

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