

Civil Protest in Bulgaria: the Absent Social Critique

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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away towards other categories and genres of public discourse, therefore references to the realm of the social look outdated.¹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 it 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 his 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. Andrei 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 who had gone on strike in the summer of 2007.