Comparing Aspects of Regional and Local Cinema Differentiation through Perceptions of Cinema-going in Post-socialist Bulgaria

Maya Nedyalkova

Email: mnedyalkova@brookes.ac.uk

Abstract:

This chapter compares the differentiated contemporary cinema infrastructure across six regions in Bulgaria with reference to wider film exhibition changes across post-socialist Eastern Europe. Despite a recent overall rise in the number of cinema screens in the country, the concentration of the market in large high-priced urban venues, screening predominantly Hollywood content, has made cinema both less accessible and less attractive to certain groups of spectators. Cinema-going transformed from an inclusive, low-cost, popular everyday activity during socialism to an exclusive special occasion that fewer people can now afford. The current emphasis on optimising profitability often proves at odds with local views on accessibility, measured by perceptions of ticket price, ease of going to the cinema- and film-related information flows. Comparing accounts of respondents from different Bulgarian localities and across the six regions within the country serves to illustrate preoccupations with social value, programming strategies, and disparities in local provisions.

Keywords: Film exhibition, Audience, Regional film culture, Post-socialism, Bulgaria, Eastern Europe

“Don’t worry! The lights will go out now, so that we can see the films better.” This forewarning preceded the screening of select short films during the 2021 edition of the Meetings of Young European Cinema Festival in Sofia. The pictures were created by school students from small towns and villages in Bulgaria through a limited film education programme and showcased to their peers.[i] As the festival organisers later explained, it was usually necessary to reassure their young audiences, most of whom had never been to the cinema before, that there was no power cut and that turning off the lights was the standard practice at a film screening.

Moments like these highlight in tangible terms the shift in film-viewing experiences across particular audience segments in post-socialist Bulgaria. This chapter compares the differentiated contemporary cinema infrastructure across six national regions in the context of exhibition changes taking place not only in Bulgaria but also across Eastern Europe. Despite a recent overall rise in the number of cinema screens in the country, the concentration of the market in large high-priced urban venues, screening predominantly Hollywood content, has made cinema both less accessible and less attractive to certain groups of spectators. Cinema-going transformed from an inclusive, low-cost, popular everyday activity during socialism to an exclusive special occasion that fewer people can now afford in terms of finances and, sometimes, time. The current emphasis of the Bulgarian cinema industry on optimising profitability often proves at odds with local views on accessibility, measured by perceptions of ticket price, ease of going to the cinema and film-related information flows. Comparing accounts of respondents from different localities and across the six regions within the country serves to illustrate preoccupations with social value, programming strategies and disparities in local provisions. By triangulating official statistical data with viewer perceptions and experiences, defined by age, location and, sometimes, gender and socio-economic status, this comparative study uncovers overlooked voices addressing systemic inequalities across Bulgarian cinema exhibition. Shifting between a micro and macro focus helps to expose issues in post-socialist cinema culture developments that transcend national borders and suggests the need for collaborative thinking in the name of local audiences.

Literature and Sources

This chapter answers the call of Biltereyst and Meers (2016) for more comparative perspectives on cinema cultures, systematically looking beyond temporal and spatial confines to address overarching tendencies or unique phenomena in film reception, investigate dis/similar patterns and test explanatory hypotheses. In addition to regional and local comparisons within the country, this literature review and subsequent analysis address broader links between the Eastern and Western European contexts of cinema-going. Analysing viewer experiences often appears secondary to reflecting on film texts, national policies, famous actors, *auteur* styles and industry developments not only in Bulgarian but also in Eastern European academia. In this way, this chapter forms part of a still limited but valuable body of scholarship.

During state socialism, researcher and publicist Emil Lozev and his team at the Bulgarian National Scientific and Information Centre for Culture conducted two representative sociological studies (respectively, in 1972–1973 and in 1980–1981) titled "Cinema and Spectators." Their aim was to examine the socio-demographic structure of domestic cinema audiences, the way spectators communicate with cinema and their feelings towards and expectations of film art (Panicherski, 1982, p. 36). More recently, for his microhistory of film distribution, exhibition and reception in the city of Plovdiv, Kostov (1999) utilised auto-ethnography, oral history interviews with early film professionals/enthusiasts and archival research to triangulate official print media sources with local memories of cinema-going and film culture. In a similar qualitative turn, Anisimovich (2019) combined textual and contextual film analysis, focus groups with members of the audience and interviews with local filmmakers in order to analyse social, economic and political issues shaping identities in Bulgaria post-socialism. Her work is valuable for investigating the ideological underpinnings of contemporary Bulgarian pictures and the active interpretative functions of local audiences in making sense of their messages. Concerned with audiences but through a positivist perspective was Donev's monograph (2018) on the recent shifts in Bulgarian film production, distribution and exhibition. It brought together film studies with sociology and economics, drawing on official attendance statistics and box office dynamics to outline from an empirical perspective the factors contributing towards a film's popularity and viewer success in Bulgaria. Outside of these examples, a large proportion of Bulgarian film studies treat audiences predominantly as imagined constructs. As Christie (2012, p. 11) points out, the problem with this approach is that viewers could be credited with "preferences and responses which are mere hypotheses, or projections of the author's assumptions and prejudices." The views and experiences of contemporary Bulgarian audiences have largely remained confined to online forum commentaries, occasional journalistic pieces and rare interactive film popularity rankings in the media.[ii] This side-lining of the voices of viewers in research implicitly creates a top-down approach to local film culture, undermining the value of audience opinions and preventing critical dialogue on established industry structures, protocols of operation and onscreen representations.

Eastern European cinema scholarship presents similar issues. Most English-language works, which otherwise usefully reflect on exhibition developments after the end of the Cold War, do so in the context of production and national cinema studies. Audience experiences are largely missing from most accounts. For instance, Hames' (2000, pp. 66–67) and Hanzlík's (2017) report on the Czech Republic's transition from a stated-controlled to an open-market film industry, during which Hollywood came to dominate local distribution and exhibition, amidst a general drop in cinema attendance and in the number of cinema theatres. To differentiate and increase interest in cinema-going, Czech independent venues, specialised film events and multiplexes alike focused their efforts on "eventisation" and the explicit targeting of different audience segments. As part of a study on the similar transformation of distribution practices in Poland post-1989, Adamczak (2020) briefly discusses local market concentration, which resolved "cinema-distributor power plays" through the integration of Hollywood subsidiary distributors and newly established multiplex chains. This resulted in block-booking screens and a significant change in cinema-going perceptions, with a practical and ideological shift towards consumption, entertainment and pleasure. Konecny (2017) succinctly details analogous developments in post-Soviet Moldova, where less than ten full-time cinema theatres remain open, most of which based in larger cities and screening Hollywood or Russian content. The relatively high ticket prices and frequent practice of dubbing in Russian discourage young people from attending, so internet piracy proves a popular alternative. Speaking of alternative exhibition strategies, Kayhan Müldür (2021) and Çam and Şanlier Yüksel (2021) examine the history and subsequent re-invigoration of open-air film screenings across Turkish urban localities. Ethnographic audience observation provides valuable insight into the nostalgia and community-building which these alternative exhibition spaces appear to foster. Papadimitriou and Grgić's (2020) edited volume on contemporary Balkan cinema—with chapters on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey—also traces (among other topics) the infrastructural difficulties of reaching local audiences in the respective national exhibition sectors, often dominated by Hollywood products and multiplex chains. Alternative forms of film screenings, the proliferation of film festivals as well as educational and audience development initiatives have proved essential for diversifying the cinema offer and opportunities for engagement in the Balkan region. Finally, in a rare mixed-method study of Estonian film audiences, Kauber (2022) examines expectations and perceptions of cinema-going in relation to different viewing environments in local art house and multiplex venues. His study draws comparisons with Western audience investigations on the importance of sociality, eventfulness, space, going offline and technical conditions while also highlighting the role national films play in stimulating local cinema attendance. These studies provide an insight into the changing exhibition landscape after the end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, of which Bulgaria proves an indelible part.

My interest in contrasting regional and local film cultures was also informed by similar work conducted in Western Europe. For instance, Biltereyst and Van de Vijver (2016) explore the link between urbanity, the hierarchy of spatial structures and sustainable cinema exhibition in Flanders, and practically explain the concentration of multiplex and art-house cinemas in cities through the central-place theory, which views urban centres as main providers of goods and services to the surrounding region. A network of independent commercial cinemas is, instead, found across regional centres and smaller cities in Belgium. My analysis was further inspired by Merrington et al. (2021), who challenge a fixed territorial understanding of regional inequality in film exhibition provisions across Northern and Western England. Their research reflects on the audiences' sense of place and geographic relationship with cinema as well as on the development of unique film exhibition ecologies across distinctive settlements. The authors point out that the UK is subject to market consolidation and intense commercialisation (similar to the briefly discussed Eastern European context) with regional screen density developing disproportionally and the capital London as well as the South region benefitting the most. There is an impulse to support the devolution of decisionmaking to UK regions, in line with the need for localised interventions, but cultural inequalities and wider social, economic and political situations still inform viewers' accounts and experiences. In addition, the studies by Irandoust (2017) on cinema-going in Sweden and Cuadrado-García et al. (2018) on Spanish film-goers provided a useful overview of film-specific, socio-economic, situational and demographic factors understood to influence viewer demand, motivations and barriers to cinema-going, which, in turn, serve to shape theoretical and practical approaches to audience segmentation.[iii] So, my study forms part of reflections on the development of the regional and localised film cultures across Europe with regard to market and viewer dynamics.

This overview reveals that the case of Bulgaria is not unique. A number of studies outline a similar shrinking and centralising exhibition landscape across Eastern and Western Europe with little programming variety beyond Hollywood but efforts by state and independent organisations put into alternative exhibition strategies. In this chapter, I examine in further detail changing notions of cinema accessibility through the perspective of Bulgarian viewers across different regions and localities. This geographical comparative dimension stands in contrast to most previous work in the field of Eastern European cinema. The findings are further contextualised with regard to the comparative experiences of viewers according to select demographic characteristics (most prominently age and location, but occasionally also gender and socio-economic status). Reflections on differentiated regional infrastructure and viewer segmentation further evoke supra-national comparisons. Useful sources, in that respect, prove publications by the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (NSI), the Bulgarian National Film Center, European Union's MEDIA Salles project and the European Audiovisual Observatory.

Method

This chapter stems from a large-scale mixed model study of contemporary Bulgarian film viewers, inspired by the interdisciplinarity of the New Cinema History movement (Maltby, 2011).[iv] I combine parallel qualitative and quantitative approaches across all phases of the research process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, pp. ix–x). I triangulate data sources, theories and methods to uncover how audiences interact with and are influenced by general media developments and structures. This methodological pluralism is favoured by Schrøder et al. (2003, p. vii), who advocate for combining reception research and audience surveys, among other complementary tools, for exploring social and cultural meaning processes and practices. The authors develop and apply the concept of discursive realism to audience research, which explains the decisive role played by language and discourse in gaining an insight into audiences. Schrøder et al. (2003, p. 45) acknowledge that research findings are interpreted "versions" of reality but argue for the need for generalisation in order to uncover consistent and "truthful" accounts, which help us understand shared experiences of media consumption. This attitude to audience research flexibly combines exploration with hypothesis-testing, with the implied understanding that social and cultural phenomena are, in a way, constructed alongside the process of observation.[v] By adopting a realist approach, I acknowledge the subjectivity of the individual viewer perspective but find reflecting on it useful in uncovering essential truths about the experiential reality of film exhibition and consumption in Bulgaria. The end goal is to begin to democratise the understanding of current film industry developments and facilitate productive dialogue between policy-makers, film professionals, critics and scholars, on the one hand, and film viewers, on the other.

Through a geographical comparison, based on the location and size of the different settlements explored, as well as attention to the participants' different demographic characteristics, this chapter illustrates the need for differentiated understanding when exploring notions of cinema-going accessibility and value. Data collection activities took place during the summer of 2018 and secured 580 valid survey questionnaire responses (either online or in paper format) across 75 settlements and 86 focus group participants from 18 settlements of diverse sizes and locations across Bulgaria. Heterogeneous groups were targeted across a vast geographical spread, but the participants were ultimately recruited through convenience sampling and were self-selected volunteers. As a result, the sample dataset was skewed, compared to the general population in the country and to previous cinema-goer statistics (see Table 6.1). The majority of the questionnaire respondents were women (67.3%), relatively young (16−25 years old: 42%), well-educated (55.9% with higher education), employed at highly qualified positions (30%) or still students (34%), living in very large settlements (49%), of predominantly Bulgarian ethnic origin (98%), with high self-assessed IT skills (68%), using a personal computer, laptop or tablet when browsing the internet (60%) and interested in arts, learning and creativity, in terms of hobbies (47%). The focus group participants were similarly unevenly distributed, with the prevalence of younger people (16−25 years old: 37.2%), women (79%) and participants coming from medium-sized (37%) and large (29%) settlements.[vi]

Table 6.1 Comparison between general population and cinema-going statistics in Bulgaria (as adapted from NSI reports), the questionnaire sample dataset and the demographics of the focus group participants.

	General population:	**People who attended the cinema once or more in 2016:**	**Questionnaire respondents:**	**Focus group participants:**
Gender:	Men: 48%; Women: 52%	Men: 50,07%; Women: 49,93%	Men: 32,7%, Women: 67,3%	Men: 21%; Women: 79%
Age:	<14: 14%; 15-24: 9%; 25-49: 35%; 50-64: 21%; 65-79: 16%: >80: 5%	25-34: 50,13%; 35-54: 36,03%; 55-64: 15,4%	16-25: 42%; 26-45: 38%; 46-65: 17%; 66+: 3%	16-25 – 37,2%; 26-45 – 16,3%; 46-65 – 30,2%; 66+ – 16,3%
Education:	Higher: 19,6%; Further: 43,4%; Primary: 13,9%; No education: 23,1%	Higher: 61,83%; Further: 31,44%; Primary or lower: 6,73%	Higher: 55,9%; Further: 28,7%; Primary: 15,4%; No education: 0%	−
Occupation:	Managerial, specialist: 7,66%; Technical, admin, service or military: 11,3%; Skilled: 6,85%; Unqualified:	Employed: 58,83%; Unemployed: 20,03%;	Managerial, specialist: 30%; Technical, admin, service or military: 23%; Skilled: 4%;	−

	3,3%; Retired: 3,11%; Student: 13,53%; Unemployed: 5,02% ; Persons not in the labour force: 49,23%	Economically inactive: 21,14%	Unqualified: 2%; Retired: 4%; Student: 34%; Unemployed: 3%	
Settlement size:	Very small (+ villages): 38.%; Small: 10%; Medium: 18%; Large: 4%; Very large: 30%	Cities/towns: 74,68%; Villages: 25,32%	Very small (+ villages): 5%; Small: 13%; Medium: 26%; Large: 7%; Very large: 49%	Very small – 3%; Small – 13%; Medium – 37%; Large – 29%; Very large – 17%
Ethnicity:	Bulgarian: 84%; Turkish: 9%; Roma: 5%; Russian: 0,10%; Other: 1,9%	–	Bulgarian: 98%; Turkish: 0,4%; Roma: 0,6%; Russian: 0,4%; Other: 0,6%	–
IT skills (self-assessed):	–	–	5 – 30%; 4 – 38%; 3 – 24%; 2 – 5%; 1- 2%; 0 – 1%	–
Internet access preference:	–	–	PC, laptop, tablet: 60%; Phone: 37%; Smart TV: 2%; No access at home: 1%	–
Hobbies:	–	–	Arts, learning, creativity: 47%; Quiet pastimes: 7%; Socialising: 15%; Physical/travel: 11%; Online: 15%; Other: 5%	–

In order to understand how viewers in different parts of the country perceived access to cinema-going, it is essential to provide some administrative context as well. Officially, the Bulgarian territory is divided in two large regions: Northern and Eastern Bulgaria, on the one hand, and South-Western and South-Central Bulgaria, on the other.[vii] These districts are further comprised of six smaller planning regions—Northwestern (NW), Northern Central (NC), Northeastern (NE), Southeastern (SE), Southwestern (SW) and Southern Central (SC)—which are split into 28 provinces and 265 municipalities (see Image 6.1). The regions are formally and informally differentiated according to landform, population numbers, local industries and developed infrastructure. Generally speaking, the North is a more mountainous, less populated and poorer area with more adverse weather conditions than the South (where the capital Sofia also lies). In terms of geographical spread, the majority of questionnaire respondents lived in the SW (40.5%) and SC (17.3%) planning regions, whereas most focus group participants came from the SE (53.5%) or SW (23.3%) regions (see Table 6.2).

Image 6.1 Map of Bulgarian regions and planning regions, as classified by NUTS

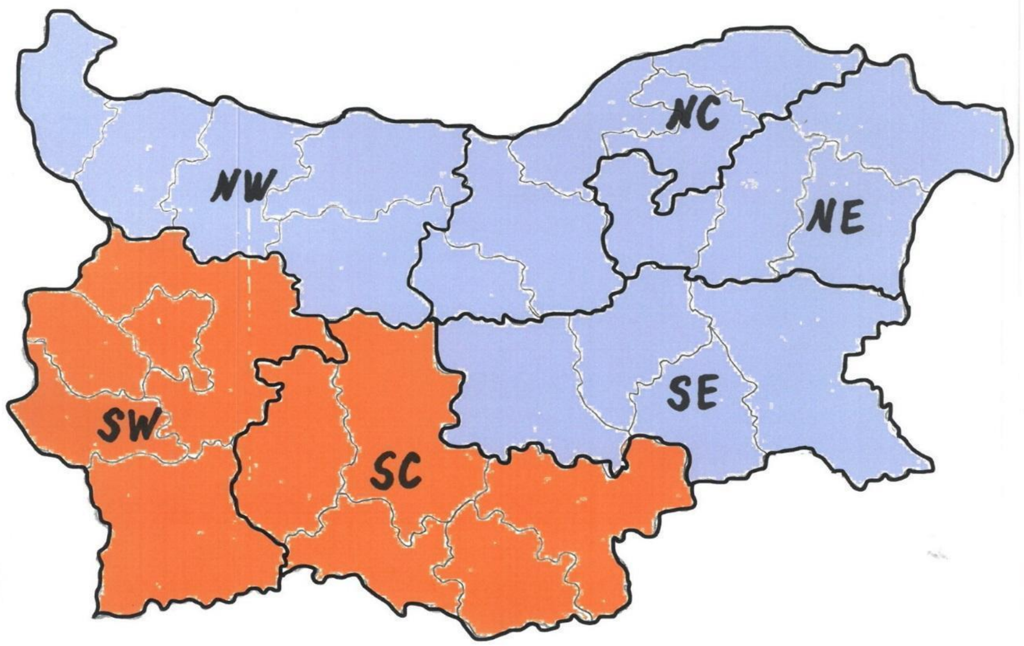

Table 6.2 Spread of questionnaire and focus group participants according to planning regions, as classified by NUTS

Planning regions:	**NW**	**NC**	**NE**	**SE**	**SC**	**SW**
Location of questionnaire participants:	10,2%	5,5%	9,8%	16,7%	17,3%	40,5%
Location of focus group participants:	2,3%	4,7%	2,3%	53,5%	14%	23,3%

While the findings of this project might not be representative for the whole of the Bulgarian population or consistently reflect cinema-goer profiles, the dataset and focus group discussions prove valuable for analysing film-viewing tendencies across a large geographical area of the country, featuring particularly engaged and outspoken viewers. Indeed, the participants professed high interest in film (whether seen in cinemas or not), recounted their film-related experiences enthusiastically and reflected in quite some depth on their varied engagement with different film-viewing practices.[viii] Thus, the study provides a useful starting point for uncovering certain personal, communal and regional aspects which cannot be practically reflected in formal statistics on cinemagoing. It also offers a valuable case study of how audiences in Eastern Europe reflect on their experiences of changing film exhibition structures post-socialism.

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to rate on the five-point Likert scale (from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”) the following statements: “Cinema tickets are too expensive nowadays”; “If I feel like going to the cinema, I can easily do so”; and “In general, I feel well-informed about what films are screened in my town/area.” During the focus groups, the participants were encouraged to reflect on open-ended questions, such as: “What, for you, is the perfect place for watching films?”; “How do you learn about new films?”; “What does going to the cinema mean to you?”; “What makes you/could make you go more often?” and “Imagine and describe the next Bulgarian cinema theatre.”[ix] The aim was to learn about the participants’ relationship with cinema, their perceptions of the cost of cinema-going, the influence of location and other factors on ease of access as well as the ability to obtain information and participate in communications about film. Microsoft Office Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics were employed for describing and inferring from quantitative data and QSR NVivo—for qualitative coding of emergent themes.[x] Before I proceed to discuss the results, however, it is essential to provide some context for the factors shaping the development of Bulgarian and, by extension, Eastern European film exhibition post-socialism.

The Development of the Post-socialist Exhibition Landscape

During the years of state socialism (1944−1989), the Bulgarian film industry was nationalised and vertically integrated. The state had invested in expanding the exhibition infrastructure and, by the 1980s, the number of cinemas in the country exceeded 3000. The majority were single-screen, not particularly luxurious in terms of setting and located in rural areas (NSI, 1990, p. 423). Due to state censorship, their programming consisted of predominantly ideologically safe films. Still, cinema-going was a popular and frequent pastime, with annual attendances nearing 100 million in the 1980s (NSI, 1994, p. 270). While the state agenda of catering to viewers from smaller settlements contributed to a sense of accessibility and inclusivity (a point to which I come back later in the discussion), internal government communication suggests that most of these venues operated at a loss (Statulov, 2021).[xi] With the changeover to democracy, new laws on monopoly and free trade, and the tumultuous socio-economic crises which followed, the vertically integrated system was dismantled and the state-owned exhibition network found itself in decline.

Donev (2018, pp. 199–204) details the manifold reasons behind the closing down of Bulgarian cinemas between 1995 and 2004. Firstly, the majority were in a poor general condition, with the lack of upkeep and modernisation a result of the low average ticket price (reportedly, between 0.33 and 0.37 US dollars outside of Sofia versus 2 US dollars in other Eastern European territories and 4.5 US dollars in the rest of Europe). By 1988 only 227 cinemas—most of which in larger towns and cities—were turning a profit and that number dropped further in the 1990s. At the same time, newly formed private distribution companies, representing the big Hollywood studios, protested the programming policies of the still state-owned company Sofia Film, which controlled the most financially lucrative part of the exhibition market. These private distributors set their sights on entering exhibition in order to maximise their profits but needed to minimise the investment risks of building multiplexes. In tandem with real estate companies looking for cheap properties in desirable locations and banks securing credits for the building of new cinemas, they systematically lobbied for and took part in the privatisation and closing down of the old venues. Meanwhile, Bulgarian audiences were affected by multiple financial crises and unprecedented inflation, which decreased their buying power and disposable income and intensified urbanisation patterns. The increased availability of new technologies (such as cable and satellite TV, video and the internet) further diminished the popularity of cinema-going. Consequently, cinema attendances dropped consistently with every passing year until they reached their lowest—1.9 million—in 2000 (NSI, 2004, p. 423).

In the 2000s, cinema-going slowly began to recover. Donev (2018, p. 204) credits the re-invigoration of attendance and increase in profits with the establishment, expansion and appeal of the cinema chains linked to the big distribution companies Alexandra Films and Forum Films. Indeed, after the first *Arena* multiplex opened in 2003, followed shortly by the launch of the first *Cinema City* venue (part of an Israeli network catering to Central and Eastern Europe) in 2006, annual attendance numbers grew and stabilised at 4.5 to 5.5 million, in the five years prior to the pandemic (Bulgarian National Film Center, 2018; NSI, 2022a).[xii] The accompanying consolidation of the domestic exhibition market and change in programming were palpable.

Between 2003 and 2018 the number of cinema venues dropped from 146 to 69, while the number of cinema screens increased from 200 to 226. The overall seating capacity decreased from 52,865 in 2003 to 38,952 in 2018 (NSI, n.d.-a). This shift suggests an investment in a high number of small halls within a given venue, in order to maximise the amount of screenings per day and minimise loss from empty seats, while creating an exclusive environment inside. The updated and luxurious atmosphere predetermined a rise in the average ticket price. It increased to 4.80 euro—a significant jump from what was reported in the 1990s. Even though Bulgaria consistently remains the poorest country in the European Union, the average ticket price climbed higher than that across Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean Rim, which at the time stood at 3.42 euro (Media Salles, 2020). This increased annual box office earnings from 13.7 million leva (6.9 million euro) in 2003 to 46 million leva (or 23 million euro) in 2018 (NSI, n.d.-a). While improving the profitability of exhibition business, the prohibitive influence such a price hike had on certain cinema-goers is reflected later in this chapter. The increased integration between distributors representing Hollywood studios and local exhibition structures, consistent with developments in the rest of the Eastern European region, predictably influenced programming as well, with US productions forming over 80% of the average number of new releases and that of cinema screenings (NSI, n.d.-b). A slightly greater diversity could be seen in select venues in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Targovishte and Kavarna, which formed part of the Europa Cinemas network (Bulgarian National Film Center, 2018, p. 48).[xiii] To uncover further local specificities, a nuanced comparison across regions and places proves essential.

At the end of 2017, there were clear concentration patterns in the Bulgarian film exhibition infrastructure (see Image 6.2). The Southwestern region featured the highest number of cinema venues and screens. Sofia proved an outlier and inflated the statistics of the region, with its fourteen cinemas and 101 screens. The Northeastern region had the second highest number of cinemas and screens, followed closely by the Southeastern. The Northern Central region had slightly more screens and less venues than the Southern Central. The lowest number of both cinemas and screens was in the Northwestern region (see Table 6.3). This differentiation echoes the findings by Merrington et al. (2021) on the privileged position of the capital city and immediate region surrounding it with regard to cultural investment and development.

Image 6.2 Cinema venue and cinema screen clusters across settlements in the six Bulgarian planning regions, as outlined by the Bulgarian National Film Center at the end of 2017.

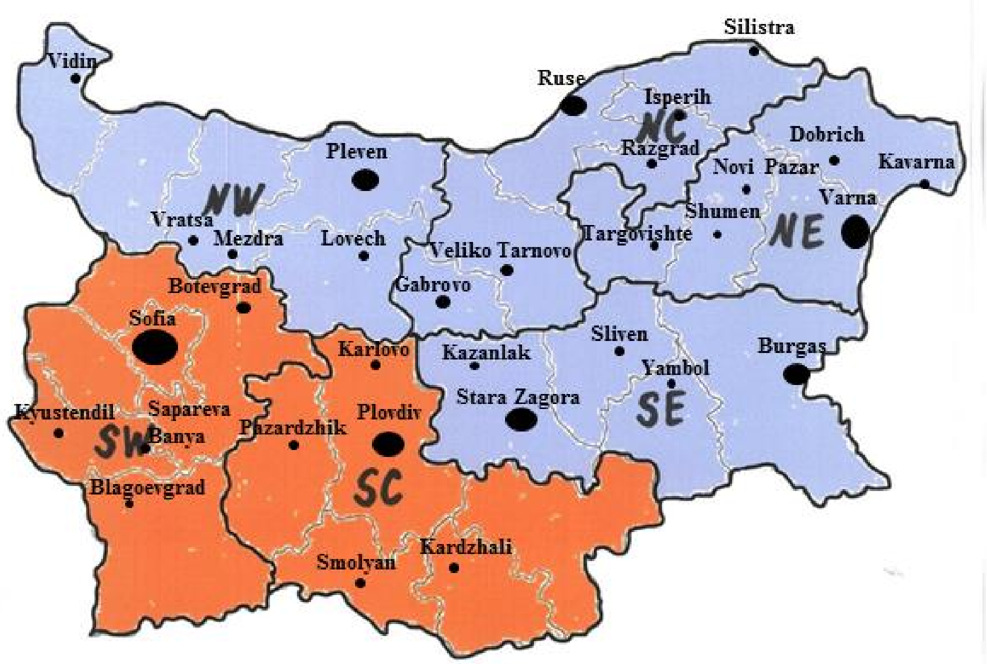

Table 6.3 Number of cinemas, multiplexes (with six or more screens) and screens across the six Bulgarian planning regions, according to data from the Bulgarian National Film Center at the end of 2017

	NC	NE	NW	SC	SE	SW
Total number of cinemas:	6	11	6	9	6	18
Of which multiplexes:	1	2	0	3	3	8
Total number of screens:	18	27	9	12	26	106

In line with Biltereyst and Van de Vijver's (2016) application of central-place theory informing spatial hierarchies of cinema exhibition, there were variations in cinema offer, according to the size of the different Bulgarian settlements. Twenty-nine out of the 56 cinemas were located in very large or large cities and a further 19—in medium-sized towns. Only eight venues were available to residents in small or very small settlements. Unsurprisingly, the multiplexes concentrated in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Ruse and Burgas—the largest cities in the country—generated over 70% of the box office takings. Even though the majority of venues in Bulgaria at the time were single-screen and small miniplexes (with two to three screens), most of the profits were generated by the multiplexes (with six or more screens), located in large urban areas (Bulgarian National Film Center, 2018).

As previously mentioned, the case of Bulgaria is not unique within the Eastern European context. A recent report by the European Audiovisual Observatory reveals that Eastern European countries account for 20% of the European Union population but only have access to 11.9% of all the screens in the Union. So, while the formative influences on the development of cinema post-1989 are similar across Eastern and Western countries, in the Eastern part of the continent exhibition structures need further growth. Average admissions per capita in Eastern Europe are well below the EU average, which is likely due to the lack of venues in certain, mostly rural areas—as is the case in Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Eastern European countries 87.4% of the population have at least one cinema within the suggested catchment area of a driving time of 30 minutes. However, countries such as Bulgaria and Romania display a notable polarisation, with a significant share of the population having access to just one screen (24.14%), and an equally significant share of cinema-goers enjoying access to more than 100 screens (24.36%) (Talavera, 2018, pp. 11, 16, 20). So, this uneven development of the cinema network and consolidation of the exhibition business around more populous and profitable regions significantly affects other post-socialist states as well. Talavera concludes that

> the region relies heavily on monoscreens, usually located in the centre of cities. This does not, however, imply that most cinema tickets are sold for monoscreens, as there is no direct link between accessibility of a type of theatre and its level of admissions. It may well be that multiplexes in suburban areas are accessible to fewer people in a given territory, but that the level of admissions is much higher than that for monoscreen theatres. (Talavera, 2018, p. 38).

This contradiction between the accessibility and profitability of cinema, exemplified across Eastern European countries, remains at the heart of long-lasting debates about the cultural and business value of the arts, more generally, especially in relation to justifying state financing and legislative support. As illustrated in the following section, this tension implicitly informed the perspectives of the participants in my research who discussed both the social significance of access to cinema and the need for financial sustainability of the sector.

Survey Questionnaire and Focus Group Findings

Perceived Cost of Cinema-going

Questionnaire and focus group participants evaluated the current pricing strategies of local theatres and reflected on their implications. The majority of survey respondents (50.7%) felt that cinema tickets were too expensive and, given that the average ticket price in Bulgaria was higher than the average for the Central, Eastern and Southern European regions, such opinions were unsurprising.[xiv] There were differences across participants from the six planning regions. The largest percentage of questionnaire respondents who thought that cinema ticket prices were too high came from the NW region (64.4%). In comparison, only 45.5% thought so in the SW region—the lowest rating given across all six regions. This result is likely linked to the fact that a significant number of respondents from the SW region lived in Sofia and earned more, on average, than their counterparts across the country and, particularly, in the North West (NSI, 2022b).

There was a significant difference between the groups of the different settlement sizes as well.[xv] Participants coming from medium-sized towns were significantly more in agreement that cinema tickets were too expensive than respondents from small-sized settlements.[xvi] It is possible that the latter were more likely to be commuters, employed in larger cities, and, thus, earning more than participants from medium-sized towns. This could also be a testament to the differentiated development of film exhibition and changing perceptions of what cinema should be. Perhaps participants from medium-sized settlements found that the cinemas available to them were too expensive in comparison not only to their standard of living but also to what they were offered in terms of viewer experience.

That was the case with a female focus group participant, aged 46–65, from the medium-sized town of Kazanlak (in the SE planning region) who considered affordability when reflecting on what going to the cinema meant to her:

> Well, [it's] a holiday, because it happens rarely. For me, it's a pleasure.… A special occasion. I go [there] in high spirits. But the tickets are expensive, in my opinion… if they are just a little cheaper. They lower the prices every day.… Yes, the day before changing the programme.… But [it depends on] at what time it's on, because you have to go to Stara Zagora … but, yes, if [tickets] were cheaper, I would go more often.

The perceived high ticket price rendered cinema a special occasion for this participant. She deliberated on the added cost and time of commuting to the cinema in a nearby large city but when asked about the monoscreen venue in her hometown, she did not appear very interested in attending. Her opinion had to do with the fact that *Latona Cinema* Kazanlak, part of a mini-chain in mostly medium-sized towns, had a small seating capacity (only 50 seats), was situated in a neighbourhood far away from the city centre and featured predominantly children and young adults programming. Even though the ticket price there was somewhat lower than that in the nearby *Cinema City* in Stara Zagora—an average of 7.50 leva (or 3.84 euro) versus 8.95 leva (or 4.56 euro)—she believed the ideal cinema experience would include a more luxurious setting and greater choice. Bearing in mind that the majority of medium-sized settlements in Bulgaria were served by either *Latona* or the similar *Kinopolis*[xvii] small chain, this could mean that viewers there found the tickets to be inadequately priced for the experience offered, especially in comparison to larger, more luxurious and only slightly less affordable venues. This finding corresponds with Adamczak's (2020) observation (in the context of Poland) that cinema-going came to epitomise heightened consumption, entertainment and pleasure post-socialism.

Still, general pricing strategies proved a point of contention between this particular participant and her male counterpart, aged 26–45, from Kazanlak. When she suggested that 5 leva (2.50 euro) would be accessible and still allow filmmakers to recuperate their costs, he countered that the ticket price should be 2–3 leva (1.02–1.53 euro), arguing that a higher number of tickets sold would make up for the difference in price. A similar point was raised in the very large city of Burgas (in the SE planning region), where a 26- to 45-year-old male focus group contributor explained that he could afford to go to the cinema, went often and thought that filmmakers should be appropriately remunerated but also that cinema "needs to be an accessible element for the population … whether you are rich or poor." The majority of viewers acknowledged the need for sustainable profits in the film business but often reached the conclusion that cinema was a cultural good for the many and, as such, should be made more accessible.

Some outliers in this context were the self-professed film buffs who took part in the research. For instance, a 26- to 45-year-old male from the medium-sized town of Kyustendil (in the SW planning region) imagined as the ideal Bulgarian cinema an exclusive, luxurious and extra comfortable theatre with gourmet food, cocktails and special gifts for collectors. He was happy to pay a high price (two to three times the current average) to "receive special treatment" but doubted that many of the Bulgarian viewers would appreciate a cinema experience of enhanced quality when they had to spend so much money for it.

Pricing strategies and views on accessibility proved points of contention which implicitly indicated the influence of age (often linked to changing personal circumstances). While only 48% of respondents aged 16–25 agreed that cinema tickets were too expensive, that percentage consistently increased across the older age groups, reaching 60% for those aged 66+. In general, older research participants had more expenses and dependents to pay for when visiting the cinema, remained more critical of the perceived value for money and drew comparisons with their experiences during socialism, when cinema-going cost significantly less.

To begin with, a male focus group participant, aged 46–65, from the very small town of Tran (in the SW planning region), which had no cinema anymore but was in close proximity to Sofia, talked about the added cost of travelling to the cinema with his family. A 46- to 65-year-old female focus group member from the medium-sized town of Pleven (in the NW planning region) was similarly upset about how much it cost to take a family of three or four to one of the two small miniplexes in her hometown. The older focus group discussants also raised the question of value for money. A female participant, aged 46–65, from the large city of Stara Zagora (in the SE planning region) wondered about the high cinema ticket price, given the "stupid" blockbuster summer programming and the fact that she could spend the same amount on a quality book, theatre play or concert, where she perceived less risk of disappointment and more opportunities for immediacy and live contact. Undeniably, the homogenous, Hollywood-dominated programming across most venues discouraged some participants from attending. The older age group appeared more discerning in that respect. Three female discussants, aged 46–65, from Kyustendil admitted that they were also selective and preferred to see Bulgarian, European or independent American films to big studio productions. Lastly, many of the older generation reminisced about how cheap cinema used to be. A female participant, aged 66+, from the very small town of Kalofer (in the SC planning region) contemplated:

> Everyone says that there is an outflow from cinema because tickets are expensive. They used to be dirt-cheap, such were the times. Bigger towns don't tend to notice the prices [nowadays] because people earn well there. Whereas here, people can't [afford to] go buy [even] bread.

Coupled with the fact that in 2018 the average pension per pensioner in Bulgaria was less than 200 euro per month, it was unsurprising that cinema ticket prices proved prohibitive for viewers aged 66+ (the smallest of the cinema-going segments), who often remembered cinema-going during socialism with nostalgia. So, the location, age and socio-economic circumstances of the participants played an important role in shaping perception of cinema ticket price.

Perceptions on Ease of Access to Cinema

The cost of cinema-going was not the only factor shaping engagement. Encouragingly, 73.6% of the questionnaire respondents reported that they could easily go to the cinema, if they felt like it.[xviii] This was a promising finding, given the general shrinking of the exhibition network post-socialism. It corresponded with European Audiovisual Observatory data that 75.2% of the Bulgarian population was served by cinema theatres within a catchment area of a 30-minute drive, confirming the appropriateness of the adopted measurement of accessibility (Talavera, 2018, p. 23). Though all groups scored 60% or higher, it was, again, participants from the SW region (82.1%), who found it the easiest to go to the cinema. The abundance of venues concentrated in Sofia likely contributed to increased perceptions of accessibility in the region. In contrast, participants from the NC and NW regions found it the most difficult to attend the cinema when they wished to, in line with the low cinema and screen density of the two regions. Furthermore, viewers from large and very large settlements thought it was significantly easier to go to the cinema when they felt like it, in comparison to everyone else.[xix] Such a finding correlates with the concentration of large multiplexes (and some independent venues with more diverse programming) in urban centres, making cinema significantly easier to access for the local population.

The location of the settlement and the cinema density in the area were factors in qualitative responses on ease of going to the cinema as well. As a male survey respondent, aged 46–65, from the medium-sized town of Veliko Tarnovo (in the NC planning region) wrote in the free-text box at the end: “We need more cinema theatres and more meetings with film artists, actors, directors, scriptwriters and cameramen.” As apparent in this comment, the cinema density was implicitly equated with local cultural activity and opportunities for engagement with creators. Another questionnaire respondent, a 16- to 25-year-old male from the very small town of Devin in the mountainous SC planning region, complained: “Unfortunately, there is no theatre/cinema in Devin and, because of this, I can’t go to the cinema often, because the closest cinema is 50 kilometres away.” While it might not seem like a great distance to drive to the closest cinema in Smolyan, the journey would, in fact, take over an hour, due to the particular terrain and irregular alternative transport. So, the landscape, size of the settlement and limited infrastructure precluded certain participants from accessing the existing exhibition network on a more consistent basis.

Another point, frequently raised during the focus group discussions was the time commitment involved in going to the cinema. As a female participant, aged 16–25, from the small town of Karlovo (in the SC planning region) admitted:

> You have to put some time aside in order to go to the cinema. It happened to me, I had tickets … 4 tickets, I think.… And I could watch whichever film I wanted in half a year’s time. I ended up throwing them away because I had absolutely no free time to go … which was a pity. I thought: “I will finally go!” but … we had plans to go and they fell through at the last moment. It takes time.

This particular participant was one of the lucky few who, despite living in a small town, had access to a local cinema without the need to travel. Still, time proved an issue. While younger people found it more difficult to coordinate their schedules and activities in organising group outings, the older (and usually female) viewers had to negotiate work and house chores. A 46- to 65-year-old female participant from the very large city of Sofia reflected:

> I would like to go specifically with the purpose [to watch a film] and not… whilst I’m cleaning these lentil seeds to [meanwhile] watch that film [on TV] … to go, to sit down, to watch it, to have some coffee afterwards, to meet my friends … an occasion to go out [outside of] the usual everyday activities. Because, all in all, when I watch a film nowadays, it’s like a background … when I am at home … at the same time I am talking on the phone, doing something, doing house chores or I am doing something else on the computer and it’s just a background…

When contemplating her ability to go to the cinema, the participant mentioned the price of cinema tickets again, so it is important to consider these two questions as interconnected when analysing the obtained data.

Certainly, age played a similar role when determining ease of going to the cinema to when considering cinema ticket price. While 76% of respondents aged 16–25 agreed or strongly agreed that they could easily go to the cinema when they felt like it, that share dropped to 67%, when considering the responses of participants aged 46–65 and 66+. Consequently, though the ability to attend the cinema depended, to an extent, on personal factors, such as free time and coordination with other people, these too were often linked to the participant's age, location and, occasionally, gender.

Reflections on Film-related Information Flows

The majority of questionnaire participants (75%) felt well-informed about the cinema offer in their area of residence.[xx] There was no significant difference in the perceptions of information flow due to the size of the different settlements. However, respondents from the NC region found learning about the films screened in their town or area the least straightforward.[xxi] Issues with devolved government communication on local culture probably contributed to the feeling of lack of information (a point to which I come back shortly). The age of the respondents made a difference as well. Seventy-six per cent of age groups 16–25 and 26–45 and 74% of age group 46–65 thought it was easy to learn about the films on offer locally. For respondents aged 66+, that percentage dropped to 53. What levelled out access to information flow about new films being screened across different settlement sizes but also precluded some of the oldest viewers of keeping abreast was likely the internet.

When asked how they learned about new films, focus group discussants often echoed the sentiments of the 26- to 45-year-old male participant from the small town of Botevgrad (in the SW planning region), who disclosed:

> Mainly from the internet lately. There aren't as many trailers shown on TV … [So, I read] blogs, specialised film websites, like [my friend's], for film criticism … social media as well, even Facebook groups. I follow [them]. What is interesting is that one of YouTube's latest updates follows your interests and my adverts are [personalised], showing something that you might like … which is OK. I have no problem with it, whilst streaming, because I usually listen to music on YouTube, I come across adverts, which are all about films.

So, the ability to access the internet not only helped democratise but also personalised film-related information flows. However, not everyone in the older generation had the technical skills for it, as admitted by a female participant, aged 66+, from Kazanlak. So, while the web enhanced access to information for some, for others it presented another barrier.

Online information did not completely displace word-of-mouth or more traditional channels of communication. A female discussant, aged 16–25, from the medium-sized town of Gabrovo (in the NC planning region) shared:

> I can say that we get information either from posters … there's a grocery shop that often features brochures or… they have a tableau… there's information specifically about cinema … it's accessible to any citizen. There's no need to mention the internet, [it goes without saying]. Word of mouth. Any other way … the posters really, when I get off at the bus stop in

> the morning, that's the first [thing] I see when I lift my head up—I look at what is expected and when.

So, print materials placed consistently in key locations seemed vital for generating attention and engagement for local screenings. The town of Gabrovo proves an interesting example because it consists of disconnected neighbourhoods at a relatively high altitude in the Balkan mountain that are not easy to move between whilst on foot. As it is more difficult for people to walk between locations and, thus, accidentally meet, so it likely becomes for word-of-mouth information about cinema to travel serendipitously. That same participant also informed the rest of the focus group members about an upcoming local open-air screening, where she was volunteering, organised by the regional administration. The fact that the other discussants, including a self-professed cinema enthusiast who organised a local film club, had not heard of the upcoming event testified to potential lack of uniform information flows about cultural initiatives on the behalf of the municipality. This could be another reason why participants from the NC region felt less privileged in terms of accessing information about new films screened. Finding a way to consistently reach local audiences through a variety of information channels might ensure increased awareness and, thus, grow engagement with film-related events locally.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter brought together official statistics on Bulgarian film exhibition with audience perspectives on cinema-going and accessibility to reflect on the impact which structural changes had on the perceived realities of film consumption. The post-socialist reformation of film business operation in Bulgaria and across Eastern Europe altered the ethos, character, programming and location of venues, turning cinema into an exclusive, mostly urban, Hollywood-dominated and costly pastime. The differentiation of film offer according to the size and regional location of settlements impacted negatively on Bulgarian viewers coming from smaller towns and villages (especially in more mountainous locations with less developed infrastructure) as well as on those of older age. It rendered viewers with less free time (often women) and money more discerning in their cinema-going choices. Even the participants who generally rated positively their ability to go to the cinema when they felt like it and to access film-related information found a point of contention in ticket prices. Debates ensued on the significance of cinema as a social and cultural good and film business sustainability, revealing the vested interest of viewers in finding a reasonable way to enhance access without compromising income for film practitioners. Finally, this chapter outlined inequalities of access which are likely exacerbated when looking beyond the current sample, consisting of participants with generally good resources and education.

The case of Bulgaria is not unique when put in the broader European context. The country is subject to the same forces driving cinema commercialisation and concentration across the continent. However, Eastern Europe remains significantly underprivileged in terms of cinema and screen density in comparison to Western countries. Still, the contemporary Bulgarian exhibition network proved profitable, thanks to the higher than average ticket prices as compared to Central and South-Eastern Europe, so there appeared to be little incentive for local exhibitors to expand and make their offer more competitive. As cinema-going recovers after the COVID-19 pandemic, finding a way to be more inclusive of certain audience segments might prove crucial for business sustainability. Some strategies might include more consistent regional cultural policy administration and sector regulation or, as Statulov (2021) has suggested, alternative communal spaces for exhibition in established local cultural centres with more varied programming and lower prices. Considering the opinions and experiences of Bulgarian and, by extension, Eastern European viewers on a regular basis could provide exhibitors, policymakers and scholars with a wealth of useful information, reverse any sense of disconnection and ensure that both the cultural and the business value of cinema-going are preserved. Drawing useful comparisons across national borders could facilitate the exchange of good practice and know-how as well as the coordination of alternative exhibition strategies.

References

Adamczak, M. (2020). Hard power and film distribution: Transformation of distribution practices in Poland in the era of digital revolution. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema, 11*(3), 243–261.

Anisimovich, A. (2019). *Coming to terms with the past: New Bulgarian cinema and the post-communist transition* [Doctoral dissertation, Edge Hill University].

Biltereyst, D., & Meers, P. (2016). New cinema history and the comparative mode: Reflections on comparing historical cinema cultures. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen*. *Media, 11*, 13–32.

Biltereyst, D., & Van de Vijver, L. (2016). Cinema in the ‘fog city’: Film exhibition and socio-geography in Flanders. In J. Thissen & Z. Clemens (Eds.), *Cinema beyond the city: Small-town & rural film culture in Europe* (pp. 223–236). Palgrave–BFI.

Bulgarian National Film Center. (2018). *Bulgarian cinema 2018: Facts, figures, trends*. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://www.Bulgarian National Film Centre.bg/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Bulgarian_Cinema_2018-online-2.pdf

Çam, A., & Şanlier Yüksel, İ. (2021). Old places, renewed experiences: Looking at the legacy of Çukurova cinemas in the pandemic era. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, 18*(2), 419–435.

Christie, I. (2012). *Audiences*. Amsterdam University Press.

Cuadrado-García, M., Filimon, N., & Montoro-Pons, J. D. (2018). Picturing Spanish filmgoers: Motives, barriers and film theatres. *Regional Science Enquiry, 10*(2), 45–60.

Donev, A. (2018). *Pomosht ot publikata*. Fŭn tezi.

Hames, P. (2000). Czech cinema: From state industry to competition. *Canadian Slavonic Papers, 42*(1–2), 63–85.

Hanzlík, J. (2017). Eventization and targeting in Czech theatrical distribution after 1989. *Iluminace, 29*(3), 49–64.

Irandoust, M. (2017). The demand for cinema in Sweden: An application of proportional odds model. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society, 48*(5), 351–361.

Kauber, S. (2022). The imagined affordances of cinema-going and national cinema. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, 19*(1), 199–223.

Kayhan Müldür, S. (2021). Open-air cinemas of Istanbul from the 1950s to today. *Space and Culture, 24*(1), 128–143.

Konecny, B. (2017, March 24). *A forgotten country's forgotten cinema: Searching for hope in post-Soviet Moldovan cinema*. FilmInt.nu. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from http://filmint.nu/forgotten-countrys-searching/

Kostov, K. (1999). *Na kino v Plovdiv*. Vera Slovena Publishing House.

Maltby, R. (2011). New cinema histories. In R. Maltby, D. Biltereyst, & P. Meers (Eds.), *Explorations in new cinema history: Approaches and case studies* (pp. 1–40). Wiley-Blackwell.

Media Salles. (2020). *Average ticket prices (Euro) (2013–2019)*. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from http://www.mediasalles.it/ybk2020/tabelle/img_tabelle/prezzimedi_e.htm

Merrington, P., Hanchard, M., & Wessels, B. (2021). Inequalities in regional film exhibition: Policy, place and audiences. *Journal of British Cinema and Television, 18*(2), 198–222.

NSI. (1990). *Statistical Yearbook 1989*.

NSI. (1994). *Statistical Yearbook 1993*.

NSI. (2004). *Statistical Yearbook 2003*.

NSI. (2022a, May 23). *Cinemas.* National Statistical Institute. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://nsi.bg/en/content/3621/cinemas

NSI. (2022b). *Average gross monthly wages and salaries of the employees under labour contract by statistical regions and districts in 2018*. National Statistical Institute. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/3930/statistical-regions-district

NSI. (n.d.-a). Cinemas: Seats, screens, screenings and attendances by regions. *Infostat. National Statistical Institute*. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/query.jsf?x_2=428

NSI. (n.d.-b). Screening movies according to their nationality by districts. *Infostat. National Statistical Institute*. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/query.jsf?x_2=556

Panicherski, I. (1982). Sotsiologicheski Pogled Varhu Kinoto i Zritelite Prez 80-te Godini. *Kinorabotnik, 4*, 35–38.

Papadimitriou, L., & Grgić, A. (2020). Introduction. In L. Papadimitriou & A. Grgić (Eds.), *Contemporary Balkan cinema: Transnational exchanges and global circuits* (pp. 1–17). Edinburgh University Press.

Schrøder, K., Drotner, K., Kline, S., & Murray, C. (2003). *Researching audiences: A practical guide to methods in media audience analysis*. Arnold.

Spatial Development Act. (2001). Bulgaria.

Statulov, D. (2021). *Alternativni filmovi prostranstva*. Kultura.bg. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://kultura.bg/article/950-alternativni-filmovi-prostranstva

Talavera, J. (2018, January). *Measuring access to theatrically screened films in Eastern Europe*. European Audiovisual Observatory. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from https://rm.coe.int/measuring-access-to-film-east-euro-pdf/168078731e

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.

Biography:

Maya Nedyalkova is a Research Fellow for the Creative Industries Research and Innovation Network at Oxford Brookes University, interested in popular culture and film/media audiences. She explored aspects of the transnational Bulgarian film industry during her AHRC-funded PhD and contemporary Bulgarian film consumption for her British Academy fellowship. She co-edited two themed sections, titled "International Film Audiences", for *Participations Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* and has published in journals (*Open Screens* and *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*) and edited volumes (*Routledge Companion to European Cinema*, *Popular Music and the Moving Image in Eastern Europe*, and *Transformation Processes in Post-socialist Screen Media*).

---

[i] The initiative is part of CinED—an international film education programme, funded by the Creative Europe / MEDIA programme of the European Union, "Support for film education." Its objective is to help European youths aged six to nineteen discover European cinema. In the Bulgarian case, the programme is run by the arts and cultural events organisers, Arte Urbana Collectif, with the aim to help children from underprivileged backgrounds, who might struggle with the official curriculum, learn about filmmaking as well as re-engage at school.

[ii] An interactive popularity ranking—"Lachenite obuvki na balgarskoto kino" ("Bulgarian Cinema's Patent Leather Shoes")—was organised by the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) in 2015 to commemorate the centenary of the production of the first Bulgarian film, *Balgaran e galant* (*The Bulgarian Is Gallant*, Vassil Gendov, 1915), and allow viewers to vote for their favourite local feature. Similar initiatives for Bulgarian animated and documentary films followed shortly.

[iii] Irandoust (2017) demonstrates the importance of gender, age, educational attainment, income, marital status, critical reviews, word of mouth and willingness to pay in shaping demand for cinema-going. Cuadrado-García et al. (2018) uncover the influence of education, film popularity, film quality, social interaction and mood for motivating cinema-going, and the effects of programming, venue features, place, competing activities, financial restrictions and free time on barriers to access. This chapter focuses predominantly on the role of age and place in shaping perceptions of accessibility to cinema venues. I discuss the place of sociality, critical reviews, film quality, programming strategies, the appeal of genre and national cinema in more detail throughout other parts of my larger project.

[iv] The project "Turning (your) back to audiences? Glimpses into shifting cinema-going and film consumption patterns in Bulgaria" was funded by the British Academy between 2017 and 2021. It aimed to investigate the experiences, habits and preferences of contemporary Bulgarian film viewers, their expectations of new Bulgarian cinema and their ability to access audiovisual products. More information can be found on the official website: https://bulgarianfilmaudiences.org/.

[v] So, while realist and empiricist enquiries can be similar in implementation, the findings are interpreted with different ontological underpinnings in mind.

[vi] According to an amendment to the Bulgarian Spatial Development Act in 2009, settlements are classified as very small when they have under 10,000 dwellers, small—between 10,000 and 30,000 inhabitants, medium—between 30,000 and 100,000 residents, large—between 100,000 and 200,000 citizens and very large, when they have a population of over 200,000.

[vii] As classified by the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) introduced by the European Union in 2003.

[viii] When asked to evaluate on the Likert rating scale the statement, "I am generally interested in films and cinema," 70% of the questionnaire respondents marked "Strongly agree" and a further 20% responded with "Agree." The majority of these respondents also used the free-text box at the end of the questionnaire for their reflections on the state of Bulgarian cinema. Similarly, focus group discussions often overran in time, due to the desire of the participants to share their views.

[ix] The questions were adapted from the projects “Opening Our Eyes: How Film Contributes to the Culture of the UK” (2011), “Mediating Cultural Encounters through European Screens—MeCETES” (2013−2016) and “European Cinema Audiences: Entangled Histories and Shared Memories” (2018−2021).
[x] One-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests were applied to analyse differences of questionnaire respondents’ opinions, as shaped by the size of the settlement in which they lived.
[xi] Even though there is evidence for the building of new cinema theatres in (unofficially) racially segregated neighbourhoods throughout the country during state socialism, I am making no claims with regard to the experiences of minority groups, as this is beyond the scope of the study sample. Recruiting more participants from underrepresented groups would form an important query for future research, increasing the theoretical value and practical usefulness of the findings.
[xii] The rise in popularity of new Bulgarian productions in the 2010s also contributed to renewed interest in cinema-going.
[xiii] An initiative by Creative Europe / MEDIA Programme and French National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image supporting non-national European cinema.
[xiv] Mean = 3.47, Standard Deviation = 1.288.
[xv] The result of one-way ANOVA testing ($F(4.575) = 3.2$, $p = 0.013$).
[xvi] As determined by a Tukey post hoc test, $p = 0.007$.
[xvii] A local venture, re-branded to *CineLand* in 2020.
[xviii] Mean = 4.07, Standard Deviation = 1.235.
[xix] As determined by one-way ANOVA testing ($F(4.575) = 6.8$, $p < 0.001$) and a Tukey post hoc test across: very small and small settlements ($p = 0.020$); very small and large settlements ($p = 0.003$); very small and very large settlements ($p < 0.001$); medium and very large settlements ($p = 0.006$).
[xx] Mean = 4.11, Standard Deviation = 1.132.
[xxi] Only 65% thought that they could easily access information on local film programming.