

FILM REVIEW

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## *The Good Postman:* Romanticizing Refugees and Absolving States

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### *The Good Postman*

Film (documentary)

Release date (streaming): November 16, 2017

Written by Tonislav Hristov and Lubomir Tsvetkov

Directed by Tonislav Hristov

Run Time: 1 hour, 20 minutes

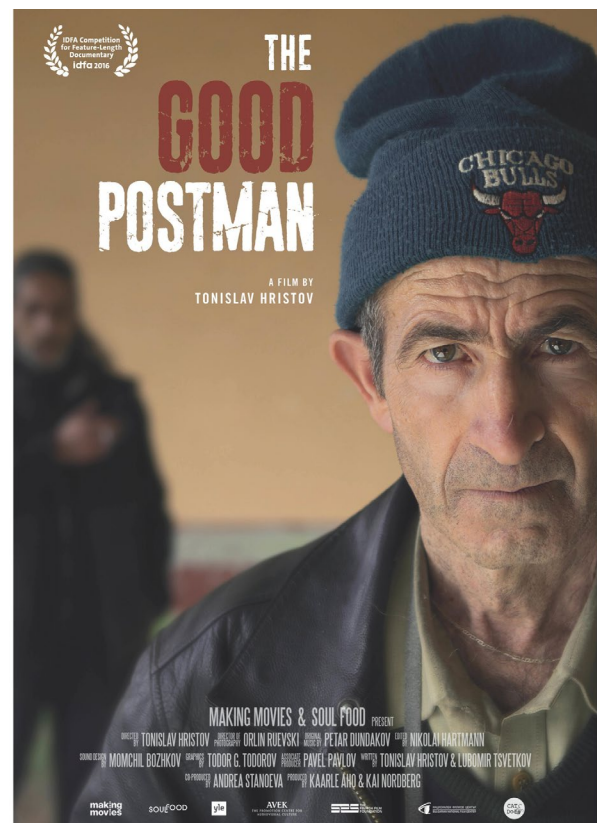
Original Language: Bulgarian

More Information at:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6254144/>

*The Good Postman* presents multi-layered migration narratives through a small Bulgarian village called Golyam Derwent on the Turkish border. The documentary begins with Ivan Fransuzov, the village postman, witnessing Syrian refugees crossing illegally from the Turkish-Bulgarian border and choosing not to report them to the border police. Fransuzov's individual resistance against the system allows us to see the socio-economic background of migration through the eyes of a resident of the host country. It is 2016, and local elections have raised hopes of rescuing the village from oblivion. The villagers, who are elderly and number fewer than 40, seek a solution to the depopulation and eventual disappearance of their village.<sup>1</sup> Three mayoral candidates represent three different perspectives on Muslim refugees from the East, and each reflects historical trauma.

The first candidate is "the good postman", Ivan Fransuzov, from the centre-right national party, GERB. His election promise is to settle Syrian refugees in



the village to both develop the village and provide humanitarian aid to Syrians escaping war. Postman Ivan seems to represent the film's position on the Syrian refugee crisis, with his sympathetic portrayal and titular role. Both the emphasis on the loneliness of the villagers and the desperate escape stories of Syrian refugees to Europe evoke a sense of compassion in the

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audience. Although focusing on personalized stories aims at reducing the local anti-refugee sentiment, I believe that this framing absolves the real perpetrator: states and international actors. Postman Ivan stands for the socio-economic view of migration as beneficial for both migrants and the host country, while individuals and communities bear the burdens of migration governance more so than states. However, the second candidate, Comrade Ivan, appears as the embodiment of a quite different perspective.

Ivan Halahcev, candidate from the Socialist Party (successor of the BCP), represents psychological and socio-political dimensions of nationalism and xenophobia that reveal the identity politics at play. Comrade Ivan is paradoxical for embodying both communist nostalgia, marked by economic prosperity, and the dangerous identity politics of the ruling regime. Just as former BCP members saw the salvation of the country in removing the Turkish and Muslim minorities, Comrade Ivan sees hope for the village in getting rid of the others, namely Gypsies and migrants. Comrade Ivan also reminds the audience that village youth have migrated abroad due to unemployment and underdevelopment. Yet, unable to offer solutions to these problems, Comrade Ivan pledges instead to open an internet cafe so the remaining villages can visit their loved ones abroad via Skype. Comrade Ivan is not the only ghost of Bulgaria's communist past in the film. In one scene, women of the village go to clean the cemetery, triggering memories of the communist-era ban on entering the site and hinting at the darker days of communism. However, the director's nostalgic critique of communism does not allude to the conditions it imposed on Muslim and Turkish populations of Bulgaria. While the director endorses resettling Syrian refugees in empty villages, he does not touch on the country's history of ethnic cleansing of the Turkish and Muslim minorities, which was itself another factor in the depopulation of those villages in the first place. This leaves the film's story incomplete.

What about the third candidate? The current mayor of Golyam Dervent, Veselina Dimova, represents the status quo without reference to ideology or political party. Veselina is shown to have done little during the mayoral period and, unlike the postman and the comrade, promises nothing about the Syrian refugees or the revival of the village. Veselina represents the inertia and decay of public institutions, an apparition of a cumbersome state apparatus.

Postman Ivan represents the bundle of hope for democracy, the free market economy, and the European Union that emerged with Bulgaria's post-

1990 liberalization. On the other hand, Comrade Ivan is the ghost of Bulgaria's communist past. In the end, the winner of the election is the status quo, Veselina Dimova. There is no hope left for the revival of the village, nor has a solution been found for Syrian refugees. Village life continues to wane. The documentary ends with the good postman Ivan's individual resistance against the system again, as he is seen looking the other way as another group of Syrian refugees illicitly crosses the border.

To its credit, the film challenges stereotypes and orientalist views of Muslims—that they are terrorists, diseased, and ignorant. However, the film puts state rights and prerogatives ahead of those of refugees. Whose interests are served by directing migrants into villages that the locals have already abandoned in favor of opportunity elsewhere? Or perhaps the refugees may not even want to settle in Bulgaria at all (van Brunnersum 2023). The director does not acknowledge these questions. Instead, he casts the refugees as passive agents, deprived of choice. A critical viewing of the film reminds us that refugees have a right to much more than just our compassion. We should not romanticize their suffering nor absolve the real perpetrator.

## Note

- 1 On the rural transformation in Bulgaria after the collapse of the communism see: Creed (1995a, 1995b), Dudwick (2007).

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