

Street Protests in Sofia: On Environmental Protection and the “Critical Public” in Bulgaria. A Commentary

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In June, protests against the loosening of environmental protection provisions in the Bulgarian forestry law took place in the capital city Sofia. However, the feared environmental damage was not the only cause of the protests. Instead, the protests also articulated a general dissatisfaction with the social and political situation. The author examines the potential for the emergence of a critical public in Bulgaria.

In June of this year, street protests took place in the capital of Bulgaria against the political legitimization and legalization of construction activities in designated public nature conservation and forest areas. The direct cause of the protests in Sofia was the passing of amendments to the applicable forestry law by the parliament on 13 June 2012. Before the Christmas holidays of 2011 and in violation of the legally stipulated public consultation time period of 14 days, the government of the liberal-conservative party “Citizens for European development of Bulgaria / GERB” under Prime Minister Borisov presented the national assembly the bill to be passed. The new forestry law abolished the obstacle of structural reallocation of land into construction grounds, which was previously mandatory and associated with high costs. This amendment gave investors de facto a quick possibility to obtain rights of usage for and begin construction on public forests and meadows at no cost, for example to build skiing and golf facilities while circumventing strict environmental protection regulations. The previously applicable construction ban in protected public nature parks was removed. Furthermore, due to the amendments existing ski slopes and other state-owned sporting facilities could be turned over to private investors for usage on the basis of a mere decision of the agriculture minister – without the requirement to allocate rights of usage after public bidding procedures. In ad-

dition, the amendments laid the legal foundations for the intensification of logging activities.

Since the beginning of the present year environmental protection associations such as “Green Balkans” had publicly criticized the legal amendments as a lobbying initiative for the sell-out and large-scale destruction of nature. It was seen as a violation of both applicable national and European legislation. The public authorities justified the amendments with references to the potential for regional development and as a means of improving the infrastructure for tourism and skiing. The parliamentary opposition which consists of the Socialists (BSP) and the conservative alliance “Blue Coalition”, which has 99 seats in the National Assembly, did not make use of its existing possibility to block the law.

The lobbyism accusations are indeed justified. Within the past few years the investment-related pressures from the tourism branch on the political system and environmental protection regulations has continuously increased, while offshore firms, in particular, have realized semi-legal and illegal large construction projects on protected lands time and time again. The tourism complexes on the Black Sea coastline and the expansion of the Bansko ski resort into the Pirin National Park are two of many examples of the uncontrolled construction boom.

Within just hours after the passing of the

law in June 2012, the opponents of the amendment, who were mainly under 30 years old, spontaneously organized by means of electronic and personal networks, in particular Facebook and SMS. Based on the motto “Block the Eagle Bridge” they adopted the style of the Occupy Movement and flash mobs in order to block off the busy intersection in the center of Sofia. On the evening of June 13th, they peacefully chanted slogans such as “You stole everything and now you want to rip the skin off Bulgaria” or simply “mafia” and demanded a presidential veto. The protesters described themselves as “friends of nature” and as the “young generation” and both implicitly and explicitly distanced themselves from any partisan or associational affiliations. On the following evenings far more than a thousand people peacefully followed the calls from personal networks and electronic media to continue the protests until the law was overturned. The hundreds of policemen who arrived did not make any serious attempts to forcefully disband the unregistered demonstrations, which were initially demonstratively downplayed by politicians, as reflected in statements of the Prime Minister. The feared environmental damage from business lobbying was the trigger, but not the only motivation behind the most recent wave of protests. They took place in a country which, after years of Soviet-style socialism, embarked on a rocky process of transformation and socio-economic restructuring after 1989/90 aimed at establishing democracy and a market economy as well as complying with the stability criteria for EU membership. Bulgaria was becoming a country, in which new means of participation and development, fundamental rights and freedoms coexist with numerous socio-economic structural problems and functional deficits: for example, in the form of political influence

of corrupt clientelist networks and economic interests, electoral fraud and blatant representational deficits of political parties and actors, as well as the undermining of competition rules and the abuse of structural funds from the European Union. The democratic deficits also include unfettered influence of the Prime Minister on areas of activity of other political decision-makers and institutions and political and corporate control of the – with few exceptions – skewed and selective pro-governmental media landscape, which is far away from the ideal-typical notion of media “checks and balances”. The verbal attacks of the journalist Diana Najdenova from the largest private broadcaster BTV, who described the demonstrators as aggressive, unprincipled hooligans, and accusations leveled at the protesters by the broadcaster in reaction to the scandal that broke out due to their statements in internet forums are just a few examples of this. The wide-spread disappointment and political apathy among the population are not to be understood as a general rejection of democracy as the political order, rather as the consequences of the perception of political governance as a “dirty business”. Beyond their wish to maintain the nature conservation areas, protesters accordingly also expressed their more general critique of the oligarchic structures, the lacking compliance with European “rules of the game” due to the pseudo-democratic political practice, and the perceived absence of a “real” grassroots democracy, the rule of law and actual means of participation. Finally, the protests can also be viewed as part of the overall youth protests which have taken place around Europe and the world and been motivated by lacking opportunities for socio-economic advancement, fears of the future and the perceived alienation between political elites and the population. However, can the protests in

Sofia be seen as a potential and indicator for the emergence of a previously lacking critical public as part of society which is willing and able to express and publicly articulate its problems and demands – and which also could bring about political alternatives based on clearly defined political demands resulting from a consensus of opinion and values? Skeptical references to the potential political manipulability of diffuse, amorphous masses and the fact that a mass of people generally can only be mobilized for short-term and less risky forms of protest are absolutely legitimate in this context. Equally legitimate is the argument that the protests say nothing about the intensity and sustainability of the commitment of the protesters and that they can be understood as an expression of potentially quickly changing sentiments, an expression of a youth sub-culture, or as a momentary “fad” to become involved in environmental protection which may quickly fade away. It is also legitimate to refer to the superficiality of the “information consumption” through new media and social networks, which could lead to the depletion and flattening of any ideological convictions within the protest culture, in particular within the younger generation, just as it is legitimate to point out the limited impact of the internet with regard to promoting substantive and discursive debates. There is also justification for the objection that a “new protest generation” cannot be expected, because the protesters were primarily young members of a more highly educated urban segment of society and that a broader societal mobilization is hardly possible for socio-economic reasons and due to the absence of an issue- and value related consensus. One must also consider that due to the deliberate distancing of the participants from the political sphere the protests did not bring about any leading fig-

ures and coherent general political demands aimed at gaining political influence and that a substantial foundation for the mobilization of political alternatives does not exist. Moreover, the existing critique of cartelized democracy and corrupt neo-liberalism is not adequately conveyed in public. It is also reasonable to question the opportunities for establishing independent political alternatives in a pseudo-democratic political and journalistic reality characterized by “populist re-politization” (A. Todorov) and aimed at preserving the *status quo*.

Anyway, attempts to interpret the protests as a mere manifestation of the apolitical lifestyle of a “transitional generation”, which has been socialized in anonymous irresponsibility and with the information overflow of the internet, and as the “rebellion of naïve individualists” who are protesting because environmental protection is “sexy” at the moment come up too short. The authenticity, spontaneity and peaceful character of the Sofia protests are notable in their own right. Young people gathered on short notice without being mobilized or politicized by individual actors in order to carry their critique of the endangerment of the nature conservation areas into the public. Electronic and personal networks played a key role in the dispersal of information, the development of an awareness of the problem and the mobilization of protesters. The protesters not only “reminded” politicians about the traditionally strong significance of the environment as a public good worthy of protection in the collective social consciousness and system of values. The forum for the critical public created by the protests also served to enable implicit and explicit criticism of undemocratic elements of the political elites. With an emerging spirit of optimism at the grassroots level, which was somewhat reminiscent of

the protests for environmental protection and democratization in 1988/89, the commitment to environmental protection once again provided a channel and “motor” for conveying more profound critique of the perceived lack of moral responsibility, the alienation of the political establishment from the citizens, and the functional and structural deficits of the political public. It created a public expression of the demand for alternatives to the political *status quo* “from below”, which agitated the system as a political issue. This is evidenced not only by concessions from the Prime Minister to engage in talks with the protesters and to announce the compliance with the public consultation time period in future legislative processes. It is also reflected not only by populist attempts to seize on the protests by the political opposition, whose representatives jumped on the critique and demands of the protesters. Further evidence of this is provided by the political and journalistic attempts to discredit and censor the protests and to silence them by means of staged counter-protesters. Above all, it demonstrated by the veto issued on 16 June 2012 by President Plevneliev against the amendment which was described as incompatible with national and EU law and the ensuing negotiations initiated with environmental protection activists while drawing up the final version of the law. Ultimately, the parliament to a large extent followed the demands of the environmentalists as the stricter provisions from the old forestry law regarding the construction of ski resorts and facilities remain intact in the new version of summer 2012.

The fundamental dispute with business representatives and advocates for the development and expansion of tourist and skiing centers will doubtlessly continue, which is shown by the counter-protests initiated after the passing of the most recent forestry law. In general

though, it has become clear that the protesters acted in public through a process of consensus mobilization and developed a political threat potential for critical opinions. One can hope that in the future more information and discussion forums will promote and strengthen the general awareness of problems and the readiness to publicly express criticism. The participation in the discursive spread of information and critique begins at an individual level, but is the responsibility of all democratic forces.

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