to withdraw from the system. From the public's perspective, the regime was failing to deliver on its social contract commitments. By withdrawing from the system, citizens signaled their perception that the regime had reneged on its commitments under the socialist social contract. Figure 1 presents a graphic representation of this erosion of trust by tracking the overall volume of complaints in Bulgaria in 1978–1989 (1989 data are available through November 1989; data for December 1989 are

Figure 1
Volume of citizen complaints in Bulgaria, 1978–1989



Sources: 1978: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 935, 6; 1979: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 936, 5; 1980: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 937, 6; 1981: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 938, 5; 1982: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 940, 5; 1983: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 942, 26; 1984: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 943, 8; 1985: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 944, 31; 1986: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 949, 30; 1987: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 951, 21; 1988: TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 953, 3; 1989: TsDA f. 1B op. 11, vr. a. e. 10.

imputed). There was a 50 percent drop in complaints between 1984 and 1988, followed by a further substantial reduction in the volume of complaints in 1989, at the height of the pre-collapse economic crisis.

Faced with its inability to deliver on the existing socialist social contract, the regime unfolded a new social contract in 1987–1988. This new social contract featured massive economic and political liberalization, similar to perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union. Economically, the role of planning in industry and in agriculture was drastically reduced, special economic zones were established, the monobank was replaced with a system of seven commercial banks, and private firms were legalized.¹⁰⁰ Although there was no wholesale privatization or price liberalization, these changes nevertheless explicitly laid the groundwork for a gradual shift from the plan to a market economy. The political changes were no less sweeping. The regime allowed for the establishment of nongovernmental organizations, eliminated compulsory mass rallies and demonstrations, introduced semicompetitive local elections, ended the jamming of foreign radio broadcasts, liberalized the domestic media, and allowed freedom of travel outside of Bulgaria.¹⁰¹

But these reforms did not have the intended effect. The economic changes created uncertainty: citizens neither understood nor believed in the reforms aimed at

establishing private economic activity.¹⁰² Furthermore, as the reform initiatives did not specify how the losers from the reform would be protected, both rural and urban residents suffered serious anxieties about the potential for unemployment once the market was introduced.¹⁰³ Instead of increasing support for the regime, the political changes betrayed its weakness, since citizens believed that a strong regime would not make such major concessions. With the emergence of various NGOs in 1987–1988, like *Ecoglasnost*, the perestroika support club, and about a dozen human rights organizations,¹⁰⁴ anti-regime protests, a rare event in the past, began to occur with increasing regularity. This showed that, having witnessed the failure of the regime to deliver on the socialist social contract and being unwilling to accept the new social contract that was unrolled to supplant it, previously loyal citizens simply exited the system of citizen complaints and instead became opponents of the regime. Because the leadership was reading the secret reports of the Information-Sociological Center, it had full knowledge of these changes in popular sentiment.

The connection between an erosion of trust and a rise in protests needs further discussion. An erosion of trust need not manifest itself as an increase in protests. When it occurs in highly repressive regimes, citizens would suffer in silence and we may not observe any protests. Yet, this erosion of trust occurred under a relaxation of repression in Bulgaria in the second half of the 1980s. In such conditions, protests emerge easily and function as yet another indicator of the declining trust in the regime. However, in contrast to the decline in complaints, which is made known only to the leadership, a rise in protests is widely visible and sends a signal to wide segments of the population that trust in the regime has declined.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a theory of the process of regime collapse. Convincing arguments have been made that regime collapse is fundamentally a stochastic process.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, scholars have produced abundant research on the proximate causes of regime collapse in the Eastern Bloc. The emphasis has been on identifying the causal mechanisms through which external factors like contagion and Soviet unwillingness to use force created conditions whereby the opposition and the incumbents took decisions that allowed this stochastic process to unfold.¹⁰⁶ Taking its inspiration from studies that differentiate between regime decay and regime breakdown,¹⁰⁷ this article presents an argument for how the declining trust in the regime in communist Bulgaria (as expressed through the system of citizen complaints) made regime collapse more likely. By focusing on the long-term factors that impact the ability of communist regimes to survive, this article contributes to theories of resilience rather than to a theory of collapse. This argument is probabilistic, since the collapse of communism in Europe was not inevitable. There is no better illustration of this point than the case of China, where the same long-term factors led to a near-collapse in 1989 (similar to Bulgaria, a drop in complaints and an increase in protests occurred immediately prior to 1989),¹⁰⁸ but the regime nevertheless survived, in no small measure because it maintained control over the use of force.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

This article aims to shed light on the strategies through which communist Bulgaria mitigated the problem of collecting information about popular discontent. In contrast to electoral autocracies, it did not rely on competitive elections, protests, and the commercialized media to collect such information. Instead, complaints functioned as one of the primary channels through which the Bulgarian communist party collected information that could be used to evaluate the quality of governance. In contrast to information that is involuntarily extracted (e.g., through state security surveillance), citizens voluntarily transfer information to the regime when they complain. Thus, complaints are less likely to suffer from preference falsification than involuntarily collected information. Complaints information is prized by the leadership, because it reveals problems in policy implementation, identifies corrupt officials, and allows the regime to ascertain what level of trust in its governance institutions exists among the general population.

The evidence from Bulgaria shows that complaints can be regime-sustaining provided that the party-state can maintain a minimal level of responsiveness to them. This responsiveness is delimited by the social contract, which specifies that the regime will provide citizens with housing, jobs, benefits, and certain types of consumer goods. In exchange, citizens will reward the regime with quiescence. Complaints indicate that citizens are buying into the system, because they express their demands through officially approved channels, rather than engaging in protests. Delivering on these commitments was relatively easy during the decades of rapid growth. However, when economic growth began to slow down in the early 1980s, it became increasingly difficult to maintain responsiveness to citizen complaints.

When responsiveness decreases, citizens react by withdrawing their trust from the regime. The specific manifestation of this erosion of trust is the decline in complaints, which occurred in Bulgaria in the 1980s. The decrease in responsiveness meant that the regime reneged on its part of the social contract. Thus, citizens no longer felt obliged to keep their part of the bargain by remaining quiescent and turned to the streets. Although regime collapse in Bulgaria is a multi-causal event, these protests did contribute to the destabilization that occurred in the second half of the 1980s and paved the way for the ultimate dissolution of the system in 1989.

Notes

1. TsDA f. 1 op. 35 a. e. 1235 (1970).
2. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 943, 9 (1985).
3. Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 378–408.
4. Archival holdings on Soviet complaints prior to 1960 include primarily TsKhSD, Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet State, Fond 6 Tsentral'naia kontrol'naia komissia

Kommunisticheskoj partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, Opis 6. Western scholarly research on the Soviet Union focused primarily on the Stalinist period and includes most notably Alex Inkeles and Kent Geiger, "Critical Letters to the Editors of the Soviet Press: Areas and Modes of Complaint," *American Sociological Review* 17, no. 6 (December 1952): 694–703; Alex Inkeles and Kent Geiger, "Critical Letters to the Editors of the Soviet Press: Social Characteristics and Interrelations of Critics and the Criticized," *American Sociological Review* 18, no. 1 (February 1953): 12–22; Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 78–105; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Take Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), esp. 240–61; and Marjorie Hilton, "The Customer Is Always Wrong: Consumer Complaint in Late-NEP Russia," *The Russian Review* 68, no. 1 (2009): 1–25. On Poland, see Dariusz Jarosz, "Akta Biura Listów i Inspekcji KC PZPR jako źródło do badań rzeczywistości społecznej w Polsce w latach 1950-1956," in *Polska 1944/45-1989: Studia i materiały* II/1996, 191–216; Marcin Kula, ed., *Supliki do najwyższej władzy* [Pleas to the highest power] (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1996); Adam Leszczyński, *Sprawy do załatwienia: Listy do „Po Prostu,” 1955–1957* [Unsettled business: Letters to "Po Prostu," 1955–1957] (Warszawa: TRIO, 2000); and *Księga listów PRL-u* [Letterbook of the Polish People's Republic] (Warszawa: Baobab, 2005).

5. Monika Deutz-Schroeder and Jochen Staadt, eds., *Teurer Genosse! Briefe an Erich Honecker* [Dear comrade: Letters to Erich Honecker] (Berlin: Transit, 1994); Ina Merkel, ed., "Wir sind doch nicht die Mecker-Ecke der Nation": *Briefe an das DDR-Fernsehen* ["We are not the grumps of the nation": Letters to GDR television] (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1998); Jochen Staadt, *Eingaben: Die institutionalisierte Meckerkultur in der DDR: Goldbrokat, Kaffee-Mix, Büttenreden, Ausreisenanträge und andere Schwierigkeiten mit den Untertanen* [Complaints: The institutionalized culture of complaining in the GDR: Gold brocade, instant coffee, carnival speeches, exit visa requests, and other difficulties with the subjects] (Berlin: Arbeitspapiere des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat, Nr. 24/1996); Felix Mühlberg, *Bürger, Bitten und Behörde: Geschichte der Eingabe in der DDR* [Citizen, pleas, and authorities: History of the complaint in the GDR] (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2004); Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East Germany from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 269–88.

6. The key sociologist in the inner cabinet of the General Secretary was Academician Niko Iakhiel, a member of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences. Among the secretaries of the Central Committee, sociologists were represented mainly by Stoyan Mikhailov. See Niko Iakhiel, *Todor Zhivkov i lichnata vlast: Spomeni, dokumenti, analizi* [Todor Zhivkov and personal power: Memoirs, documents, analyses] (Sofia: M8M, 1997), and Stoyan Mikhailov, *Politicheski fragmenti: Iz kukhniata na totalitar-noto obshtestvo* [Political fragments: From the kitchen of the totalitarian society] (Sofia: M8M, 2012). On the integration of sociologists within the apex of the power hierarchy in general, see Svetla Koleva, Diana Nenkova, and Simona Trencheva, comp., *Sotsiologiyata v Bulgariia prez pogleda na pokoleniyata: Interviuva s bulgarski sotsiolozi* [Sociology in Bulgaria through the prism of generations: Interviews with Bulgarian sociologists] (Sofia: Pensoft, 2012).

7. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 2nd rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 135.

8. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*; see also Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1951).

9. Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Václav Havel and John Keane, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

10. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

11. Timur Kuran, "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991), 7–48; Susanne Lohmann, "The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989-91," *World Politics* 47, no. 1 (1994): 42–101.

12. Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20–25, 39.

13. Communist regimes are the most durable type of non-democratic regime, outlasting both noncommunist single-party regimes and non-democratic monarchies. As of 2000, the average life span of noncommunist single-party regimes was 28.51 years and that of nondemocratic monarchies was 34.75 years. In contrast, communist single-party regimes had an average life span of 46.2 years as of 2000. My data set includes thirty-nine noncommunist single-party regimes (based partially on Benjamin Smith, “Life of the Party: The Origins of Regimes Breakdown and Persistence under Single-Party Rule,” *World Politics* 57, no. 3 [April 2005], 421–451), twenty nondemocratic monarchies, and fifteen communist regimes. As of 2013, the five remaining communist regimes have an average life span of fifty-six years.

14. Kuran, “Now out of Never,” 47.

15. This insight is associated centrally with Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* no. 12 (2009): 403–22; Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, “Political Order and One-Party Rule,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, no. 13 (2010): 123–43; and Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

16. See Peter Lorentzen, “Regularized Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8 (2013): 127–58; Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); and Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

17. Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

18. Victor Zaslavsky and Robert J. Brym, “The Functions of Elections in the USSR,” *Soviet Studies* 30, no. 3 (July 1978): 362–71.

19. Alex Pravda, “Elections in Communist Party States,” in *Communist Politics: A Reader*, ed. Stephen White and Daniel Nelson (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986), 27–54.

20. The most important pre-perestroika Soviet case is the Novochoerkassk riot of 1962. See TsKhSD, Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet State, F. 89 per. 6 d. 11–19 and d. 23–25.

21. Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience,” *World Politics* 55, no. 2 (2003): 167–192.

22. Kuran, “Now out of Never,” 47.

23. An independent institute called OBOP (created in 1957) existed in Poland (I thank an anonymous reviewer for this helpful point). Regime-affiliated institutes existed in most socialist countries. On OBOP and the development in sociology in Poland, see Antoni Sulek, “The Rise and Decline of Survey Sociology in Poland,” *Social Research* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 365–84; and Antoni Sulek, “Systemic Transformation and the Reliability of Survey Research: Evidence from Poland,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 104 (1994): 85–100. See also Vladimir Shlapentokh, *The Politics of Sociology in the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987); and Heinz Niemann, *Meinungsforschung in der DDR* [Opinion research in the GDR] (Cologne: Bund-Verlag, 1993).

24. On the use of these methods in the Soviet Union, for example, see V. S. Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima: Gosudarstvennyi politicheskii kontrol’ za naseleniem Sovetskoi Rossii v 1918–1928 godakh* [The eyes and ears of the regime: State political control over the population of Soviet Russia, 1918–1928] (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo SPbUEF, 1995); Leslie Rimmel, “Svodki and Popular Opinion in Stalinist Leningrad,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 40, no. 1/2 (January–June 1999): 217–34; Fitzpatrick, *Take Off the Masks!*; and Timothy Johnston, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumor, and Everyday Life under Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

25. Tsentralen durzhaven arkhiv (Central State Archive in Sofia or TsDA), f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 943, 8 (1985).

26. *Annual Work Reports of Central Government Departments* (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang guojia jiguan gongzuo weiyuanhui yanjiushi, 2008).

27. On China, see Zhang Yonghe and Zhang Wei, *Lintong xinfang: Zhongguo jiceng xinfang wenti yanjiu baogao* [Complaints in Lintong: Research report on grassroots complaints problems in China] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2009), 152–53. On Russia, see the results of a Levada Center poll reported in “Russians Trust President and Church Most,” March 25, 2004, <http://english.pravda.ru/news/russia/25-03-2004/56195-0/> (accessed September 16, 2012). On the Soviet Union, see VTsIOM, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie v tsifrakh*, no. 8 (15) (April 1990): 15. On Bulgaria, see TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 578 (1975).

28. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. a. 934 (1977); TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 935 (1979); TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 951 (1988).

29. TsDA f. 1B op. 35 a. e. 1246 (1970).

30. Mariia Deenichina, *Mezhduraznitsata i zaklinaniyata: Totalitarniata model na bulgarskata zhurnalistika 1956–1989* [Between fanfares and incantations: The totalitarian model of Bulgarian journalism 1956–1989] (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Sv. Kliment Ohridski,” 2008), 235–38.

31. Konstantin Chakurov, *Vtoriia etazh* [The second floor] (Sofia: [no publisher], 1990), 101–2.

32. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 940 (1983).

33. See TsDA, f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 934 (1977), at 14 and Stoian Tsvetanski, *Organizatsionnoto razvitiie na BKP 1944–1986: Istoriko-statisticheski analiz* [Organizational development of the Bulgarian Communist Party, 1944–1986: Historical-statistical analysis] (Sofia: Institut po istoriia na BKP pri TsK na BKP, 1988), 34–35, 42.

34. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 951 (1988).

35. *A Decade of Measuring the Quality of Governance: Governance Matters 2006: Worldwide Governance Indicators* (Washington, DC: IBRD/The World Bank, 2006), 2.

36. Impartiality is defined in the following way: “When implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take into consideration anything about the citizen/case that is not stipulated beforehand in the policy or the law (Strömberg 2000).” See Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 13.

37. www.qog.pol.gu.se.

38. See Governance Matters (World Bank) and the QOG Institute indicators.

39. Both terms from TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 949, 4 (1987). For the Chinese context, see Melanie Manion, *Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), and Andrew H. Wedeman, *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

40. For details on the circulation of these reports, see TsDA, f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 945, 4–7 (1986).

41. Merkel, *Wir sind doch nicht die Mecker-Ecke der Nation; Staat, Eingaben*.

42. TsDA f. 1B op. 101 a. e. 1337 (October 28, 1985), 1.

43. On jar lids, see ANSIS, d. 4/1990, t. 521, pp. 3–7; on strategies for meeting the table salt needs, see a letter from the head of the Committee for State and People’s Control to the Head of the Council of Ministers, October 25, 1979, f. 375 op. 32 a. e. 5 (1979).

44. Canning was crucial for surviving the winter under communism. See Eleanor Wenkart Smollett, “The Economy of Jars: Kindred Relationships in Bulgaria—An Exploration,” *Ethnologia Europaea* XIX (1989), 125–40. On the social contract, see Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers’ Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

45. Reshenie na TsK BKP, MS, US na BANU, TsS BPS, NS OF, and TsK DKMS, “Za po-natatushno izpulenie na Dekemvriiskata programa za povishavane na zhiznenoto ravnishte na naroda v suotvetstvie s resheniata na XII kongres na BKP” (On the further fulfillment of the December Program on Raising

the Standard of Living of the People in Accordance with the Decisions of the Twelfth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party] (Sofia: Partizdat, 1983), 13.

46. *Ibid.*

47. On consumer socialism in general, see Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

48. *A Decade of Measuring the Quality of Governance.*

49. For more details on the content of these reports, see Martin K. Dimitrov, “Zhalbite na grazhdanite v komunisticheska Bulgariia” [Citizen complaints in communist Bulgaria], in *Da Poznaem Komunizma: Izsledvaniia* [Getting to know communism], ed. Ivailo Znepolski (Ciela: Sofia, 2012), 167–226.

50. TsDA, f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 949, at 10–11 (1987); see also TsDA, f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 935, at 9 (1979).

51. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 943 (1985).

52. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 944, at 15 (1986).

53. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 949, at 17 (1987).

54. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 938, at 11 (1982).

55. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 944, at 26 (1986).

56. *Ibid.*, at 19.

57. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 485, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 1/1977 (January 1977).

58. *Ibid.*

59. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 486, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 2/1977 (March 1977).

60. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 507, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 6/1980 (December 30, 1980).

61. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 529, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 2/1986 (March 1986).

62. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 497, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 1/1979 (April 10, 1979).

63. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 487, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 3/1977 (April 1977); TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 496, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 5/1978 (November 1978).

64. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 512, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 2/1982 (March 5, 1982).

65. TsDA, f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 502, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 1/1980 (April 8, 1980), 16.

66. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 515, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 5/1982 (November 25, 1982), 17.

67. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 506, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 5/1980 (September 22, 1980); TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 489, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 5/1977 (June 1977).

68. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 508, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 1/1981 (June 24, 1981).

69. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 501, *Zlobodnevni problemi*, no. 5/1979 (December 29, 1979), 10.

70. For specific examples of cases involving complaints to the media, see TsDA f. 1B op. 82 a. e. 719 (1975); TsDA f. 1B op. 83 a. e. 303 (1987); TsDA f. 1B op. 83 a. e. 304 (1986); and TsDA f. 1B op. 83 a. e. 327 (1989).

71. See TsDA f. 1B op. 83 a. e. 299 (1985) for a sample of successful and unsuccessful attempts to address problems highlighted in newspaper publications.

72. TsDA f. 1B op. 101 a. e. 792 (1982).

73. B. A. Grushin, “Institut obshchestvennogo mneniia—otdel *Komsomol'skoi pravdy*” [The Institute of Public Opinion: A department of *Komsomol'skaia pravda*], in *Pressa v obshchestve: Otsenki zhurnal'istov i sotsiologov. Dokumenty* [The press in society: Assessments of journalists and sociologists: Documents], ed. A. I. Volkov, M. G. Pugacheva, and S. F. Iarmoliuk (Moscow: Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2000), 46–64.

74. See Article 3 of the “Regulations on the Structure, Tasks, and Activities of the Commission for State Control,” Decree No. 10 of the National Assembly (January 6, 1948), *State Gazette*, no. 7 (January 12, 1948): 1–2.

75. *Ibid.*, Article 4.

76. TsDA f. 375 op. 34 a. e. 168, 81a (1988).

77. TsDA, f. 375 op. 33 a. e. 161, 21–21a (1983).

78. TsDA f. 375 op. 34 a. e. 125, 27–28 (1987).
79. *Ibid.*, 28.
80. All three complaints occurred in 1988–1989. See TsDA f. 375 op. 34 a. e. 1387; TsDA f. 375 op. 34 a. e. 1391; and TsDA f. 375 op. 34 a. e. 1390.
81. TsDA f. 375 op. 34 a. e. 168, 81a, 79a (1988).
82. See Article 31(a)–(c) and Article 43(a)–(b) of the 1981 Statute of the Bulgarian Communist Party.
83. TsDA f. 224 op. 2 a. e. 671 (1984); TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 191 (1984); TsDA f. 224 op. 2 a. e. 686 (1985).
84. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 177 (1979).
85. See Article 9 of the 1981 Statute of the Bulgarian Communist Party.
86. See, e.g., TsDA f. 224 op. 2 a. e. 313 (1971).
87. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 190, 1 (1983).
88. TsDA f. 1B op. 82 a. e. 441 (1980).
89. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 178, 10 (1980).
90. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 190, esp. 3 (1983).
91. See Venelin Ganey, *Preying on the State: The Transformation of Bulgaria after 1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).
92. For more on this point, see Martin K. Dimitrov, “Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes: The Role of Citizen Complaints in Bulgaria and China,” in Martin K. Dimitrov, ed., *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 276–302.
93. Li Lianjiang, “The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China,” *Modern China* 39, no. 1 (2012): 3–36.
94. On the Soviet Union, see F. 646 op. 1 d. 3, at 11. On East Germany, see SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, DY 30 vorl. SED 42508/1, Bestand Abteilung Staats- und Rechtsfragen. On China, see *Renmin xinfang* (People’s Letters and Visits), no. 2/2010 (313), 7.
95. As reported in Georgi Chukrin, *Zapiski ot totalitarnoto vreme: Kraiat* [Notes from the totalitarian period: The end] (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2007), 85 (emphasis added).
96. TsDA, f. 1B op. 83 a. e. 38, 20 (1986).
97. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 722, 8 (1988).
98. Calculated from TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 953, at 19–20 (1989).
99. TsDA f. 1B op. 55 a. e. 196 (1989).
100. Gospodinka Nikova, “Zhivkovata ikonomicheska reforma, perestroikata i startut na skritata privatizatsiia v Bulgariia” [Zhivkov’s economic reforms, Perestroika, and the beginning of hidden privatization in Bulgaria], *Istoricheski Pregled*, no. 5–6 (2003): 92–125.
101. Iskra Baeva, *Iztochna Evropa prez XX vek: Idei, konflikti, mitove* [Eastern Europe in the twentieth century: Ideas, conflicts, myths] (Sofia: Paradigma, 2010), 462–493.
102. Martin Ivanov, *Reformatorstvo bez reformi* [Reform-mindedness without reforms] (Sofia: Ciela, 2008).
103. F. 1B op. 55 a. e. 853, “Obshtestvenoto mnenie po niakoi osnovni problemi na preustroistvoto v nashata strana” [Public opinion on some basic questions of perestroika in our country], December 1988, 24.
104. Dimitur Ivanov, *Politicheskoto protivopostaviane v Bulgariia 1956–1989* [Political opposition in Bulgaria, 1956–1989] (Sofia: Ares Press, 1994).
105. Kuran, “Now Out of Never”; Lohmann, “The Dynamics of Informational Cascades.”
106. Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (2003), 178–256; 6, no. 4 (2004), 3–64; and 7, no. 1 (2005), 3–96.
107. Stathis Kalyvas, “The Decay and Breakdown of Communist One-Party Systems,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 323–43.

108. Dimitrov, "Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes," esp. 289–293.
109. Zhang, Liang, comp., *The Tiananmen Papers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

Martin K. Dimitrov is Associate Professor of Political Science at Tulane University. He is the author of *Piracy and the State: The Politics of Intellectual Property Rights in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2009; paperback 2012) and of *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). He is currently completing a book manuscript titled *Dictatorship and Information: Autocratic Regime Resilience in Communist Europe and China*. He received his PhD in Political Science from Stanford University in 2004 and has held residential fellowships at the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki; at the American Academy in Berlin; the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Notre Dame; the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at Stanford; the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard; and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard.