



ΕΙΧΕΙΝΟΣ

Governance and Culture in the Black Sea Region

NEGOTIATING „NATION“ AND „SOCIETY“: THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN POST-COMMUNIST BULGARIA

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The square "National Assembly" is the preferred symbolic stage for civil protests and political rallies in postcommunist Bulgaria.

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Negotiating „Nation“ and „Society“: The Public Sphere in Post-Communist Bulgaria

Editorial

The post-communist public sphere that emerged in the early 1990s was dominated by the ideological clash pitting democracy against totalitarianism, civil society against the police state, the market economy against the centrally planned one. Solving these dilemmas – shared across the East-European countries – gave rise to a few other, more specific questions: in what terms could Bulgarian society construe itself after the disintegration of the communist bloc and the hollowing out of communist ideology; what kind of symbolic resources could it muster in its attempt to reinvent itself in the new situation? In this specific context, continuity has trumped the desire for a clean break with the past. Nationalism, so prevalent in late “socialist” times, turned into a launch pad and a source of energies for both the acolytes of a dogmatically encapsulated, essentialist national identity and their critics, the liberal debunkers of national identity. Transformed into propaganda incantations, the national myths have lent an ideological *raison d’être* to a number of nationalist parties, with Volen Siderov’s *Ataka* having achieved the greatest popular appeal among them. The power of nationalist narratives has also manifested itself in hijacking new social divisions: they were ethnicized, and the frustrations they yielded were channeled towards nationalist hatred. On the other hand, the strictly social (critical) interpretations of post-communist reality – as, for that matter, the very genre of social criticism – discredited to a substantial degree by the failed state socialism project, have proven marginal, lacking imagination and popular appeal, and incapable of lending meaningfulness and direction to present day social protests by Bulgarian citizens.

The way they are arranged, the contributions to the current issue present an attempt to shed light on “the national” and “the social” from the

perspective of their importance in Bulgarian post-communist publicity as well as to investigate how they have been articulated for political purposes. Chavdar Marinov’s piece comes up with an analysis of the key national myths – dealing with the ancient Thracian legacy, the Bulgarian National Revival, Macedonia, etc. – which have, with a stunning ease, outlived the ideological laboratory of late communist regime and thrived in the atmosphere of “post-communist plurality of ideas”. As a counterpoint to historical myth-making, Marinov has profiled the critical voices in Bulgarian humanities in their drive to review national identity by questioning its underlying stereotypes. The task the author focuses on is to tell the dogmatic historical perspectives apart from the critical ones on the levels of both discourses and institutions. From this vantage point, the traditional hubs churning out history knowledge – universities and academic institutes – have to a large extent proven as the guardians of the “unadulterated” national narrative whereas the critics of this narrative rather belong to either marginal academic outfits or other scientific fields (anthropology, sociology, literary studies), or work for the non-governmental sector.

The national myths, spearheaded by both academic and popular publications, have enjoyed a broad and benevolent media coverage; they have also provided the foundations to new political projects. Nadege Ragaru’s article offers an insight into *Ataka*’s political oeuvre resting on a specific cocktail of social issues and jingoist stereotypes. The injustice of the new social order, the elites’ sell-out, the plunder of state assets during the transition years, the plight of ordinary citizens amid the new circumstances: these are all topics that have strongly captured

popular sentiment, with many Bulgarians readily recognizing their own social experience in them. Yet Ataka's political success (and creativity) did not only rest on the roll-out of such grievances – incidentally made instrumental by a host of other political formations – but also on successfully sandwiching them with anti-Turkish or anti-Roma prejudices already rife among Bulgarian constituents. In her interpretations, Ragaru has pinpointed a number of specific political, institutional and demographic factors, which enabled the ethnicising of social disparities and grievances.

The last paper has stood clear of nationalist tendencies to focus instead on civil protests and the kind of domestic media coverage they have received. Boyan Znepolski has attempted to highlight the discrepancies between the

importance of civic events – a few key protests have taken place in Bulgaria lately – and their rather trivial public interpretations. The teachers' strike in the autumn of 2007 provides an example where this discrepancy was underpinned by the dominance of a specific expert perspective, which promoted effectiveness as the leading principle of social life as a whole, reduced education to a market-based service and saw civil protests as a fiscal problem. This stance – attaching importance to the number of protesters rather than to the grievances they were voicing – has been oblivious to the moral dimension of civic protests, thus failing to notice their reform potential.

Translation from the Bulgarian by Georgi Pashov

National Myths in Post-Communist Bulgaria and Their Criticism

by Tchavdar Marinov, Athens

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the history-related national myths of contemporary Bulgaria and the public criticism levelled against them. A string of mass-scale reactions since the early 1990s up until the present day have revealed how entrenched the negative stereotypes towards national minorities or neighbours, the simplifying historical narratives, and the historical symbols with powerful ethno-mobilization potential, are among Bulgarians. These contrivances have been subject to critical scrutiny by academics working on behalf of several NGOs. Social scientists, cultural anthropologists and literary scholars have zeroed in on the narrowly ethnic twist of national identity and the forging of a nationalist mythology. A few historians have launched a sceptical revision of several key historical myths, e.g. the “Turkish yoke”, the “National Revival era”, etc. Yet the repercussions of this academic or NGO output among the broader public in Bulgaria is indeed rather limited.

INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION: A LINGERING CONTROVERSY

*“The Bulgarians sobered faster than their Balkan neighbours. Now it is the Serbs’ turn to sober. But it is going to be even harder in Macedonia, they are still getting drunk out there. The Albanians might be facing the steepest challenge sobering...”*¹. This assurance was recently made by Bulgarian researchers known to share a civic commitment in combating discrimination of ethnic or religious minorities. From the comparison with its neighbouring Balkan countries, Bulgaria has emerged as a heartening showcase: the “sobering” is the authors’ metaphor for the nation’s alleged scrambling out of national myths.

However, a diagnosis as optimistic as this might look somewhat weird from a number of perspectives. What a string of events and public reactions in post-communist Bulgaria since the early 1990s until the present day reveals is a rather entrenched negative stereotyping of minorities and neighbours, a set of knee-

jerk patterns in narrating the past as well as the persistence of historical symbolism with strong ethno-mobilizing action: these are all manifestations of something, which – with all due reservations – might be identified as “national” and/or “historical” myths. The most staggering case was the controversy around a research project that had flared up less than two years prior to 2009, when the statement in our opening quote was made. Two researchers – a Bulgarian PhD student in Germany and a well-known Austrian historian and anthropologist – were condemned for having denied the reality of an historic event that took place in 1876 and became widely known as the Batak slaughter. It refers to the killing of nearly 2000 Bulgarian Christians by Muslim anti-insurgency paramilitaries in the process of stamping out an uprising against the Ottoman rule². What actually triggered the nationalist hysteria – that spilled out across media and town squares and featured politicians (including the country’s president) – was the way the word “myth” was used in

¹ Petar-Emil Mitev, Antonina Zhelyazkova, Goran Stojkovski, “Macedonia at Crossroads III, Conclusion”, *Kultura* (a weekly), 9 January 2009, available at: <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/15104> (in Bulgarian).

² See the project’s publication: Martina Baleva, Ulf Brunnbauer (eds.), *Batak As a Place of Memory / Batak. Ein bulgarischer Erinnerungsort*, Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2007.

an initial version of the Batak project. Even though the embattled researchers had resorted to the term's stricter academic implications rather than its popular meaning of a "hoax" or "contrivance", the unleashed public response was brandishing the details of the slaughter as a historical event. Furthermore, beyond the dry facts, Batak was held up as a national sanctity tarnished by "anti-Bulgarian forces". Sparkles still flicker around the "Batak denial" in media or websites, and even in the National Assembly in Sofia. In early April 2011, the Bulgarian East Orthodox church canonized the 1876 victims.

Thus, the polemic has unwittingly proven the assumption that the Batak slaughter is a myth in the specific sense as a symbolic construct with a powerful identity charge erected around a real historical event; it has also shown how powerful this kind of constructs are in today's Bulgaria. The cliché that the Bulgarians aren't "quite as chauvinists" as the neighbouring nations, suffered a resounding defeat. Yet are there civic or academic circles in the country who are ready and willing to face up to nationalist tenets and are capable of resisting the recurrent ethnic mobilisations? An attempt to answer this question should be based – for the sake of clarity – on presenting the historical myths of the ethnic majority in Bulgaria.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BULGARIAN HISTORICAL MYTHS

The key one among them was referred to above: "the Turkish yoke" (or "slavery" in a more literal rendition) as the Ottoman domination from the late XIV century up until 1878 has been termed in the popular – as well as the academic – discourse. The 'yoke' has typically been painted in the darkest of colours as an era

of barbaric, "Oriental" despotism, which by default has gone hand-in-hand with systematic and indescribably cruel abuses of the empire's Christian population, forced mass-scale islamisations, etc. The more extreme versions describe Bulgarians as victims of a "genocide" similar to the Armenian one.

Despite the "yoke's dark ages", the national ideology provides the Bulgarians with a number of reasons to be proud: it is commonly surmised they were consistently and heroically resisting the alien oppression. Besides, the era of the so-called Bulgarian National Revival (standardly dated 1762-1878) has been a point of specific emphasis and – in many ways – romanticising. On the other hand, there is a prevailing assumption that the Ottoman conquest had obliterated a glorious Bulgarian medieval civilisation. Ever since its birth in the XIX century, the local national ideology has invariably listed the Slavic alphabet and writing, created by the Byzantine missionaries Constantine-Cyril and Methodius in the IX century, among the "Bulgarian" cultural achievements. The cliché of an indigenous renaissance in the arts, which burgeoned even before the West European one, is still being syndicated, mostly based on the XIII c. murals in the Boyana Church near Sofia.

The origins of Bulgarian civilisation are sometimes cast even further back in time. A voluminous cache of amateurish – yet not without the direct involvement of academic historians and archaeologists – publications has piled up since the early 1990s lionising the ancient, pagan proto-Bulgarians. This literature is the pillar of the "proto-bulgaromania" that enjoys a substantial popular appeal and credits the Bulgarian ancestors with numerous inventions, e.g. "one of the most accurate" calendars of humankind. The last decade has seen the active recycling for popular usage of

the ancient Thracians, who had already been promoted as civilisation ancestors and genetic kin of the Bulgarians during the 1970s, in the context of the cultural policy championed by Lyudmila Zhivkova, the late daughter of the communist party-state ruler, Todor Zhivkov. The Thracians have also been credited with magnificent cultural achievements made independently from the ancient Greek or Roman civilisations: the Thracian treasure troves are still representing Bulgaria in museums around the world boosting national self-esteem back in their “motherland”.

Apart from the overblown claims in the cultural sphere, these in politics and statehood are also worth mentioning. The medieval Bulgarian state map has been unabashedly stretched out in both historic atlases and T-shirts. Even though there is no lack of irony in the way the slogan “Bulgaria on three seas” is perceived today, the broader public predominantly gives credit to a formidable list of “lost lands” that Bulgaria is – both “historically” and “ethnically” – entitled to claim. Top place in the list is allocated to Macedonia, a land that for any good reason qualifies as Bulgarian national myth, like the Kosovo myth for Serbia or the Transylvanian myth for Hungary. What seems to provide the key frustration here is the Macedonians’ bid to be a separate nation. The notion that the latter was “artificially created” within communist Yugoslavia and that Macedonian language is no more than a Bulgarian dialect has enjoyed an outstanding currency – even among intellectuals who tend to go quite “liberal” on historical issues.

In parallel with that, the history taught at school has cultivated among Bulgarians the feeling that they have always lost – unfairly, despite their gallantry at the battle field – on the political arena: this has partially been attributed to imperialist tendencies among

the great powers (depending on political bias, these could be one or more West European countries, the West in general, or Russia). Nurtured by history textbooks, the Bulgarian martyrdom myth has been reinforced by the cliché that deep down its core this has ever been “a tolerant nation” that caused no pain to members of any other national community and sustained a unique ethnic coexistence model in its “own” state. In this section, preventing the deportation of around 50,000 Bulgarian Jews to Nazi death camps during World War II has become the most exploited historical event. Bulgarian society however has refused to shoulder any responsibility for more than 11,000 Jews who were deported from the occupied territories of Greece and Yugoslavia. The multiple campaigns for the expulsion of major portions of the domestic Muslim population since the 1878 creation of the Bulgarian state up until the 1980s, the abuse committed to this population group or the destruction of the Ottoman cultural heritage have never been a popular discussion topic. The crimes carried out against other Balkan people during the Second Balkan War in 1913 or during the two world wars get even less of a mention.

THE TRANSITION’S EFFECT

The adoption of any kind of policy in history and memory, that could highlight the embarrassing facts and humble the claims for past glory, is still being successfully warded off by the cliché that the Bulgarians – unlike their chauvinistic neighbours – are too unassuming, that they even lack national self-esteem. Hence, the claim that they are the only ones on the Balkans that have successfully sobered out of nationalism. As a matter of fact, the post-communist transition period has even

further entrenched Bulgarian nationalism. By and large, the latter has traditionally gone along two key “axes”. The first one is anti-Turkish or anti-Islamic; it has been manifest in the “Turkish yoke” discourse as well as in the prevalent attitudes towards Turkey and the Muslim minorities in the country. The second axis is the irredentist one that mostly busies itself with the so-called Macedonian question. In both areas, Bulgarian society was profoundly indoctrinated with chauvinistic tenets under the Zhivkov regime, similar to the Romanians’ indoctrination under Ceausescu or that of the Albanians under Enver Hoxha. In the aftermath of the 1999 events, the circles identifying with the former regime quite consistently tried to sustain legitimacy through the code-words of “patriotism”, rallying themselves against the revisions of history inspired by “alien forces”. Yet the new anti-communist discourse cast itself into the mode of reiterating or even further inflating the already entrenched period pieces, especially on nostalgic subjects like Macedonia. Its acolytes claim that the communist regime was “nationally nihilistic” in its core and sold Bulgarian interests out to Moscow.

Under the circumstances, instead of bashing national myths, the post-communist plurality of ideas engendered paranoia. Ever since the early 1990s, the scare that for misunderstood political correctness – borrowed from the West or sponsored by Turkey – some historians and policymakers were willing to substitute euphemisms like “the Ottoman presence” for the commonly accepted “Turkish yoke” was making waves across Bulgarian society. Allegations are rife that today’s history schoolbooks fail to treat the “Turkish yoke” in a sufficiently patriotic way or even pretend that no such ever existed. At a later stage, these obsessions were complemented by the

panic that the poem “I Am a Little Bulgarian” by Ivan Vazov (1850-1921), revered as the greatest national writer, would be dropped from school primers. In June 2011, during a patriotic holiday, over 24 000 children all over the country took part in a web portal initiative to recite simultaneously “I am a Little Bulgarian”: the event was supposed to drive home the idea that, despite all detractors, both Vazov’s work and Bulgarian identity will thrive forever.

Still, are there exceptions – e.g. public personae or academic circles – that have opted out of the nationalist discourse or even actively resisted it?

VOICES CRITICAL OR LESS SO

Like most changes in post-communist public life in Bulgaria, the reappraisal of the fundamental national identity myths was to a large degree promoted from outside the country. The nongovernment sector played the important role of a mediator, quite often based on funding from the Open Society mega-foundation of George Soros. Hence the entrenched conviction among those nostalgic for the former regime (and among others as well) that the West, the USA or, indeed, “the global Jewish conspiracy”, has been sponsoring a process of “denationalization” of the Bulgarian nation. Apart from the numerous NGOs and human rights organisations, e.g. the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, academic circles have also been critical of nationalism. The two realms are not actually unconnected. Most academics working in the humanities who became known for their anti-nationalist civil stance or even gained a reputation as “myth busters” have at least made a passing through the civil sector. They often work

on projects of Sofia-based think-tanks after having studied or taught abroad by dint of the same networks, e.g. the Central European University in Budapest. Some of the NGOs committed to the battle for enhancing Bulgarian civic culture or boosting Balkan political understanding, have been headed by historians or other humanitarian academics. Some of these new centres have published valuable research on ethnic or religious communities in the country, promoted initiatives to support Bulgarian “civil society”, worked on pan-Balkan projects analysing “the image of the other”, thus contributing to the shakeup of popular nationalist myths. However, the way the NGO world functions, with its demand for a fast product (strategic *policy papers* rather than actual research) to account for the funding taken up, has somewhat distorted the critical reassessment of nationalist stereotypes. It has too often been reduced to trivial political correctness. In a number of cases, the result has been a lack of deeper reflection on the issues and moral cynicism: the concession that certain sets of issues (e.g. the minorities’ condition, especially the plight of the Roma population, etc.) provide a winning card in the fights over project funding has reigned supreme. Well entrenched clichés – like the one of the “sobered Bulgarians” referred to at the beginning – are not so hard to come by in publications of NGO-active experts. With the proviso that in the local context the distinction between the civil sector and university/academic circles is difficult to make, it might be claimed that among the academic group that most directly relates to nationalist mythmaking – the historians – the evolution towards a genuine critique has been slow to gain momentum. This can predominantly be attributed to the fact that history science in this

country is still regarded as a patriotic quest, and the historian has been looked up to as the guardian of the purity and credibility of the national narrative. It is also a consequence of the prevalence of an obsolete set of concepts and methods that have proven difficult to outlive even among “plugged-in” historians. This is why the undermining of the narrowly ethnic articulation of national identity has often been taken up by humanitarian researchers from adjacent fields, e.g. social sciences, cultural anthropology or philosophy³. It was again the historical myths that came into the crosshairs of some younger literary or cultural historians. They produced a string of studies, specifically on the fiction and nonfiction writing from the so-called Bulgarian Revival, that have contributed to the rethink of the way Bulgarian national ideology – and mythology – has been historically constructed⁴. As a result, the discussion of national myths has gained the reputation as the turf of literary historians and cultural anthropologists, thus alienating professional historians.

However, research coming from social or culture sciences has been by and large restricted by its focus on how collective conceptions are created and what implications they have had. These studies have shed light on the use and abuse of “collective memory” but never had the capacity or the aim to question the *veracity* of its constructs. The latter has indeed been perceived as a “positivistic” issue that cultural theorists, sociologists or literary

³ A few names are worth mentioning here, e.g. Ivailo Dichev, Petya Kabakchieva, Liliana Deyanova, Maya Grekova.

⁴ For instance: Albena Hranova, *Language And Its Speeches*, Sofia: Figura, 2000; Desislava Lilova, *Revival Implications Of The National Name*, Sofia: Prosveta, 2003; Nikolay Aretov, *National Mythology And National Literature*, Sofia: Queen Mab, 2006.

historians contemptuously shrink away from and comfortably cede to historians.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVISIONS

Given these circumstances, it wasn't quite a surprise that some of the boldest deconstructions of traditional interpretations in the field of history science have come from foreign experts. However, with the exception of the "Batak Project" (where the authors did not actually pursue quite as ambitious goals), these "provocations" have never gained any visibility outside narrow academic circles. For instance, the French academic Bernard Lory has directly assaulted the myth of the five centuries of "slaughter" visited upon the Bulgarians by the Turkish "slave drivers"⁵. In 2002, a Bulgarian translation of a monograph written by the Dutch historian of Ottoman art Machiel Kiel⁶ came out; the study shattered to pieces the belief that the Ottoman invasion had a catastrophic effect on a previously existing "unique" Bulgarian medieval culture. In this case – as in a number of other similar ones – the Bulgarian history faculties preferred to keep a low profile.

Still, a certain amount of critical aptitude among Bulgarian historians cannot be denied. It is most visible among Ottoman and Balkan history experts. The popular conceptions of the "Turkish slavery" have been subject to robust criticism on behalf of researchers like Vera Mutafchieva (who died in 2009), Tsvetana Georgieva and Antonina Zhelyazkova (another

⁵ Bernard Lory, "Five Centuries They Slaughtered Us – Thoughts around a Historical Myth", *Historical Future* 1, 1997. The article is accessible in Bulgarian at: <http://www.libsu.uni-sofia.bg/Statii/Bernar.html> (all the publications are in Bulgarian).

⁶ Machiel Kiel, *Art and Society of Bulgaria in the Turkish Period*, Assen-Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1985.

activist in the civil sector, director of IMIR, the International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations). They have also debunked another widely believed historical fiction: the forced mass-scale conversions to Islamic faith. These researchers – specifically Georgieva – have been blamed for promoting the term "Ottoman presence", even though it is either absent in their publications or presents a classic case of "taken out of context".

Another subject area, which is chronologically a part of the Ottoman era, but has traditionally been themed as the authentic realm of patriotism, the National Revival in XIX century, has been revisited by historians as well, apart from literary ones. On the one hand, the variety of historiographic perspectives and ideological stakes behind its interpretation as the "sublime Bulgarian age" became subject to fresher reflection⁷. On the other, it was highlighted that the Revival dynamic cannot be explored or understood outside its contemporary Ottoman context⁸. Some recently published studies have shown how the freeze-out of this context had enabled ideological contrivances like the Bulgarian "Revival town", with its "Revival architecture", or the "unique" national clothing styles, cuisine, etc.⁹.

⁷ See Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans: Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2004. See also the monograph of the Bulgarian-US historian Maria Todorova on the build-up of hero No 1 in Bulgaria's national pantheon: Maria Todorova, *Bones of Contention: the Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2009.

⁸ Alexander Vezenkov, "Obvious Only at First Glance: the „Bulgarian Revival“ as a Separate Era", In: Diana Mishkova (ed.), *The Balkan XIX Century. Other Perspectives*, Sofia: Riva, 2006 (in Bulgarian).

⁹ Stephan Dechev (ed.), *In Search Of the Essentially Bulgarian: Networks Of National Intimacy (XIX-*

In most of these cases, it is a matter of historians who occupy rather marginal niches away from the university or academia establishment. Their names are mostly associated with the Sofia-based Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) founded in 2001, with periodicals like *Critique and Humanism* or with faculties or universities other than the ones laying down the mainstream of historiography (the History Faculty of the Sofia University or the history institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences). Yet even representatives of the latter have published important research, e.g. on the Bulgarian government oppression of Muslim communities. Beyond any doubt, the most traumatic legacy in this respect was left by the communist regime when the Bulgarian-speaking Moslem minority, and subsequently the Turkish-speaking one, were forcefully given Bulgarian names and identity¹⁰. Thus, after a long-lasting reign of an anti-Turkish agenda, the Bulgarian historical scholars finally provide us with evidence that they are capable of breaking the mould and facing up to their own clichés¹¹.

XXI centuries), Sofia: Institute for Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2010 (in Bulgarian).

¹⁰ The most serious contribution on the subject has been provided by the study of Michail Gruev and Alexei Kalionski, *The Revival Process. The Muslim Communities And The Communist Regime*, Sofia: Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, Open Society Institute, 2008 (in Bulgarian).

¹¹ A more general overview of Bulgarian historiography over the last two decades: Daniela Koleva, Ivan Elenkov, "Historical Studies in Post-Communist Bulgaria: Between Academic Standards and Political Agendas" in: Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor (eds.), *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2007.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: MYTHS STILL INTACT

As already seen, the key historical myths that became subject to critical revisits over the last couple of decades, had been exclusively resting on the anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic axis of Bulgarian nationalism. It is however unfortunate that the public repercussions of this academic or NGO-based critical output do not look quite as impressive as they might. This is corroborated at least by the ease of whipping up mass scale anti-Turkish nationalist mobilisations like the "Batak scandal". Just as disheartening is the fact that a string of other well-worn constructs, through which Bulgarians have been habituated to filter their perceptions of the past, are still almost unscathed.

Among them is just about everything related to the traumatic Macedonian subject: the handful of reflective publications by Bulgarian researchers on the Macedonian issue have mostly been published overseas. The crimes against Serbs or Greeks committed by Bulgarian troops during the 20th century wars still remain a taboo. The "traditional tolerance" of the Bulgarian nation to the Jews has yet to see a more comprehensive rethink, especially against the backdrop of the rampant anti-Semitism of the last few years.

The further back in time we go, or down the entrenched historical myths, the more timid the specialised publications appear. Among those researching the antique history (archaeologists, classical philologists, etc.), very few are the ones who have had the stomach to debunk the pile of inventions on a subject like the Thracians. Medieval historians and experts in problem-ridden disciplines like the "old Bulgarian studies" or "Cyril and Methodius studies" have been singularly silent. Arts history, ethnography

and folklore studies, dialectology have remained predominantly traditionalist in their approaches. Instead of undermining established schemes, they have mostly superficially modernised their clichés and indulged in pseudo-innovation. Taking into account how complicit with Bulgarian popular mythology these research areas have always been, and their recent faltering evolution in a more genuinely up-to-date direction, the “sobering” of the Bulgarians seems for the time being put on the backburner.

Translation from the Bulgarian by Georgi Pashov

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Voting for the Xenophobic Party “Ataka” in Bulgaria. Reshaping Symbolic Boundaries after Socialism

by Nadège Ragaru, Paris

ABSTRACT

This article examines the reasons behind the electoral support for the xenophobic party Ataka [Attack] in Bulgaria since its founding in 2005. While some authors have emphasized the salience of ethnic prejudices as an explanatory variable, others have insisted that Ataka mustered its strength by voicing some voters’ drive to radically denounce the Bulgarian post-socialist political, social, and moral order. This paper argues that understanding the Ataka vote requires a focus on the intertwining of changing socioeconomic inequalities and the territorialization of ethnocultural differences. Bulgaria is currently undergoing a hardening of social boundaries that goes hand-in-hand with a defensive reassertion of ethnic and cultural boundaries in a context where new intra-state and international geographic mobilities challenge former modes of ethnicity negotiation.

“Some in my family voted for Ataka but are not xenophobes. I asked them why. They believe Siderov, unlike everyone else, speaks about the real issues in Bulgaria.”¹

“Volen [Siderov, Ataka’s leader] is the first one who – based on facts – has nailed Dogan [the leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms /MRF/ representing the Turkish minority], Parvanov [the president of the Republic, a socialist], Turkey’s Islamist policy towards Bulgaria and lots of other things. Now everyone denounces Stanishev’s [the former socialist prime-minister] corruption yet when Siderov raised these issues they made fun of him. I wish him well as he is the one who talks about our problems and stands for our interests.”²

In June 2005 Ataka [Attack] – an extreme nationalist coalition bringing forth an anti-Roma, anti-Turkish and anti-Semitic discourse – stormed the Bulgarian parliamentary scene winning 21 seats (out of 240) and 296 848 votes

¹ A conversation with G., 27, Sofia, 7 June 2011.

² A 2009 opinion in an Internet discussion forum responding to an article published in Capital, a liberal weekly, discussing the falling out between V. Siderov and the owner of the Scat television channel, which at the time played a key role in promoting Siderov. See http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2009/12/04/825940_novite_patrioti/.

(8, 93% of the total vote). This breakthrough was surprising in a number of ways: the time in history (Bulgaria had just signed its European accession agreement, and the economic recovery was beginning to bear fruit); the vote structure (one third of those who cast their votes for Ataka belonged to the educated classes); and some of the themes in Ataka’s pitch (the anti-Semitism, which had hardly reared its head during the post-communist period in Bulgaria). A year later, based on extensive field research in villages where Ataka had scored high, the social scientist Evgenia Ivanova accurately sketched the Ataka constituency as “medium educated, relatively successful and working”³. She emphasized the social nature of the vote denouncing the new inequalities as well as the corruption among political elites. While reminding of the nationalist beliefs among some voters and the power of anti-Roma and anti-Turkish prejudices, she saw the political expression of these stereotypes as a result of the “ethnicising” of social divisions. The quotes at the start of this paper may also suggest the Ataka sympathizers’ drive to

³ Evgenia Ivanova, A Majority of Innocent, Screwed-Up Bulgarians, Balkan Studies Forum, 1-2, 2008, pp. 63-72.

radically denounce the political, social and moral order of post-Communism as well as to seek an alternative in a setting where the key parties are regarded as identical, i.e. as equally corrupt and indifferent to the expectations of ordinary citizens.

Yet how much do we know about Ataka and the reasons behind its success? Should we view this organization as a paradoxical champion of social grievances and/or a fruit of an ethnicization of social cleavages? These two interpretations need a closer look. The former is reminiscent of some research dedicated to the National Front in France. Some commentators held the view that the Front mustered its strength – particularly after it was headed by Marine Le Pen – by giving visibility to political and social issues that its opponents try to evade (among them: globalisation-triggered social marginalisation; some mass-spread insecurities, the loss of clear-cut ideological distinctions among established political parties, etc.) The second interpretation seems likely to hold a stronger analytical potential. Ernest Gellner's work has brilliantly demonstrated how social and economic divisions were translated into ethnic and cultural terms by the emergent European nationalism at the turn of XVIII and early XIX century.⁴ Yet both assumptions have to be treated with caution. Firstly, as Evgenia Ivanova makes clear, large segments of Bulgarian society hold acutely negative attitudes towards both the political

class and the post-communist period and not all of them vote for Ataka. These critical views do not sufficiently explain the support given to an organisation preaching rabid nationalism. Secondly, if understanding the Ataka vote requires a focus on the intertwining of socioeconomic inequalities and ethnocultural divisions, the whole problem boils down



Volen Siderov speaking before Ataka sympathisers in a Sofia central square.
(poligraff.net)

to explaining the nature of this connection. What we have to understand is how the perceivably descending trajectories of social mobility might be converted to denouncing the ethnic “other”, and what makes this kind of stigmatisation conceivable or legitimate for the Ataka constituency. We should not exclude the possibility that the hardening of social boundaries we are witnessing in Bulgaria today goes hand-in-hand with a defensive hardening of ethnic and cultural boundaries in the context where both the contours of citizenship and multiple identities are being reshaped.

⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983.

ATAKA'S CONSTITUENCY:
THE VOTE OF SOCIAL GRIEVANCES?

For a start, let us assume that Ataka – a heterogeneous formation, including individuals from the former intelligence community, the security services, the former Communist Party as well as a host of others who passed through a number of political affiliations – articulates grievances, and among them issues or sources of discontent, which had never made it properly to the political scene before: the desire for a profound revamping of political practices; the angst amidst a political order that is perceived as unfair and immoral; the annoyance triggered by the frequent resorting to a “schoolboy” rhetoric (both on the part of local political elites and Western partners) and the brandishing of Euro-Atlantic integration as the only possible political project.

Indeed, by the start of the new millennium – after a decade dominated by the face-off between “the reds” (the former communists) and “the blues” (the anticommunists) – the Bulgarian political process was already coming across to the broader public as a string of governments, which actually offered no alternative: whatever their political affiliation, once in power, the political actors seemed to forget the change they had promised and only busied themselves multiplying the clientele-sustaining practices of their predecessors. The time of opaque privatization was followed by the time of murky procurement deals and fishy management of European funds. Condemning the corruption of the elites and the plea to restore a strong state capable of warranting the rule of law turned into powerful electoral arguments. Back from his exile, the former Bulgarian king Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha pledged his 2001 campaign on restoring

morality in politics. However, the fallout from his mandate strengthened even further the aspirations for a more transparent public life. Consternation towards the political class was further exacerbated as the rulers started to epitomise – next to the business community – the “nouveaux riches” who helped themselves to the national riches and lived high on the hog. During communism, social gaps were not obliterated but yet were softened, with wealth accumulation and ostentatious consumption forbidden (at least officially). Having transformed the capitals (in Bourdieu’s meaning) bringing social success, post-communism yielded social discrepancies among the former “equals” from the communist era, and, to boot, gave them an unprecedented financial and material visibility. A subject of bitter confusion (how was it possible that a cash exchange point owner could make a fortune while a teacher or a midwife dropped near the poverty line?), this new social stratification was soon felt as unwarranted and/or illegal, with the two notions often mixing up. The perceived injustice of the social order was compounded by seeing the “transition to a market economy” as the “plunder of the state” – an interpretation shared by large sections of the upper middle classes as well. The daily experiences of post-communism seemed to radically clash with the messages the political class was trying to put across. The contrast was never as strong as during Ivan Kostov’s government (1997-2001, right-wing), which actually played a decisive role in preparing the country for its Euro-Atlantic accession: while the ruling classes kept talking of reforms, achievements and progress, voters felt their world (and social safety net) were crumbling under their feet. Having expressed some degree of solidarity in denouncing the evils of post-communism,

Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha subsequently adopted the vocabulary of his predecessors – achievements, reforms, etc. – while at the same time government technocrats and experts dismissed public perceptions as “incorrect”... In this kind of milieu, voters’ grievances went largely unheeded.

The sense of loss was further exacerbated by the over-the-top use of NATO and European Union integration as primary sources of legitimacy by the ruling classes. Rumen Vodenicharov, running for a seat in Parliament on the Ataka 2005 ticket, trashed “the European fixation hypnotizing both the left and the right”⁵. The urge to meet the expectations and requirements of the Western allies led to a number of profoundly unpopular government decisions (e.g. the support for the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo or the shutdown of the third and fourth reactor of the Kozloduy nuclear station). A growing number of constituents already regretted the forfeiture of sovereignty Bulgaria hoped to attain in the early 1990s. Having become somewhat more familiar with life in the West, quite a few Bulgarians felt that the overly stringent standards imposed by NATO or the EU on aspiring countries were not applied with the same zeal by the member states themselves. The slogan “Let’s get Bulgaria back” raised by Siderov in 2005 keenly caught the popular sentiments and the drive to refocus on the national.

Yet restricting our interpretations to the above would be a mistake. First and foremost, ever since Ataka was created, the political and moral lambasting of post-Communism – on topics like reigning in corruption, establishing the rule of law, providing security to common

⁵ Rumen Vodenicharov, “Towards a New Dawn for the Fatherland with Ataka”, *Nova Zora* (New Dawn, a nationalist weekly), 24, 14 June 2005.

citizens, etc. – was tapped into by a broad range of political formations, among them GERB (the Bulgarian acronym for Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), the party of the former Sofia mayor and current prime minister Boyko Borisov. If Ataka had owed its success at the polls to a monopoly on this agenda alone, it would have lost its support as early as in 2009 (the year when the party got 9,36% of the vote and 21 seats in Parliament)⁶. Besides, it would be misleading – and dangerous – to assume that extremist political formations address good issues the bad way. It is not a matter of pushing neglected grievances onto the political agenda, but a matter of how they are articulated to become part of the public agenda: no public issue exists outside the way political actors name it – or construct it.

Let us take corruption as an example. Even though Volen Siderov has denounced corruption as a whole, the predominant target of his discourse has always been and still is the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the political representation of Muslim minorities in Bulgaria). Yet is there an MRF-specific corruption issue in Bulgarian political life or does the conduct of some in its leadership merely reflect the culture – widespread in both the ethnic majority and the minorities – of collusion between politicians and business people? Even if we allow – something that indeed needs to be proven – that corruption is more endemic amidst MRF than in other political parties, should we not seek the reason in the structure of political competition

⁶By the way, it has to be pointed out that between 2005 and 2009 several political players tried to fit into the populist niche in the fight against corruption, e.g. the Order, Law and Justice Party (currently having 10 seats in Parliament) or the Leader Party (which could not make it over the 4% barrier only just).

within the Turkish minority (the long absence of political alternative restricting the opportunities for a penalty vote and accountability pressures upon the elites) or should we accept – as Ataka claims – that the core of the problem is the very existence of a “Turkish party in power”? Defining what constitutes a problem is political business in itself rather than a given. Actually, one of the most stunning phenomena in Bulgaria today is the way in which Ataka and MRF have become more and more often perceived as “twin parties” that feed off one another. The way that Ataka has articulated the “MRF issue” has, at final reckoning, influenced the whole public debate: the existence of a formation aimed at representing the interests of minority groups has increasingly been presented as an issue in itself.

Now let us go back to the second, much more insightful, hypothesis: the ethnicising of social divisions. Building up on Evgenia Ivanova’s work, we shall pursue the idea of a partial shift and hardening of the symbolic boundaries correlated with social and territorial changes during post-Communism that affect majority and minorities alike.

ETHNIC CONVERSION OF SOCIAL DIVISIONS? THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTERNAL BORDERS WITHIN BULGARIAN SOCIETY

How could we clarify the dynamics that enabled the ethnicising of social contrasts? To start with, we can revisit the longer existence of negative images of the (minority) Other in Bulgaria. In an earlier article, I highlighted the fact that the nationalist and xenophobic arguments resorted to by Siderov have gathered their strength from three sources: the unitary conception of the nation-state dating back to the XIX century; tying up the idea of

national unity with the (forced) assimilation of minorities (having reached its climax during the 1980s); and xenophobic notions borrowed from the international market of conspiracy theories (the example here is Siderov’s anti-



The cover page to Volen Siderov’s book “My Battle for Bulgaria” (images.ibox.bg)

Semitism).⁷ This analysis, however, does not enable us to understand why this radical discourse crystallized in 2005 rather than in the early 1990s (when many commentators were apprehensive that ethnic tensions might be aroused) or, for that matter, in the late 1990s (when the effects of social marginalizing, triggered by the transition to a market economy, were already visible).

A focus on the anti-Roma stereotypes preyed on politically by Ataka – a phenomenon partially new in its nature – could help us shed light on the inner works of ethnicizing the social dynamics in today’s Bulgaria. Prejudice towards the Roma population is not something new. In varying degrees, depending on the times and places, Roma people have been associated with poor hygiene, laziness and stealing. What Siderov’s discourse does, though, is to push these widespread perceptions out into the political arena and

⁷ See Nadège Ragaru, «Un parti nationaliste radical en Bulgarie: Ataka ou le mal-être du postcommunisme», *Critique internationale*, 30, January-March 2006, p. 41-55, http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/publica/critique/article/ci30p41_56.pdf.

use them as arguments in political debates. Why? This evolution can, on the one hand, be explained with the growing tensions in some bigger city suburbs where a large number of unemployed Roma, who had previously lived in rural areas, moved into after 1989 in search of a better life. In such places, where the majority feel exposed to social marginalization, heightened competition over scarce resources turns the Romany population into an issue that can be instrumentalized for political purposes (we might recollect the May 2005 incident in the Sugar Factory neighbourhood in Sofia, when a local fight between some Roma and non-Roma residents have left a well-known Bulgarian historian and archeologist dead and several people hurt on both sides, causing much uproar in the Bulgarian media, and offering the newly created Ataka coalition a pretext to denounce the “tsiganization” of the country. Although traditionally good, interethnic relations in the neighbourhood had been deteriorating over the previous years in a context where economic opportunities were scarce and social policies unable to accommodate existing needs). Another development however looks even more fundamental.

As did Ilia Iliev, a number of Bulgarian social scientists have emphasized that pauperization, or social marginalization, in Bulgaria is at times perceived amongst Bulgarian citizens as a form of creeping “tsiganization” and associated with the fear that Gypsies might some day prevail in the national population. In other words, the crossing of some social borders is on occasion symbolically linked with the trespassing of established ethnic borders. At the same time, while most of the Roma became even poorer after 1989, a minority of them struck it rich, mainly by filling a few entrepreneurial niches. As a consequence,

some of the Roma neighbourhoods (mahali) started featuring a handful of oversized houses with opulent aesthetics in a stark contrast with the makeshift shacks or crumbling tenement blocks from the Communist past inhabited by the ordinary Romanies. The social fabric in Bulgaria prior to 1989 was ethnically based on a pecking order putting the Gypsies firmly at the bottom rung. In other words, Romani “otherness” was negotiated and accepted so long as their integration with the rest of society did not question the social or ethno-cultural hierarchies.

Faced with the two-way rupture of a symbolic border previously deemed impermeable – on the one hand, the social marginalization of some ethnic Bulgarians and, on the other, the upward mobility, real or conceived, of the Roma – some Bulgarians became prone to strengthen, to essentialize and even to racialize the demarcation line between themselves and the former. The more fuelled by demographic anxieties, the more persistent the “*tsiganizatsiya*” bashing exercise grows: the Romany quite often come across as a young, fertile group whereas Bulgarians see themselves as an aging, declining nation.

In actual facts, only an in-depth research into the forms of spatial expression of social and ethnic hierarchies and their recent changes might explain the response to Siderov’s anti-Roma discourse. The communist regime, a period of great territorial mobility, had already initiated the spacing out of ethnic and cultural divides, a process that expanded and partially intensified after 1989. The liquidation of the former collective farms and the socialist industrial conglomerates, the development of a private farmland market – excluding the Roma population in their vast part – as well as some urban renewal projects ill-adapted to the Roma way of life and livelihood or squeezing

the Roma out into the suburbia, have resulted in a dramatic increase in the share of Roma who live in a segregated universe: from 40% in 1989 to 78% in 2007. But the process did not only affect the Roma community: the migrations between villages and towns, or across the national border, have transformed the public mobility routes as well as the living spaces for Turks, Bulgarian Muslims and the majority of ethnic Bulgarians. These new mobilities – compounded by the monetarisation of social interactions accompanying the transition to capitalism – have called for a renegotiation – at times painful and incomplete – of the relations between newcomers and previous settlers in a number of neighbourhoods.

A second factor for the redefining of symbolic borders in post-communist Bulgaria should also be highlighted. It refers to the loosening of relations between citizenship and ethnicity in the context of global circulation and fluid identities. In the course of the development of the Bulgarian nation-state a distinction between the two had been established. Among the members of the majority, as true nationals are regarded those who speak Bulgarian language, confess the East Orthodox Christianity and are ethnically Bulgarian whereas all others are admitted into the realm of Bulgarian citizenship yet rather to its symbolic periphery than to its core. Since the late 1950s, the communist regime embarked on the uprooting – initially through incentives and subsequently through force – this discrepancy between the outlines of Bulgarian citizenship and Bulgarian ethnicity. This policy reached its climax between 1984 and 1989 bringing forward an unlikely ideological mix: on the one hand, the Turkish minority's "otherness" was wildly overblown (and presented as a radical threat), and on the other, it was denied with the same zeal (epitomized

by the campaign to forcibly change their Turkish names with Bulgarian ones, to ban their cultural or confessional practices as well as the use of Turkish in public places, etc.).

Ataka's discourse is reminiscent to a certain degree of the Communist regime rhetoric when the party reaffirms the legitimacy of the Bulgarian Turks' compulsory assimilation, when it denies their Turkish identity or when its leader rants, "if he's Bulgarian but has opted for a Muslim name, he has to be asked what he thinks he is. If he said "I am a Turk", my advice would be to go settle in Turkey. If he says he is Bulgarian, it means he is Bulgarian"⁸. Without claiming that every member of the Ataka constituency would support this argumentation to the same degree – or that they are the only ones likely to share attitudes of this kind – one may put forward two factors behind the public appeal of this exclusive notion of national citizenship. The first one is that after 1989, with the institution of a political party designed to champion the interests of Turkish and Muslim minorities in Bulgaria (MRF), with Bulgaria's adoption of international documents warranting minority rights (especially the 1995 Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities) and the emergence of a non governmental sector taking to heart the close follow-up on the enforcement of these rights, the fiction (long cherished in Bulgarian national ideology) of Bulgaria as a single-nation state becomes increasingly difficult to uphold. This transformation presents a challenge to a part of the Bulgarians that were largely socialized back in communist times in the spirit of a unitary state. It is perceived as even more threatening in a context where (...) people tend more and more often to work, live,

⁸ "If GERB are Reasonable, they Would Back me for President", 4 April 2011, www.ataka.bg.

belong and vote in different places at a given point in time. Coupled with the evolution of citizenship regulations (e.g. an increasing number of countries recognizing dual citizenship, joined by Bulgaria in 1998 as well as the implications of European integration for the definition of European citizenship) these multiple, at times disconnected, spaces of existence have yielded fluid and multifaceted ways of belonging. The popular appeal that the “patriotic” quest to protect “Bulgarianness” from “the Turks” has enjoyed is probably a symptom of a society struggling to adapt to the plurality of implications – both individually experienced and politically instituted – of being a Bulgarian nowadays. The anti-Turkish repertoire is today instrumentalized for the very role it had been historically granted throughout the XXth century in the factory of Bulgarian identity – despite its inability to meet the challenges of modern identities.

CONCLUSION

With the forthcoming presidential and local elections in October 2011, the likelihood that Volen Siderov, running for head of state, revisits his 2006 performance (when he reached a runoff with 24,05% of the vote) looks insignificant. Since the autumn of 2009, his support for the Borisov government (GERB, right-wing) has been undermining his credibility as a force of protest; in-house wrangles have weakened his structures;

and the May 2011 incident triggered by Ataka activists in front of the Sofia mosque (where believers were subjected to physical aggression) was denounced by the whole political class and led to the withdrawal of sympathizers unwilling to see the inter-faith and inter-community peaceful coexistence in the country threatened. Nevertheless, even if Ataka scored lower than in the previous vote, this electoral retreat would not imply an erosion of the attitudes that the party has tapped into. Six years to its creation, some of its ideas, which would have been regarded as populist and/or extremist not so long ago, have already become run-of-the-mill among the mainstream parties.

Translation from the Bulgarian by Georgi Pashov

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Civil Protest in Bulgaria: the Absent Social Critique

by Boyan Znepolski, Sofia

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the place which Bulgarian public sphere assigned to social civil protests in a broader concept of civil society. The specific question the article tries to answer is to what degree civil protests contribute to the self-understanding and reforming of contemporary Bulgarian society. The analysis is focused on the big teachers' strike that took place the autumn of 2007, and is aimed at building up a typology of the key perspectives towards the strike – that of the financial experts, of intellectuals/ humanitarian academics, of citizens who voiced their support for the strike – that offer different ways to identify and address social issues in the country.

The history of social civic protests in Bulgaria over the last 20 years has not been written yet. The major reason behind this is that the social as a category and social critique as a genre have remained marginal throughout the whole period of the so-called transition. They are marginal even today, in the times of the world financial crisis and its lasting consequences. The energies have obviously leaked away towards other categories and genres of public discourse, therefore references to the realm of the social look outdated.¹

Any overview of publications dedicated to civil society in Bulgaria astonishes with the nearly utter lack of interest to civil protest. The latter is practically absent from the definitions of civil society², predominantly restricted to the third sector covering nongovernmental organisations of various profiles. A number of policy papers, analysing the functioning of Bulgarian NGOs, symptomatically emphasize two key features of the national third sector: 1) NGOs carry out awareness raising and

educational functions: they are elitist structures trying to fill in “from top to bottom” the missing civil culture in Bulgarian society; 2) NGOs complement government institutions or make up for their ineffectiveness in providing a number of services to the public (e.g. in the areas of social support, mitigating poverty or education).³ However meaningful these tasks, and however helpful the NGOs are to the public (we assume they are), they are not equivalent to the concept of civil society. The question about the voices coming from “down below” remains open. Are they entirely absent in the public arena or does Bulgarian publicity simply fail to provide them with enough room, to debate over them, to outline their reformist potential?

A look back to events of the recent years proves the point that the problem lies in the standards of Bulgarian public sphere rather than in the quality of civil protest itself. Even if we put aside the large political upheavals of the 1990s (the protest rallies in 1989-1990 that accompanied the collapse of communism; the big university students' strike of the summer in 1990; the massive civil protest in the winter of 1997, which led to the overthrow of Jean

¹ See Chavdar Marinov's article, National myths in post-communist Bulgaria and their criticism, in this collection.

² We can only find a brief chapter on “civil disobedience” in a theoretical booklet by Prof. Fotev from the early 1990s. See Georgi Fotev, *The Civil Society*, Sofia, Bulgarian Academy of sciences, 1992, pp. 47-51.

³ See D. Andreeva, I. Dushkova, D. Petkova, D. Michailov, *A Civil Society Without Citizens. An Assessment Of Bulgarian Civil Society (2003-2005)*, Sofia, Balkan Assist, 2005, pp. 11-14.

Videnov's socialist government), we find out that Bulgaria saw at least several substantial social protest events only within the last few years: the public transport drivers' protest (in the spring of 2007); the strike of the Pirogov Emergency Hospital doctors (the summer of the same year); the farmers' protests (the summer of 2008); the protests of faculty and students from the Sofia University and other



September 2007, Bulgarian teachers march in the centre of Sofia united behind their rallying cry "Dignified Work. Dignified Pay." and demand the resignation of the education secretary. (oldspook.blogspot.com)

third-level schools in the capital (the autumn of 2010), etc.

The most significant one among this string of protests was the national strike of Bulgarian teachers in the fall of 2007, the largest protest action in the history of Bulgarian trade unionism. Teachers united around the slogan, "dignified work, dignified pay", and broached a demand for a 100% pay rise. The strike went on for more than a month (from late September to early November); it was led by three trade unions (the Trade Union of Bulgarian Teachers, the Podkrepa /"support"/ Labour Confederation and the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria); 80-90% of Bulgarian teachers joined the strike

(by October 10 the united striker's committee declared that the percentage of striking teachers had reached 96%); on October 11 the united striker's committee organised a national protest rally in Sofia's centre attended by 75,000 protesters (from trade union statistics). Analysing the media reactions to this important manifestation of Bulgarian civil society can give us a general view of how Bulgarian public sphere is structured when it comes to reflecting on civil protests and social issues: what are the key voices on these subjects and what is their relative strength. This kind of analysis could help us understand why civil protest still comes across as a marginal type of action as far as the self-understanding and the self-constructing of Bulgarian society are concerned.⁴

THE EXPERTS AGAINST CIVIL SOCIETY

The teachers' strike was covered by the Bulgarian press almost as a merely financial event, above all having implications on the national budget – what teachers wanted was higher pay – rather than as a meaningful civil protest and a social event that raises important questions around public values, e.g. the importance of education in Bulgarian society, the appreciation of teachers' work, etc. Hence, the figures the media primarily enlisted were financial experts whose task was to clarify the strike's stakes before the Bulgarian audience. In a host of interviews and analysis for the press, financial pundits of various political hues manifested a bewildering unanimity on the strike, which could be explained by a shared group culture. A substantial portion

⁴ In this context we can emphasize that for a host of intellectual traditions – e.g. the sociology of action of Alain Touraine or the critical social theory of Axel Honneth – societies understand and reform themselves based on civil protests, social movements and other struggles for recognition.

of the Bulgarian media-active financial professionals are graduates of the University for National and World Economy in Sofia, some of them teach in it as well. A salient twist in the history of this institution is its abrupt ideological reorientation in the aftermath of 1990. Throughout the period 1953-1990, the University carried the name Tertiary Economic Institute Karl Marx and taught the principles of the centrally planned socialist economy. In 1990, it got its current title, UNWE, and rather quickly, without any particular reflective efforts, endorsed the principles of market economy. The UNWE alumni are among the most entrenched acolytes of the philosophy that the free markets ought to engulf all other public fields. This makeover was only radical at its surface: in reality what was abruptly altered was the ideological content, however the tradition of dogmatic adherence to yet another dominant ideology was preserved. There is another kind of continuity between the two stages of UNWE development, an even more meaningful one: the “systemic” approach in analysing economy and society, which usually operates in disregard of the citizens’ activeness. If for the followers of the centrally planned economy the country’s development had to be decided at the Bulgarian Communist Party “plenums”, for the supporters of the free-market economy development is entirely dependent on the unimpeded functioning of market mechanisms. What the two ideologies have in common is that civic movements and strike actions are equally disregarded as a manifestation of human wantonness, an unpredictable and ill-advised turbulence that jeopardizes the system’s security and needs to be quickly eliminated.

The position of Emil Harsev, a UNWE teacher, banker and high-profile media pundit, represented the market extremism among the

majority of financial experts who commented on the teachers’ strike in the fall of 2007.⁵ At the core of his view stood the juxtaposition between market and state, and, in more specific terms, the truism that “the market is more effective than the state”. All public spheres are inherently classified as market spheres, hence the existence of a public service domain, where the market principles may not apply the same way as elsewhere or have a restricted reign, is ruled out. Even education and healthcare are seen as yet another market turf, if it were not for the government that has misguidedly snatched them out of the free economy and turned them into “charitable sectors”. All social problems, including those in education, stem from the distorting or restricting of market mechanisms; therefore whether these problems will find proper resolution or otherwise strictly depends on whether the market will restore (or establish) the supremacy of its pivotal principle, effectiveness. In brief, argued Harsev, the challenges in a society – either in its totality or in any of its particular sectors – resort to existing distortions of effectiveness. This tenet contradicts or crowds out any other competitive principle, for instance justice. Financial experts like Harsev won’t deny people the (constitutional) right to strike, they won’t even question the fairness of what Bulgarian teachers demand, what they dismiss is the very principle of strike action. By walking out on their work stations teachers have committed a sort of “ontological error” as the social world is guided – as must be – by the principle of effectiveness rather than by justice, which is subjective, arbitrary, i.e.

⁵ An interview with the financier Emile Harsev, What will the nation do if the treasury empties?, the Trud (labour) daily, 03.10.2007, pp. 12-13.

counterproductive.⁶ In his interview, Harsev was quite open on this: “The fairness of teachers’ demands is not an issue, nor is an issue whether they could be satisfied or not, the crux here is the social dynamic we would have on our hands if all conflicts in society were dealt with this way.” The strike as a social practice “implies that society forfeits its normal market pace and embarks on addressing its grievances through non-market devices”. This would delegitimize governance, unleash the disintegration of social fabric and revert us to a state where everyone is warring against everyone else.

If the strike had any point at all, Harsev saw it in its role as an indicator of the challenges in Bulgarian education, which however might not possibly be addressed through industrial action and claims for justice. These challenges would only be addressed as soon as Bulgarian education became subject to the objective and impartial market mechanisms, in other words “when the cabinets relinquishes its social function, axes between 30 and 50% of them [the teachers] and raises the salaries of the rest who will in turn supply a competitive product to society”.

Financial commentators were nearly unanimous that – if it were to become effective – Bulgarian education needed to be decentralised and privatised. And if we were to treat it adequately, then we would have to learn how to see it through the logic and the terms of the market. While trying to identify

⁶ In the same interview, talking about the striking teachers, Harsev argued: “yes, the teachers are victims. They are victims of their own latency, of their own attitudes so far.” At the same time, he questioned the trade unions from the perspective of governance rationality: “The trade unions are not always rational, but being rational isn’t their business. It isn’t their business to be thinking how to manage the state.”

the goals of education, these experts used a jargon entirely borrowed from the production and marketing of commodities. Education has to be conceived as a market of high quality educational products yielding competence with a market value. As a specific production area, its key purpose ideally is the provision of “knowledge and skills, which enhance people’s flexibility and adaptability” to the fluctuating market trends. What this expert jargon strikes us with is the nearly paranoid avoidance of any idea of a community: it seems the interference of such a fiction would distort the “pure” functioning of market mechanisms. The financial pundits seemed convinced that education was a process that took place entirely in a world of individuals: teachers are rated according to their qualities and diligence as individuals; they supply outputs to be individually absorbed by students in line with their qualities or ambitions; these outputs help students form individual professional competences to be subsequently – and just as singularly – used on the labour market.

The key strategy applied by the financial commentators in stigmatising the teacher’s strike was to atomise the strikers, to fragment the collective solidarity action of a professional community down to actions dictated by interests of individuals who were best taken separately and evaluated on the basis of their personal professional quality. An economic pundit⁷ questioned any collective action, e.g. strikes, and any professional organisation, e.g. trade unions, as these are instruments used to ratchet up social tension and thwart or distort the only legitimate form of negotiating labour contracts, which is the “individual voluntary agreement between employers and

⁷ Dimiter Chobanov, Teachers with Higher Wages, for the Same Education, the Dnevnik daily, 18.09.2007, pp.12-13.

employees". In the view of this expert, the strike was obviously a sham as it was attended by all sorts of teachers with wide variations of work performance – teachers with high and low professional skills, hard-working and lazy. Along these lines, the teaching community in itself is a mystification, possible in its current shape entirely for the fact that the schooling system is funded by the government and all teachers are treated the same way – which is unwarranted. Exposing schools to the market mechanisms would have a dual positive effect: every teacher will receive the compensation that he or she deserves, besides, variable rate remuneration would do away with the illusion of a community among teachers as well as with the attempts to raise up collective demands through industrial action.

In their analysis of the teachers' strike, financial commentators have used purely quantity indicators: How many of them are striking? What kind of money they want? How would this amount affect the budget? Posting the strike in an account is no doubt relevant from the perspective of its financial implications, but in itself it cannot answer the question: How could we understand this particular strike? Nor indeed the question: How could we adequately handle this strike?⁸ If we only brought up quantity indicators, we would have ended up losing the strike's professional specifics: it becomes irrelevant whether it was a teachers', or a railway employees', or a doctors', or a farmers' strike. What is more important here is that we lose its moral dimension, which relates to the feeling of humiliation, professional inferiority, social diminishment, among the teachers community, and these constituted the key motivation of the

⁸ The article of Georgi Angelov, *Is There Money for Teachers' Salaries* might provide an example of this, the *Dnevnik* daily, 04.10.2007, pp. 12-13.

strikers. What the experts managed to do was to "quantify" the strike yet they failed to grasp its point for the hermeneutical – and moral – insensitivity of their instruments. And this is precisely what led to the misunderstanding: the specific moral claims the teachers came up with – that they felt humiliated in their quality as teachers – were precipitously reduced (and this way diminished) to the alleged striving of any consumer to consume even more. The answer the strike's rallying cry for "dignified work, dignified pay" got from politicians and experts was "be more effective and you will get higher pay". The paradox here was that to the experts' imagination money was extremely valuable yet had a strictly limited application. Their shared belief seemed to be money should only be used to remunerate effectiveness; the idea it could be used for moral purposes – to restore a professional group to its dignity, self-respect, perception of fair treatment – was out of the question.⁹ To think otherwise would have demanded a different philosophy whereby education could be interpreted both within the context of its social conditions and from the perspective of its social impact.

LA CONFUSION DES CLERCS

As a form of social disobedience, the strike proved alien to the category repertoire of prominent Bulgarian intellectuals. Having socialised during the communist era, these 60 or 70-year-old popular professors and researchers – in possession of robust academic culture, but weak civil reflexes – reacted to the teachers' strike with confusion and mistrust. Some of them suggested that teachers should have been more radical and mutinied; others

⁹ I leave aside the question whether or not this might be a way – at least indirectly – to set up the proper conditions for higher efficiency of education.

preferred them to be more humble and resigned to their professional duties. As a form of action, organised protests demanding higher salaries struck these intellectuals as either too arrogant or too humble.

Indeed, unlike the financial pundits, the intellectuals – all of them from the humanities – did not trash the strike outright, but bemusedly sat on the fence between half-hearted support for the experts' position¹⁰ and half-hearted faculty solidarity. But both experts and intellectuals denounced the strikers' demand for higher pay: the former – because the teachers did not deserve it through high-quality output, the latter – because wanting more money is undignified in principle. Professor Nikola Georgiev, a well-known literary theory lecturer at the Sofia University, came up with this kind of opinion on the strike: "Yes, the wages are low, yet when the first thing a teacher strikes for is money, this casts the trade in unfavourable light in the eyes of parents [...] By demanding more money, we, as teachers, shed some of our halo."¹¹ Professor Georgiev believed the strike was humiliating as a form of civil action: "Striking means, "Please, give me more cash!" or "Reduce my working hours!" By striking the weak comes across as even weaker." Even though he expressed solidarity with the strikers' cause, the professor pleaded for some aesthetically superior forms of protest, e.g. the rebellion.

The stance of Andrei Pantev, professor of contemporary Bulgarian history at the Sofia

¹⁰ See the interview with Prof. Georgi Markov, director of the History Institute within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, titled, *I Don't Want to be a Millionaire Over Again*, Trud, 11.10.2007, pp. 12-13.

¹¹ *The Strike Has Already Turned into Panhandling*, an interview with Prof. Nikola Georgiev, Trud, 09.10.2007, pp. 12-13.

University and an MP for the Socialist Party in the current parliament, is similar only to a certain degree. Professor Pantev differed from the experts who were prone to turn education into a commodity market: "I reject being a salesman, and my students being customers. Since education is much more than a market service."¹² Yet along the same line, the professor dismisses the teachers' claims for higher wages: "On the other hand, this ferocious emphasis on money alone can put off public opinion, which used to stand unequivocally behind the teacher." This is how Pantev distanced himself from both the experts and the teachers, in his belief – apropos entirely misguided – that these two sides actually share the same logic, which is to drag education into the venality of commodity-money relationship obliterating its moral dimension. Unlike Professor Georgiev, he didn't put forward mutiny, but humility in the spirit of the Bulgarian 19th-century National Revival, which allegedly had an ideal for a teacher who is selflessly dedicated to a noble but ungrateful profession: "...being a teacher is a destiny that isn't always thankful. But the essence of teaching's grace is precisely in this ungratefulness."

In their response to the teachers' strike, Bulgarian intellectuals blended the prejudices of Revival idealism, demanding self-sacrificial commitment to a cause, with the prejudices of "socialist morality" denouncing the manifestations of material interest, and, at the end of the day, distanced themselves from the strike. They declared their support for the teacher community in principle, yet laid down conditions on the strike, which were so restrictive – not to be politicized, not to

¹² *Students are not customers*, an interview with Prof. Andrey Pantev, Trud, 24.10.2007, pp. 12-13.

have any financial claims, etc. – that had they been lived up to, that would have rendered the strike completely meaningless. Their inability to sympathize with their own kin also bears the footprint of an elitism, which places intellectuals up closer to the political establishment than to ordinary teachers.

MARGINAL VOICES OF SUPPORT

The expert discourse on the strike suffered a key deficit: it never mentioned that education has a role to play in the creation of a social environment, of social bonds, that in a more general perspective it does not simply produce professional skills, but (re)produces society, however simplified this may sound. This perspective actually did surface in the debates around the strike, but did so in a solidarity letter signed by a whole former grade of the Sofia Mathematical Secondary School to support their past teachers.¹³ It was exactly in this letter rather than in the financial experts analysis, that the teachers circumstances had been insightfully understood and the teachers got the recognition they deserved: for having made their former students “competitive to all European, American and whichever-you-like young people”, and also for having been “not only our teachers [...] but also our FRIENDS”, for having “as Bulgarian teachers – with persistence and genuine love for their profession – continued the quest against loudness, ignorance and sloppiness in Bulgaria, a thoroughly patriotic mission

¹³ To Teachers With Love, Dnevnik, 05.10.2007, pp. 8-9.

deserving respect and reverence that to our deep conviction does NOT match the kind of compensation they get”. The former students’ letter offered an appreciation of the teachers’ profession based on a wider range



Another key slogan of the striking teachers, “Dignified Teachers - Dignified Bulgarians”. (news.ibox.bg)

of its motivations and its social implications. Education is not merely a process of successfully handing down professional skills, but a process of communication and mutual commitment of teachers and students, in the course of which it creates attitudes, values and social skills that enable, among other things, the future successful professional career of the students.

Though it might sound as a paradox, but out of all political parties the one that stood by the striking teachers without reservations was the populist Ataka.¹⁴ Without overlooking the nationalist overtones in their rhetoric¹⁵,

¹⁴ See Nadege Ragaru, Voting for the Xenophobic Party Ataka in Bulgaria. Reshaping Symbolic Boundaries after Socialism, in this collection.

¹⁵ This pitch was clearly pursued, for instance by various Ataka activists alleging that politicians were finding money for the Romany minority or

or diminishing the fact that it is quite natural for populists to support ordinary people in their grievances against the political class, we have to point out that in this particular case Ataka's support was pertinent and convincing. Nationalist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic in its ideology, as it undoubtedly is, in terms of the teachers' strike Volen Siderov's outfit showed a keener social sensitivity than the policymakers of the then ruling triple coalition or, for that matter, than most media pundits. In a speech before parliament, Siderov stood behind the demands of the striking teachers, recognizing the moral dimension of their protest and appealing for understanding and support to people who feel humiliated and have to fight for their dignity.¹⁶ This situation bears testimony not only for the niches that Bulgarian populism fits into, but also for the limitations of contemporary Bulgarian democracy. Bulgarian society has not learned yet how to understand and reform itself by lending an ear to the voices coming from below – the voices of civil protest.

The 2007 teachers' strike wound up with a partial success for the teachers who got their rise albeit not to the degree initially demanded. Yet the strikers lost the symbolic struggle for recognition. The government at the time conceded to their demands not because it was convinced this was the right thing to do, but because the strike was massive and prolonged and could jeopardize political stability in the country; a precedent had been set with

to purchase French military equipment yet failed to find money for Bulgarian teachers.

¹⁶ Volen Siderov, Ataka insists Oresharski and Valchev Should Resign, the Ataka daily, 13.10.2007, pp. 12-13.

other professional groups as well¹⁷. If the strike's purpose had been to move education to a better place in the social imagination of Bulgarians, or to achieve higher appreciation of what teachers do, then it failed. At the end of the day, it was the experts' interpretations that triumphed and they were the ones to leave a definitive footprint on construing the event. However important a public event the teachers' strike was, it hardly changed anything in Bulgarian society. The question is: could it have done better?

Translation from the Bulgarian by Georgi Pashov

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¹⁷ the government had already satisfied demands for raising the salaries of public transport drivers earlier in 2007.