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# Investigating the history of meanings of a dish
# An enactivist approach to the life of the Russian salad in 20th century Bulgaria

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**Abstract**

This article investigates the history of the Russian salad and its meanings in Bulgaria during the 20th century: its raise and fall as a celebratory dish and its status of a culinary icon, first borrowed from fashionable Russian immigrants, then abandoned, allowing for the dish's full incorporation in the local foodways. To explain the observed evolution, I experimentally apply a novel to food studies approach: the enactivist theory, developed lately by cognitive philosophers. I argue that its non-reductive naturalist framework may prove to be well tailored to capture so far elusive and important to food studies (and to social sciences in general) issues, such as the life of social practices and the role of the body in sense-making. Applying the enactivist approach to the case study of a history of meanings of a dish I demonstrate its potential to explain the autonomy (ability for self-regeneration) of historical processes of sense-making.

## Introduction

One of my vivid memories from the last, quite decadent years of Bulgarian communism was of a friend, who liked to present himself as a party-animal. He regularly narrated of adventures, involving Cuban rum, binge-drawing (he studied in the Fine Arts Academy) and "wild" Trabant-driving: a slightly oxymoronic claim, taken that the Trabants of those times fell apart when speeding above 40 km per hour. But the story my friend would always start with, was how he was trained to party early on in his life. He had a memory of himself, aged one and a half, dancing in a washing basin with Russian salad. What was funny was the image of him as a wildly partying toddler. The notion of a basin, filled with Russian salad was not that strange. Before binge-drinking, in communist Bulgaria people did Russian-salad-binge-cooking.

Today the Russian salad remains an important and widely popular dish, although people seem to binge-shop it, rather than to binge-prepare it. According to a 2013 survey the most popular ready-made salad in Bulgaria is the Russian salad, liked by 74.3 percent of the respondents. It is closely followed by the yogurt-cucumber salad *Snezhanka* (71,5 percent), and other types of ready-made salads, none of which is liked by more than 11 percent of the respondents.[1]

But however impressive this data may seem, the Russian salad has lost its shine. While in the past it was a permanent element of any upmarket restaurant menu, today only a few eating places in Bulgaria offer it. Also on the domestic table from exclusive and festive, it has turned into a mundane and inexpensive dish, offered under a variation of brands in the supermarket. It doesn't appear on festive menus, and is no longer suggested as a festive dish in the media either.

How could this happen? How something that seemed glorious for more than half a century became banal? How was this social practice formed, and how did it die out? What role played the taste? Were the habits somehow important? Did cooking skills matter and how? Do social practices, of which the celebratory consumption of Russian salad is an example, have inertia? And how does this inertia work, what decides that it dies out?

Particularly preoccupied with the evolution of social practices are the consumption studies. One of the most influential theories is that of Schatzki, who introduced the concept of "bundles of practices and material arrangements". He argued that practices arise from, or are sustained by "complex intercalation of activities, material arrangements, and practices" and their emergence is related to conditions of social mutual understanding and shared rules, to (appearing or disappearing) "material entities and arrangements"[2]. An important input has been done also by Martin, who directed attention to the necessity to seek intersubjectively valid explanations of social processes.[3] Despite of all this advance, scholars continue to find particularly challenging to address both the agency and deliberation of actors and the effect of the habitual, practical and the structurally defined.[4] They

[1] D. Zhivkov, Готовите салати в съзнанието на потребителите [Consumers' perception of ready-made salads], *Progressive.bg*, 2013. Last visited on 4 May 2018.

[2] T. Sharzki, 'The edge of change: On the emergence, persistence and dissolution of practices', in: E. Shove and N Spurling (eds.), Sustainable Practices: Social Theory and Climate Change. London, 2013, p. 31–46 (p. 37-38).

[3] Ibid, p. 335.

[4] A. Warde, 'After Taste: Culture, Consumption and Theories of Practice', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 14, no. 3, 2014, p. 279–303, p. 289.

remain in search for a theory, which would take enough note of the habitual to explain the dynamics of the rising, sustaining and dying out of consumption practices. Another limitation is that none of the theories addresses enough (if at all) how the physical body participates in defining the practices.

Food studies, due to the specific object of research and their interdisciplinarity have been better in acknowledging the role of the body in the creation of meanings of food. A very important work has been done by Lupton, who had shown the complexity of how the body interacts with culture to create meaning to shape individual foodways. She interpreted the meaning of (particular) food as constructed through discourses, embodied experiences and sensations, and remaining ever shifting. She acknowledged the habitual way, in which individuals happen to act upon their food preferences and stated that subjectivity, rather than being determined by a discourse, "is produced through discourse in interaction with embodied experience, the senses, memory, habit and the unconscious."[5]

In this article I research the history of the meanings of the Russian salad in Bulgaria in the framework of the enactivist theory, which is recently being developed by cognitive philosophers De Jaegher, Di Paolo, Rohde and others.[6] This non-reductive, non-functionalist naturalistic framework, as its creators define it, is a "dynamic, biologically grounded" theory of sense-making. It treats sense-making as dynamic systems, which obtain an autonomy: i.e. ability to regenerate while constantly being renegotiated. Another key tenet of the theory is the embodiment of the social interaction, i.e. its nontrivial dependence of the body - both on the level of sensomonitor abilities and on the one of higher-level cognitive skills. Highly relevant to food studies is also the notion of experience, which the theory understands not as an accumulation of skills or data, but as a process, in which both the body and the experience transform each other. An example, quoted by the theorists is how one becomes a wine connoisseur: not through obtaining information, but through undergoing a transformation, involving time-extended training and experimenting. Further I apply this theory on my source material and illustrate what an enactivist analysis delivers in this field. However I do so with the awareness that another type of sources, allowing peak into the first-person

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[5] D. Lupton, *Food, the Body, and the Self.* London, 1996.

[6] Here I refer most of all to the work of De Jaegher and Di Paolo, E. Di Paolo, M. Rohde, & H. De Jaegher, 'Horizons for the Enactive Mind: Values, Social Interaction, and Play', in J. Stewart, O. Gapenne & E. Di Paolo (eds.), Enaction. Cambridge, 2010, p. 32–87. The enactivist theory was applied lately in other fields. It was used by Caraciollo and Popova, in their investigation of the role of narratives in human culture. M. Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach.* Berlin, 2014; Y. Popova, *Stories, Meaning, and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction.* New York, 2015.

experiences and unavailable in this particular case, would be even more fruitful to discuss within this theoretical framework.

The Russian salad presents one of the most intriguing cases in food history of the 20th century both as an object of consumption and with its relation to (national) identity. On the one hand its history has passed through a series of transformations of its status: from an exuberantly luxurious treat in the most expensive restaurant of Moscow to a cheap imitation; from a celebratory dish to an ubiquitous element of the daily menu. On the other side it is a unique example of a dish, which is nowhere at home, and yet at home around the world. Invented by a French-speaking chef in Tsar's Russia in the second half of the 19th century, it is considered French and called Olivier in Russia, while it is called Russian everywhere else. At the same time in many places, and in Russia first of all, it has become a quintessential part of the national foodways. This ambiguousness, combined with permanently attached references to ethnic belonging, presents a particularly interesting case to study.

I focus here on the case of Bulgaria, where the dish was introduced in the late 1920s, and where today it is, as quoted above, the most popular ready-made salad on the market. With its intensive cultural relations with Russia through the 20th century, which underwent dramatic turns, Bulgaria presents an interesting example because of the political layers, with which "Russianness" is laden in its material culture. Also the degree to which the Russian salad is incorporated in the local foodways makes the case particularly convenient to consider the role of the habitual.

The history of the Russian salad within Russia has been researched in the ethnographic study of Kushkova[7]. She examined the private and collective perception of the dish and its role on the domestic table between the 1960s and 2000. Also the internationalisation of the dish has attracted some scholarly attention in the work of Berezovich, who discussed it within her enquiry of "Russianness", as found in the names of food and drink across Europe.[8] Her linguistic study searched to identify the cultural traditions, which the adjective "Russian" in the name conveyed in different languages. This article builds on the work of Kushkova and Berezovic and expands it into

[7] A. Kushkova, 'В центре стола: зенит и закат салата 'Оливье' [In the centre of the table: the rise and fall of the Olivier Salad], *НЛО* [NLO] N 76, 2005.

[8] E. Berezovich, 'Русская пища' в зеркале иностранных языков' ['Russian food' in the mirror of foreign languages], *Anthropological forum* 17, 2012, p. 173–197.

an investigation into the internationalisation of the Russian salad. It also adds to the still modest scholarly research of the Bulgarian food history.

My principal source for this article are the recipes of the salad, as presented in Bulgarian cookbooks between the 1920s and 1990. Cookbooks have been acknowledged only lately to be a valuable historical source and they are increasingly validated as offering unique insights over the complex ways, in which culture intertwines with politics and economics in everyday life. I have used them here with the understanding, formulated earlier by Appadurai and Albala, that their content often represents ideologies, rather than the actual practices in the kitchen, and that they are best researched, when immersed in broad context.[9] Although the degree, to which this is true, varies for each particular cookbook, the research of state ideology in cookbooks, such as Notaker's[10] and my own[11] suggests that the cookbooks, published within totalitarian regimes, are laden with ideology in particularly complex ways.

I examined a total body of 49 Bulgarian cookbooks from the period 1870-1989, from a total of 119 relevant cookbooks according to the National Library catalogue[12]. My search brought up a total of 24 recipes. The first, which I identified, was in a cookbook from 1925[13]. I cannot claim with certainty if this is the first recipe of Russian salad in Bulgaria, as many cookbooks from the period before 1944 are missing from the National library, which is the legal depository of the published in Bulgaria books. However a cookbook from 1935 indicated directly that the fashion with the Russian

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[9] A.Appadurai, 'How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India', in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, 1988, p. 3–24; K. Albala. 'Cookbooks as Historical Documents', in: J. M. Pilcher (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Food History. Oxford, 2012.

[10] H. Notaker, 'Cookery and Ideology in the Third Reich', *Food and History* 6, N 1, 2008, p. 67–82.

[11] A. Shkodrova, 'From Duty to Pleasure in the Cookbooks of Communist Bulgaria: Attitudes to Food in the Culinary Literature for Domestic Cooking Released by the State-Run Publishers between 1949 and 1989', *Food, Culture & Society*, June 25, 2018, p. 1–20.

[12] For the period before 1930 I examined 8 out of 18 relevant cookbooks (i.e. such, which are not thematically excluding the possibility of featuring a Russian salad recipe, for example canning, pastry, dishes made of rice and similar). In the period between 1930 and 1944 I was able to examine 9 our of 43 relevant titles and this is the least well researched period, due to the multiple losses of cookbooks at the National Library, which is the legal depository of published literature in Bulgaria. I concentrated on most popular amongst the titles, judging by their mentions in various later and contemporary publications. For the period between 1944 and 1989 32 out of 58 relevant cookbooks were examined, selected on the basis of their higher printed number of copies - such information is available for the books, printed during most of the communist years.

[13] T. Peykova, *Готварска книга* [Cookbook], part 1. Sofia, 1925.

salad is “recent” - i.e. the actual popularisation of the salad must have occurred not earlier than in the late 1920s[14].

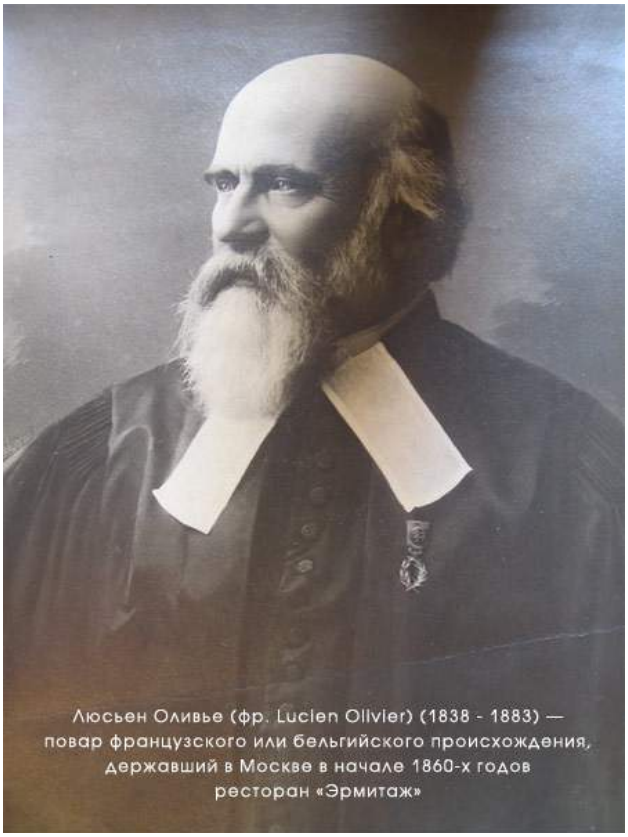
I have analysed the recipes against the references in the Russian primary and secondary literature on the Russian salad, tracing the variation of the ingredients and their approximation to the different versions (pre and post-October revolution) of the salad. I have also followed the trends of simplification or complication of the recipe and the introduction of industrially produced ingredients. I have considered the position of the recipes within the sections of the cookbooks, containing indications of perception of ‘national’ or ‘foreign’. I have also searched for language indicators, implying perceptions of exceptionality or routine. If oral sources were available for the entire period of research, it would have been a better source - alone, or in combination with the cookbook recipes I make use of. However this is not the case and in my work I deal with the constraints of the sources which offer only limited access to first-person perspectives. Also the use of the theory is experimental and could be improved by further testing in the interpretation of better suited source material.

The first part of the article examines critically the writings of how a French-speaking chef once created the dish to entertain the palates of the well-off Muscovites. Its aim is to put straight the somewhat confused record of the historical events and to explain the controversial connections of the dish to its ethnicity labels. The second, central part follows the introduction of the recipe and the evolution of its status in Bulgaria between the 1930s and the post-communist years.

**Created as Olivier Salad in Russia**

The early history of the Russian salad is one of these historical occurrences, that must have made Oscar Wilde exclaim that life imitates art more than art imitates life. The prototype of the dish first gained popularity at the end of the 19th century, when it was served in the central and expensive Moscow restaurant *Эрмитаж* [Hermitage]. Although today the Russian media are overflowing with (varying) accounts of the birth of this favoured by the nation dish, the only certain fact seems to be that the salad is attributed to the first chef of Hermitage, French-speaking Lucien Olivier.

[14] A. Hakanova, *Соленки и сладки за чай* [Sweet and salty bites for tea]. Sofia, 1935.




*A photograph, distributed via Internet as a portrait of Lucien Olivier. The source of the photo and of the information of his birth and death dates and of his ethnic origin is unclear.*

The only primary source of knowledge on Olivier's identity and personality is the writing of Russian journalist and ethnographer Gilyarovskiy[15], who composed a vivid chronicle of Moscow at the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th centuries. Born in 1855, Gilyarovskiy was a contemporary of Olivier's success, but he only moved to Moscow in 1881. According to the date, put on the recently rediscovered grave of Olivier in Moscow, the chef died in November 1883. Recounting the hedonistic partying of the Moscow's riches in the Hermitage in the 1860s, Gilyarovskiy must have drawn mostly on public memory.

According to him Olivier was French and after inventing the salad, he kept the recipe secret, while many trying to reproduce it with no success. The first recipe of the Russian salad, still known in Russia exclusively as "Olivier salad", appeared according to all sources in *Nasha pishcha* [Our food] magazine in 1894[16]. It remains unclear how far this recipe reproduced the original of Olivier. It contained grouse meat, potatoes, fresh cucumbers, capers, olives, which, chopped and well mixed, were placed over green salad leaves, poured over with "common" Provençal sauce, to which the ingredient soya Kabul is added, and which is covered with entire pealed crayfish (or lobster

[15] V.A.Gilyarovskiy, *Собрание в четырех томах* [Collected works in four volumes], vol. 4, Moscow, 1989. http://textshare.da.ru/.

[16] *Наша пища* [Our food] N 6. Moscow, 1894.

tails?) and pieces of aspic. The recipe, signed by someone Vebe, adds that pickled cucumbers could replace the fresh ones in the winter[17].

The version of Olivier salad, aiming to entertain the palate of affluent Russians, was soon in history rivalled by an alternative one. According to Gilyarovskiy's description The Hermitage was first closed and then resuscitated after the 1917 October Revolution, when on the menu again appeared the glorious old dishes, but the meat was inedible and the Olivier salad - made of leftovers. "Ah well," Gilyarovskiy sardonically remarked, "it quite suited the NEP[18]- visitors"[19].


*A postcard from Moscow, depicting restaurant Hermitage. The picture probably dates from the beginning of the 20th century.*

Today the Russian media and even the existing scientific research report numerous details, ever changing the story of the Olivier salad's origin and content. Media develop a new layer of history,

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[17] *Наша пища* [Our food] N 10. Moscow, 1894.

[18] NEP, abbreviation from Новая экономическая политика [New Economic Policy], replaced in the 1920s the politics of the military communism and reintroduced certain elements of market economy to help Soviet Russia out of the deep economic crisis after the Civil war.

[19] Gilyarovskiy, *Собрание в четырех… , p. n.a.*

which seems to be largely based on urban legends. In one of them the French-speaking chef did not invent the salad as a mixture of game and vegetables, but was serving meat under mayonnaise, adding the rest as a decoration on the sides. Allegedly he watched from behind the curtain how one of the customers, most of whom according to the picturesque descriptions of Gilyarovskiy lacked manners, mixed everything and ate it with great appetite. Disgusted, Olivier served on the following day everything mixed to express his sarcasm - which apparently went unnoticed. Although the story is widely quoted, supporting an argument that it was actually the Russian customer, who created the original Russian salad, there doesn't seem to be any historical proof of it.[20] The one (speculative) support for such theory might be the existence of a similar dish in the Provençale cuisine, where fish and beef are often served with eggs, starchy vegetables and Alioli (Provençal) sauce (mayonnaise with garlic). The recipe, as described in the early attempts for its reproduction, presents indeed a popular Provençale combination[21].

The ethnic origin of Lucien Olivier also remains a mystery. Today some media claim that he was French, some firmly describe him as Belgian, and others state that he may have been both. It is unclear how his association with Belgium came up, but one could reasonably suppose that if the chef was indeed Belgian, his name and language might have made many in 19th century Moscow considering him French. Following the same line of thought, though, he could have been also Swiss, Canadian or Luxembourgish.

If at the end of the 19th century Olivier salad was accessible only to the rich, by 1939 it seems to have been well incorporated if not into the actual Soviet diet, than at least into the imaginary concept of Russian cuisine. The first, 1939 edition of *Kniga o vkusnoy i zdorovoy pishche* [Book about delicious and healthy food][22], the most influential cookbook of the Soviet times, does not contain a recipe for Olivier salad. It though refers to it as an ingredient, as an obvious option to use

[20] The version could be found in the research of A. Kushkova, *В центре стола*, p. 1, who further refers on publications in the lifestyle magazine natali.ua and Carskoseljskaya gazeta, a local newspaper, which published a short and entertaining, but seemingly speculative essay, without quoting any source. The translation from Russian is mine.

[21] The examples are plenty, but one reference could be J. Rebuchon and L. Bienassis, *French Regional Food.* London, 2014.

[22] Книга о вкусной и здоровой пище [Book of healthy and delicious food]. Moscow, 1939.

for filling tomatoes or tartlets.[23] Desire to present Olivier salad as mundane transpires from its inclusion in the daily menu (on a summer working day).[24]

To offer luxury to the masses was a goal of Stalin's rule, which according to historian Yukka Gronow aimed at delivering the message of "general abundance", even when it was obviously not there[25]. As Geist observed, *Kniga* tried "to make the impossible [look] possible".[26] The reality though was quite removed from the dream-world, created by *Kniga*. According to the evidence, gathered by Kushkova, Olivier salad only became accessible to the urban population in the 1960s, "twice resuscitated (…) and simplified", and in its "compromised" version occupied the vacant position of the "main festive dish" of "the new historical community: the Soviet people".[27] The dish became to Russians THE salad, an archetypal dish[28], which divided the everyday life from the moments of celebration, until the end of the communist period[29].

**Reaching Bulgaria as "Russian Salad"**

The dish must have arrived in Bulgaria in the 1920s. The earliest published recipe, which I identified, was in a cookbook from 1925[30]. It presents the simplified, post-revolutionary version of the dish and its name: "Russian salad with egg-whites", allows to be interpreted as describing a dish yet unknown, without a fixed name and in need of description. The recipe contains though a mistake: there are no egg-whites listed amongst the ingredients, which otherwise include green peas, green beans, carrots, potatoes, beetroots, pickled cucumbers and mayonnaise, garnished with parsley. The parsley and the green beans seem to be a local addition.

I did not find a clear evidence of how the salad was taken over, but the publication of the recipe in 1925 coincided with an influx of Russian immigrants. In the 1920s thousands of Russians, mostly

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[23] Книга о вкусной, p. 16.

[24] Ibid, p. 27.

[25] J. Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne : Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia*. Berg, 2003, p. 14.

[26] E. Geist, 'Cooking Bolshevik: Anastas Mikoian and the Making of the Book about Delicious and Healthy Food', *The Russian Review* 71, N 2, 2012, p. 295–313 (p. 296-297).

[27] Kushkova, *В центре стола*, p. 3.

[28] Berezovic, *Русская пища*, p. 190.

[29] Kushkova, *В центре стола*, p. 14.

[30] Peykova, Готварска книга, p. 34.

well-educated men from the upper classes, avoided the consequences of the October revolution by escaping to Europe. 20 000 of them arrived in Bulgaria, marking the first significant Russian immigration to the country.[31] Their community became known as *belogvardeytsi*, White guardians, and even if many of them soon left Bulgaria and moved on to Western Europe, the period of their stay in the country left a mark. Although there are no direct evidences of them bringing in the recipe, the 1925 cookbook of Peykova features a sudden influx of Russian dishes with no precedent in the cookery literature of Bulgaria. Many recipes also bear clear relation to the upper classes of Russia: for example "dvoryanskiy borscht" (dvoryanin being the title of a Russian nobleman)[32] and similar. Different historical sources testify that the *belogvardeytsi* had a very strong influence over the social and everyday life in Sofia[33] and there is a high probability that their contribution to the popularisation of the Russian salad was significant.

In the 1930s the recipe already appeared in many cookbooks[34] and one of them stated that there is a recent fashion to serve Russian salad "extremely often" on sandwiches at social events in Sofia.[35] The recipes now varied: some of them were closer to earliest, luxurious reproductions of the Olivier's original and suggested a long list of ingredients, including salted herrings, anchovies, marine crustaceans, asparagus and meat-base aspic, added to the cubed cooked vegetables (young potatoes, carrots, beets, pickled cucumbers) and mayonnaise.[36] But also much simpler versions were published, which only mentioned the cheaper vegetables and the mayonnaise - such was the version in the cookbook of Hakanova, who explicitly referred to the economic crisis, experienced by the Bulgarian population.[37] Some cookbooks included recipes with varying complexity: from basic to fancy, calling for luxurious ingredients.[38]

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[31] P. Peykovska, and N. Kiselkova, 'Руската имиграция в България според преброяването на населението през 1920 и 1926 г. [Russian Immigration to Bulgaria According to the 1920 and 1926 Population Census], *Статистически Изследвания и Анализи [Statistical Research and Analysis]*, N3–4, 2013, p. 211–242.

[32] Peykova, Готварска книга, p. 22.

[33] P. Peykovska, Спомени на унгарския дипломат Шандор Киш-Немешкери за България и българите [Memoirs of Hungarian diplomat Sándor Kiss-Nemeskeri on Bulgaria and the Bulgarians], *ИДА* [IDA], N 66, 1993, p. 274.

[34] M. Dimkova, Нова вегетиарианска готварска книга [New Vegetarian Cookbook]. Sofia, 1931; T. Peykova, Над 50 рецепти за салати [50 and more recipes for salads]. Sofia, 1933; A. Hakanova, Соленки и сладки; B. Kassurova & S. Dimchevska, Готварска книга с полезни упътвъния за младата домакиня [Cookbook with useful tips for the young housewife]. Sofia, 1933.

[35] Hakanova, Соленки и сладки, p. 11.

[36] For example T. Peykova, Над 50 рецепти.

[37] Hakanova, Соленки и сладки, p. 11.

[38] Kassurova and Dimchevska, Книга, p. 257-259.

If the cookery literature seemed to respond to public interest, so did the commerce - Hakanova wrote in 1935 that Russian salad could be bought ready-made in the shops.[39] Her own version of the salad was simple and vegetarian. It was probably closer to the one in the shops, as she suggested that while one can purchase Russian salad nowadays, "it is even better if the housewife prepares it herself, to be more certain [not specifying of what]".

Thus it seems clear that in the 1930s both representations of the Russian salad, the Olivier-type and the post-revolutionary one, had the same function in the society: they were actively used during social events. Their variation was adapted to the local market and its fluctuations in the interwar period, and possibly to the social differences, providing a celebratory version for any circumstances. The luxurious ingredients ensured the elevated status when and to whom they were available, while the home preparation, which was suggested to be superior to the one for commercial purposes, ensured the festivity in other cases.

Considered from the point of view of the enactivist theory, the practice of preparation and consumption of Russian salad could be understood as a dynamic social system of participatory sense-making. The enactivist theory conceptualises sense-making in a social situation as a coupling between social agents, each of whom can be engaged in individual sense-making, but who, in their interaction, modify their sense-making[40]. The theory holds that sense-making systems in social realm can obtain autonomy, in which they generate and sustain identities. In this sense the introduction of the Russian salad as a celebratory dish could be seen as an emergence of a new identity. The notion of a dynamic social system to acquire identity, as Di Paolo et al. stressed, does not imply any mysterious vitalism. It indicates an operational concept of emergence, which occurs "whenever a precarious network of dynamical processes becomes operationally closed."[41]

The self-organisation of a dynamic sense-making system is seen to occur in result of the interaction between social agents "in combination with the histories, backgrounds, expectations, thoughts, and moods of the interactors"[42]. One circumstance, which must have contributed to the operational

[39] Ibid.

[40] Di Paolo et al., Horizons, p. 70.

[41] Ibid, p. 38.

[42] Ibid, p. 68.

closure, was that the Russian salad fashion tapped into and merged with another trend, which was spreading in the urban centres of Bulgaria: the changing nature and the increasing spread of social gatherings, organised in people's homes. Gatherings, involving a broader circle of friends and acquaintances, were reserved for the upper classes at the turn of the 19th century. By the 1930s though they became increasingly popular across all the levels of the society. Also what was served during these gatherings gradually changed. The older treats, consisting mostly of home-made jams and sweets[43], were replaced by different foods, produced under Western influence: particularly popular became in the 1930s the tea-parties with sandwiches[44]. Apart from the general trend of modernisation and the distinguishable new influences (which could be also seen as patterns of sense-making), such as the one from the USA, the cookery literature offers evidence that also the economic crisis before the Second World War paved the way for a new celebratory menu, involving less resources. "It became so challenging to invite people for lunch or dinner", pointed Hakanova, but at least "we could afford the pleasure of inviting people for a cup of tea". In her text there are also indications that not only the financial difficulties, but also the accelerating practice of inviting people for entertainment at home demanded a less engaging and time-saving way of treating them. The Russian salad in the 1930s was popularised precisely as a sandwich spread.[45]

Another circumstance, which must have played a role in the rapid rise of the Russian salad, was that it was introduced in a society, which had already developed skills to make similar dishes. Recipes of dishes, composed of pieces of meat and vegetables with mayonnaise were part of the Bulgarian cookery books at least from 1895. The *Domestic cookery book*, published that year, included not only two separate recipes how to prepare mayonnaise at home, but combinations of ingredients, quite resembling Olivier's invention: such, including fish with vegetables, capers, eggs and olives.[46] Later recipes featured also green peas, tongue, and in general all the ingredients of the Russian salad, although not its precise combination.

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[43] B. Georgieva, *Градските развлечения в миналото* [Urban entertainment in the past]. Sofia, 2006, p. 311-316.

[44] Hakanova, *Соленки и сладки.*

[45] Ibid, p. 11.

[46] Домашна готварска книга [Domestic Cookery Book]. Sofia, 1895.

What we observe above would have been conceptualised by the theory of Shove as a conjunction of competences, materials and meanings.[47] The described circumstances and processes could be in this sense summarised as "available skills to prepare the specific food and available materials meet cooks' and consumers' ideas of cooking a celebratory dish". This (admittedly simplified) explanation leaves many questions open: how was it acceptable for the ingredients to vary so greatly, for example, and the dish still to be considered the same, or how "the meaning" appeared in the first place. The enactivist theory offers a different interpretation, in which the meaning is not one of the elements, which need to meet in order for a practice to be created. They are themselves created on the level of the relation between elements from the environment and in the internal dynamics of the agent.[48] Thus we could see the system of Russian salad's preparation and consumption (as a sense-making process) as emerging within a dynamic system, in which fashions, coming from different parts of the world (and which could be also seen as external sense-making systems), related to existing skills and prepared palates (and possibly to a sequence of other circumstances in the environment).

The enactivitst theory is also able to explain the ability of the Russian salad to retain semantic integrity while appearing under very different forms - a phenomenon, first observed by Kushkova in Russia.[49] It sees the sense-making systems as able to acquire autonomy and regenerate, redefining in the process its limits (without being able to fully remove them) and transform themselves, as they interact with the environment[50]. The adaptivity of the meaning to the content is an illustration of the transformations, which the system undergoes. Further I will illustrate also how within the dynamics of its constant transformation, resulting from its interaction with the environment, the practice sustains its identity.

1944 meant to the Russian salad in Bulgaria more or less what the October Revolution meant for it in Russia: the Olivier version vanished from the horizon and only the simpler combination was preserved. The economic changes, caused by the formation of the communist state, interrupted the industrialisation. The private businesses, producing Russian salad before the Second World War

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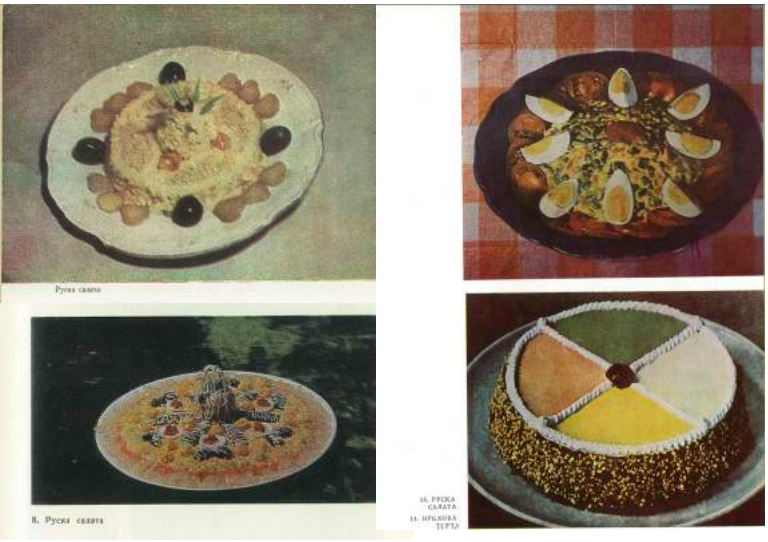
[47] E. Shove, M. Pantzar & M. Watson, *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How It Changes*. London, 2012, p. 29.

[48] Di Paolo et al, Horizons, p. 39.

[49] A. Kushkova, *В центре стола*, p. 6.

[50] Di Paolo et al, Horizons, p. 36-37.

were closed and while it is not clear when its production for commercial purposes was renewed, oral history sources from my previous research and the press suggest that between the 1960s and 1990s the dish was sold only in the *Gastronomi* - a very limited number of shops, opened in the centres of the bigger cities and accessible to a few.[51] Thus to most people the consumption of Russian salad became dependent on its home preparation.



*Illustrations of the Russian salad recipe in cookbooks, published in communist Bulgaria: Sotirov, N. Съвременна кухня [Contemporary cuisine]. 1959; Naydenov, I. and S. Chortanova. Наша кухня [Our cuisine]. 1971; Dimcheva, N. Кулинарен спекрът [Culinary spectrum]. 1983.*

There are multiple indications that within this setup the Russian salad remained an extremely popular festive dish in the following decades straight to the 1990s. It was considered by most people to have a reserved place at the festive table. Adding to the already mentioned established taste and acquired skills, came the gradual accumulation of sentimental history - by the 1950s an entire (urban) generation was raised with this celebratory practice.

However several processes, related to this status of the dish, could be traced taking place through these decades, showing that the practice had to be constantly renegotiated to be sustained and reproduced. Of importance in this process was the deficits-ridden economy. One of its direct consequences was the rearrangement of hierarchies of foods. When even simple ingredients like pickled cucumbers or green peas, or cured meat, became seen as a luxury, the simple version of the dish became seen as luxurious. Similar impact of the availability of different products on their position in social food hierarchies has been observed at least from the Neolithic-Bronze age.[52]

[51] Shkodrova, Соц гурме, p. 301-302.

[52] P. Halstead. 'Feast, Food and Fodder in Neolithic-Bronze Age Greece. Commensality and the Construction of Value', in: S. Pollock (ed.), Between Feasts and Daily Meals. Towards an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces. Berlin Studies of the Ancient World 30, 2015, p. 29-52.

Similar claim made Kushkova, seeing direct link between the deficit and the "prestigiousness" of products.

However these deficits shifted in time and what worked against the value of the dish, was the industrialisation of the food production. It brought first green peas (1955)[53], and then, more than two decades later, the industrial mayonnaise (1983)[54]. Cooked tongue or ham alternated with a vegetarian version until the end of the 1970s, but from the 1980s also roasted meat and other types of cured meats were suggested as alternatives, reflecting the expanding meat-processing industry.[55] From the 1960s on there were periods of relative affluence, in which most ingredients of the simple version became to be seen as basic and were available.

The increasingly long list of ingredients and variations of the Russian salad in the cookbooks from the 1980s suggests that authors sought to counteract the pressure of the industrialisation, which, with making the Russian salad easier to cook, pushed it towards the everyday menu and deprived it from festivity. The cookbooks started making distinction between "common" and festive (by implication) Russian salad.[56] Each cookbook demonstrated different attempts to beautify the dish, the "marine" element was reintroduced with salmon, black caviar, anchovies, and also new ingredients were integrated: onion, lemon zest, tomatoes and cumin.[57] Thus the cookbooks between 1930s and late 1980s reveal an effort to maintain the festive status of the dish by incorporating or cheap but deficit, or more expensive ingredients. In the later period a solution was sought in multiplying the classes of the recipes.

In many places around the world and in different times, in particular in contemporary history, another strategy to elevate the status of a food has been the investment of time and effort. And indeed pre-war cookbooks like Hakanova's make a suggestion to cook the salad from scratch even if it is available in the shop "to be more certain" (unspoken suggestion of quality guarantee, i.e.

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[53] I. Naydenov & S. Chortanova, Наша кухня [Our cuisine]. Sofia, 1955, p. 218.

[54] I. Dimcheva, Какво да сготвим набързо [What to cook in no time]. Sofia, 1983, p. 21.

[55] The state production of meat and cured meats grew exponentially during communism: from 94 thousand tonnes of raw meat and 17 thousand tonnes of cured meats in 1955, to respectively 462 and 91 thousand tonnes in 1980. Source: Национални статистически годишници [National statistics yearbooks] 1959, 1989.

[56] Ibid, p. 61.

[57] S. Smolnitska, Изкуството да готвим [The Art of Cooking]. Sofia, 1980, p. 62.

value). However the cookbooks, printed under communism, do not make such suggestion. Spending more time in the kitchen was against the spirit of the ideology, which saw modern foodways as necessarily industrialised and time-saving.[58] Scholars have researched the specific attitude of the regime to private time in general, defining it as an attempt at "etatization": taking under state control.[59] The ideologies, transpiring in the cookbooks by state-controlled publishers eagerly accepted the industrialisation and its effects on home cooking. By 1983 the cookbook *What to cook in no time* featured the Russian salad amongst recipes, which take between 20 minutes and an hour to cook.[60]

But as it was previously argued, cookbooks, and in particular those published in totalitarian regimes like the communist in Bulgaria, open a window more towards ideologies than towards actual practices and the evidences of actual cooking and consumption of the Russian salad illustrate this well. Rather than going for rare or expensive ingredients, people continued the practice of adding value by cooking everything from scratch, including the mayonnaise, at home. Their practice contradicted and resisted Smolnitska's book from 1980, which featured "a simple" Russian salad and a version for banquets,[61] by investing enough effort in the "simple" one to prevent it from becoming too "simple". To prepare the dish, which was often cooked in great quantities, took an entire day and some contemporaries of Bulgarian communism spoke of it as "epic cooking"[62]. People continued to make the effort to make their mayonnaise at home. They did so to make the Russian salad better, more special, more of their own[63]. I personally remember the binge-cooking of Russian salad in my mother's and in many other households, and my friend's story, quoted at the beginning, is another illustration of this.

The Russian salad had many practical advantages compared to many other celebratory foods. Its neutral taste was liked by children and adults alike. The ingredients for the simpler version were available through the year, and, importantly, in the winter, when in general there was little on the

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[58] A. Shkodrova, 'From Duty to Pleasure".

[59] On the specific value of time under communism, see K. Verdery, *What was socialism and what comes next?* Princeton, 1996, p. 39–57.

[60] Dimcheva, Какво да сготвим.

[61] Smolnitska, Изкуството, p. 61-62.

[62] Shkodrova, Communist Gourmet, p. 305.

[63] According to evidences, collected during the research for my dissertation "Rebellious cooks."

market and people counted on home-preserved fruit and vegetables for diversity in their menu[64]. Besides, it was a dish, which survived well for a few days in the fridge or on the balcony in the winter. Hence it was suitable to prepare well in advance, as well as in excessive quantities, which could cover an entire sequence of guests through the winter holidays. The Russian salad possesses also functional versatility: it could be served both as a starter/salad, or as a main on sandwiches. The repetitive cooking made domestic cooks experienced not only in cooking the dish themselves, but also in establishing a lasting pattern of contribution from the entire family in the cooking process. Finally, the permanent position of the Russian salad on the festive table, and its sufficiency to make a meal be perceived as festive, made it an easy choice, which spared digging in cookbooks and risky experimenting in uncharted culinary territories. Thus there was a very versatile set of incentives, which seemed to push the house cook to return to the Russian salad at each domestic celebration.

Neither the average Bulgarian household, nor even the average urban one was affected by the commercial production of the Russian salad in the communist years. The above mentioned *Gastronomi* remained until the end of the period a luxury. The same was valid for the state-organised network of upmarket restaurants (Balkantourist). Russian salad was a permanent element of their menus. It was cooked, following the simplest recipe and according to collected testimonies and my own memories was mostly not prepared particularly well, but it was ubiquitous. It became also one of the most-exploited standards for official dinners and parties. In a manual for professionals in public catering from 1964 it was included in the "medium" and "rich" menus in a classification, which also contained "simple" menus.[65] The same book suggested the dish was appropriate for banquets.[66] But all these places were similarly inaccessible to the general population, which visited rarely restaurants and even less often - the Balkantourist ones, which offered Russian salad.[67]

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[64] Ibid, p. 327-335.

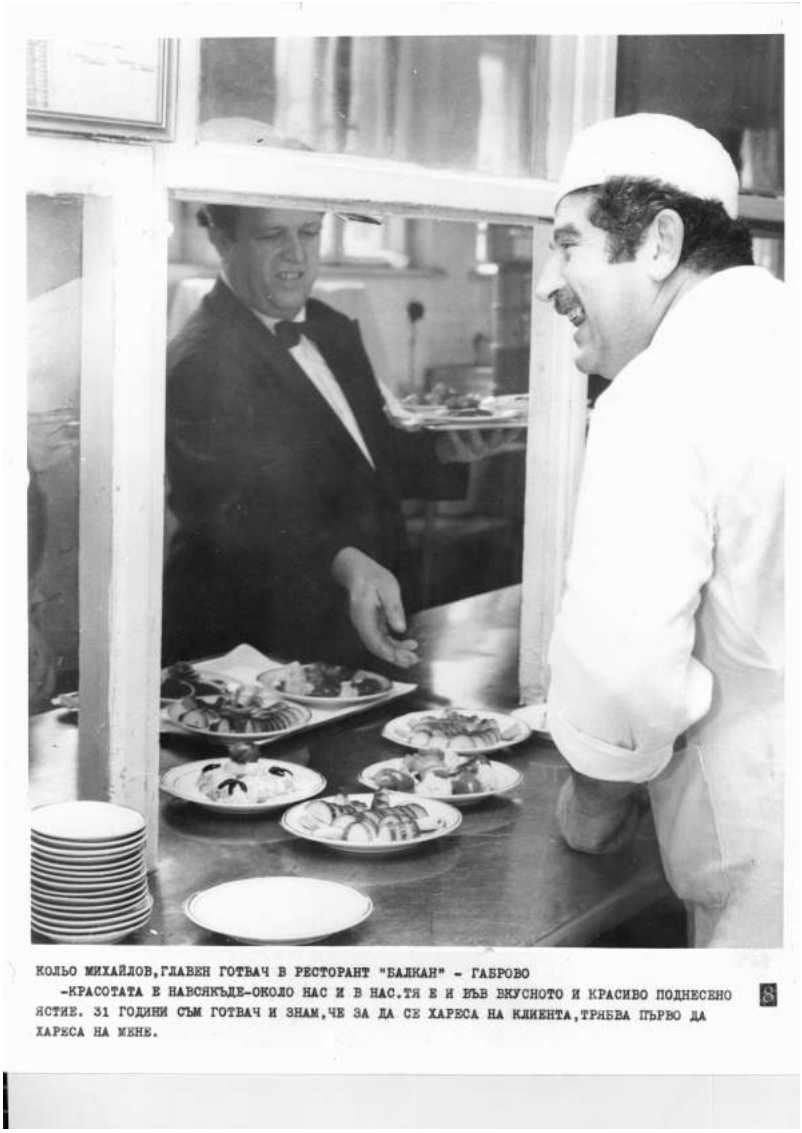
[65] Y. Popov et al., Обслужване на предприятията за обществено хранене [Maintenance of public nutrition locations]. Sofia, 1964.

[66] Ibid, p. 95.

[67] Shkodrova, Соц гурме, p. 147-163.

*A party in Strandzhata mehana in Svisthov, Bulgaria, 1968. On the table are visible portions of Russian salad, decorated with olives, as they were served typically at the time. Photograph: S.Nenov, Pressphoto-BTA. The photo is part of the archive material, which photographer Nikola Mihov collected as illustrations of Albena Shkodrova's Communist Gourmet project, with the support of Nikolay Grigorov of Raketa, Kosmos and Sputnik in Sofia.*

*The photo shows a plate of Russian salad on the counter of restaurant Balkan in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, 1978. The caption reads: Kolyo Mihaylov, chef in Restaurant Balkan - Gabrovo. 'Beauty surrounds us. It is in the tasty and beautifully served dish. I've been a cook for 31 years and I know that a dish will be liked by a customer only if I like it myself in first place". The picture was made for Fotopanorama, edition of the regional center for photo-propaganda in Gabrovo. From the private archive of photographer Nikola Mihov.*



КОЛЬО МИХАЙЛОВ, ГЛАВЕН ГОТВАЧ В РЕСТОРАНТ "БАЛКАН" – ГАБРОВО
–КРАСОТАТА Е НАВСЯКЪДЕ–ОКОЛО НАС И В НАС.ТЯ Е И ВЪВ ВКУСНОТО И КРАСИВО ПОДНЕСЕНО ЯСТИЕ. 31 ГОДИНИ СЪМ ГОТВАЧ И ЗНАМ, ЧЕ ЗА ДА СЕ ХАРЕСА НА КЛИЕНТА, ТРЯБВА ПЪРВО ДА ХАРЕСА НА МЕНЕ.

It was only after 1989 that the Russian salad indeed left the upmarket restaurants menus and gradually vacated its permanent place on the festive table to become part of the daily menu. The question how it survived for such a long time as celebratory classics and why eventually it stepped down is the question of how/why a practice rises, reproduces and falls.

It seems clear that the Russian salad was introduced as a fashion, which can also be interpreted as an act, in which a new meaning was proposed to a culture. Its acceptance and reproduction as a practice was possibly resulting from the fashion cooperating with existing skills/competences, established tastes and by coupling with the evolution in other cultural practices (of urban partying). And its long-term regeneration stepped on a vast and complex set of interactions between the elements of the system: the humans, reasoning in their kitchen within their perception of taste, energy, time, abilities and their desire to celebrate and please; the circumstances, such as parallel and relating systems of meaning (celebration practices, different fashions, ideologies, habits), and also availability of ingredients, of equipment. Indeed the obvious complexity of the interconnected elements that must have played in one or another way a role in the process of sense-making suggests the impossibility of the causality being reduced to one or another element. Also the dynamic equilibrium of the system, the pertaining of semantic integrity while constantly changing, makes such causality questionable. A non-reductive framework like the enactivist one seems much more appropriate to offer a good understanding of the process.

A system is autonomous, according to the enactivist theory, when it is able to build itself at some level of identity and generate its own laws. "Autonomy as operational closure is intended to describe self-generated identities at many possible levels".[68] The social practice, studied here, could be interpreted as generating its own laws, transforming them in the process of interaction with a changing environment and thus maintaining an ever changing within its laws identity: as such could be interpreted the examples of domestic cooks and recipe writers, working to pertain the celebratory status of the dish (without having perceived it as a purpose), and their collective efforts, coupled with the circumstances, transformed by them and transforming them, between the late 1930s and the early 1990s ensured the "operational closure" of the sense-making system: the status of the dish, its identity.

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[68] F. Varela, 'Patterns of life: Intertwining identity and cognition', *Brain and Cognition* N 34, 1997, p. 72 – 87 ; E. Di Paolo, 'Extended Life', *Topoi* 28, N1, 2009, p. 9–21; Di Paolo et al, *Horizons…*, p. 38.

By the time the Russian salad indeed lost its elevated status in the 1990s, the sense-making process was immersed in a dramatically different environment. Indeed the memory of the palate was still there, as were the available skills. But many other elements changed: the new fashions have multiplied, the industrialisation was intensified, the Russian salad spread in the supermarkets as an inexpensive dish. An explosion of culinary programs and literature pushed home cooks into an enthusiastic exploration of new ingredients and techniques. The perception of time was forcefully changed, as economy shifted and employment became both more challenging and more meaningful. Restaurants became ubiquitous and claimed part of the familial celebrations. If we assume that the celebratory identity of the Russian salad was a sense-making system on its own, somehow along the way it lost its operational closure.

**The meaning of the "Russianness"**

The central place of food to human identity has been researched extensively by scholars and lately more attention has been paid to how it participates in the creation of identity of home and nation. This has been done in a variation of ways: using a traditional socio-economic approach[69], or a variation of interdisciplinary perspectives, which interpret taste and home (in the sense of a physical or imaginary place) as dynamic categories, involved in complex relation[70]. Here I propose to apply experimentally the enactivist theory and to interpret the idea of national affiliation as an element of the identity of the Russian salad (here seen as sustained by a dynamic sense-making system).

Being introduced between the two world wars, the Russian salad arrived in Bulgaria in times, when the notion of "Russian" carried a strong emotional load. On political level, having sided with Germany in the First World War, the country had ceased its diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. But the large wave of Russian immigrants, who had entertained and "scented" the everyday life of Sofia, for the time-being embodied the "Russianness" to Bulgarians.

The situation must have changed in 1944, when the communist government took power with the support of the USSR. The presence of the Soviet Army and later the Soviet political pressure, mediated by locally reproduced ideological discourses changed the content of the "Russianness". It

[69] A. Ichijo & R. Ranta, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism.* London, 2016.

[70] O. de Maret & A. Geyzen, 'Tastes of Homes: Exploring Food and Place in Twentieth-Century Europe'. *Food and Foodways* 23, N 1–2, 2015, p. 1–13.

is today difficult to judge if the Russian salad had preserved its connection with the White Guard immigrants in the Sofiantsi's minds by 1944. But in any case the dish made it unscathed through the dramatic cultural reorientation, to which the cookbooks were subjected in the first years of the communist state publishing. Then almost all the references to Western dishes were removed, while those to Soviet or Eastern European cuisines increased.[71] The cookbooks indicate no tension around the dish, even if to locals it might have been more related to Tsarist Russia than to the Soviets.

Since the dish stayed throughout most of the 20th century a beloved part of any celebration, and since it remained to be called Russian, it presents an interesting case of persistent functional assimilation in the Bulgarian cuisine and (possibly) of semantic distanciation from its "Russianness". As the recipe was introduced in Bulgaria under the name "Russian salad" and no "Olivier" was ever attached to it before 1989, the perception of its "Russianness" seems to have been on the one hand unchallenged and definitive. But there are signs that at some point through history the name might have been lost its literate meaning.

In Bulgarian language the names of nations or the related adjectives are not written with a capital letter, unless they are at the beginning of a sentence or part of a name. Already since the 1950s the dish is written without a capitalisation of the first letter. This use of the word indicates either that the dish was perceived as Russian, or as a term, rather than a name (like French fries).

A further investigation on the matter in the cookbooks reveals wordings such as "a salad of the type "**r**ussian",[72] and also shows the dish becoming increasingly treated not as a dish per se, but as an ingredient: as a spread on sandwiches (ever since 1935)[73], or as filling in crepes, or even as stuffing for cabbage.[74] This could possibly indicate the understanding of the Russian salad as a generic dish, but such conclusion remains interpretative.

One further evidence of an ongoing assimilation of the dish in the Bulgarian cuisine offers *Contemporary Domestic Cooking. 2000 Bulgarian and Foreign Recipes*, published in 1972, where

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[71] A. Shkodrova and A. Spalvena, *Soviet and National in the Cookbooks of Latvia and Bulgaria (1944-1968)*. Paper presentation at Food and Drink in Communist Europe, International conference, Brussels, 19-20 April 2018.

[72] S. Smolnitska, Предястия [Starters]. Sofia, 1986, p. 74-75.

[73] Hakanova, Соленки и сладки, p. 11.

[74] P. Cholcheva and C. Kalaydzhieva, Съвременна домашна кухня [Contemporary Domestic Cooking]. Sofia, 1972.

the recipes in each section are divided into two groups: one, which is dedicated to classes of dishes (for example Eggs and Omelettes), and another with "foreign cuisine". Within this division, the Russian salad falls into the first group, implying it hasn't been recognised as "foreign"[75]. It is possible that another evidence of the semantic disassociation of the name from the notion of Russianness is precisely the fact that the name was kept and was never problematised. Despite of its very intensive involvement in the domestic celebration rituals and despite of the social division on the role of Russia in the Bulgarian history (which became evident after the fall of the communist regime), I was unable to identify any attempts to rename the dish or to discuss its name. There are no evidences in the cookbooks of any tension between the name and the high levels of assimilation of the dish.

In her study of references to "Russian" food in foreign languages Berezovich argued that the dish was called Russian by some Russians and predominantly outside Russia with a reference to its function, as opposed to salad Olivier, which is a reference to its genesis. However it seems that "Russian" was gradually deprived of meaning in this particular case and similarly to "French fries" gradually came to indicate not the origin, but the type of the food.

This development could be interpreted as another illustration how a sense-making system may autonomously evolve, transforming on the way its identity in intricate (and not necessarily linguistically-mediated!) ways. Perhaps it is also a proof how the habitual and automatised, whose connection to the embodied deserves to be researched and theorised, co-creates meaning together with, or sometimes instead of the discursive. From this point of view the case study can be summarised as a case, when the initial identity, introduced with one national attachment, evolved into identity with another national attachment (or at least with losing its initial one) without though losing its semantic integrity of a celebratory dish. Such would be probably the case of any assimilated foodstuff or dish, which initially arrives in a local cuisine with a foreign label and is then often liberated from it, obtaining a degree of "ownness".

This perspective allows to draw a conclusion that the "national" and "own" can be only an element in the sense-making process, and one, which can gain and lose role without necessarily damaging the integrity of the identity of the dish (as a sense-making practice). It is also probably an indication

[75] Ibid.

that the discursive value of “own” should not be overestimated, since it is often boosted by (and mistakenly analysed as being one with) other elements, interacting in the sense-making process, such as existing skills, tastes, habits (in meaning-making, but also in bodily functionality) and others.

This case study offers only a narrow window onto the potential of the enactivist theory’s application in food studies and in consumption studies. Due to some limitations of the sources, it showed some advantages of the theory better than others. Certainly the translation/extension of the concepts needs further work and the achievements in consumption and food studies can be probably used to help the development of the enactivist theory. However I have illustrated that it answers in a consistent and ontologically sound way some long-standing questions, surrounding the emergence and the dynamics of social practices, which it conceptualises as sense-making systems.

With this article I also show the complexity of the circumstances, which interacted to sustain the status of the Russian salad. One of the conclusions I draw is that there is no direct causality, which made its success possible, but it emerged and was maintained by the relations of a complex system, consisting of many elements on varying levels. Finally I suggest that the notion of ‘national’ attachment is not necessarily a central, or even existent element of a food identity, even when the food is clearly and persistently linguistically related to such notion. In fact the case study shows that the content of the perceived national attachment can change, without even causing a modulation on linguistic level, and without challenging the integrity of a food/dish identity.