

A vicious cycle? Some notes on the Bulgarian protests from the summer of 2013

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Just few months after the Bulgarians overturned the government of Boyko Borissov in February 2013, they are back in the streets in tens of thousands demanding the resignation of the new government. While this might look like the same wave of protests, there has been little continuity. The protests in February were an outburst of people suffering poverty and deprivation amidst the economic crisis. The protests happening over the last few weeks are rather caused by a moral panic and a deep crisis of political representation. And while both mourn the take-over of the state by oligarchic networks, the February protests articulated some anti-capitalist demands for security and equality, which the June ones have either eclipsed or watered down to claims for democratic liberties.

After Borissov and his right-centrist party GERB resigned on February 20th, premature election was held in May. The election was too depressing for both left-and-right leaning commentators. It brought to parliament only the four biggest parties of the status quo: GERB still scored first, followed closely by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The Turkish party Movement for Rights and Liberties (DPS) which has maneuvered itself into most coalition governments since 1989, and its antagonistic anti-Turkish and anti-Roma right-extreme party ATAKA entered parliament. They won enough to be considered in all possible government coalition, but not enough to contribute separately. Some prominent parties of the Bulgarian transition to liberal democracy as the splinters of the former Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and Tsar Simeon's party (NDSV) remained out of Parliament. Two new parties as right extreme National Liberation Front and ex European Commissioner Meglena Kuneva's right-centre Bulgaria of the Citizens did not pass the 4% barrier. After GERB rejected the mandate, a minority government of BSP was headed by former Finance Minister (2005-2009) Plamen Oresharski. It was formed with the support of DPS and one vote from ATAKA. The new PM has headed a minority government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and Bulgarian Turkish party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). GERB members and Borissov himself have since boycotted many sessions of the National Assembly. And while the new government of Plamen Oresharski was formed from the close oligarchic circle around BSP's Chair Sergey Stanishev, DPS got as concession some of the key Commissions in Parliament.

From its first day the new government has been working under great popular supervision and pressure. Protests erupted already on the third day of its mandate: led by a group organized by Green Party and broader eco-activist networks, a protest was staged to demand the change of Kalin Tiholov as a Minister of Investment Planning. A scandalous architect who destroyed reservation property to build resorts, Tiholov was swiftly changed with his colleague and office-mate Ivan Danov. Protesters calmed down, but the public stayed on the alert about further appointments. Thus, it was no surprise that it was again an appointment which lit the match in the powder barrel: DPS's Member of Parliament and media monopolist Delyan Peevski was voted by Parliament a Head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). Peevski's mother Irena Krasteva owned the Bulgarian Lottery, and still owns the biggest printing house Rodina, a large percentage of private media as well as a huge empire of smaller and larger firms. This made it possible that only at 20 (in 2001) her son Delyan became a Director of Bulgaria's biggest port, Varna, which was later privatized by the

state. More recently Peevski, a legal professional, has also been quoted as the owner of privatized national tobacco-growing industry Bulgartabac, buying its lion share in cooperation with the Central Cooperative Bank. Peevski was investigated by DANS twice but no charges were pressed. The new PM Oresharski announced Peevski as trusted fighter against GERB's corruption record. BSP's group in Parliament voted almost unanimously in favor, allegedly under pressure from Stanishev. Peevski was asked to withdraw on the next day. BSP Chair Stanishev, PM Oresharski, and DPS's Chair Ljutfi Mestan repented publicly their folly. Yet, the protests continued with a firm demand: the resignation of Oresharski.

The appointment of Peevski at this very responsible position was a clear signal for the merging of the Bulgarian state and large capital. Yet, most people who went out in the streets were there to protest first and foremost the lack of morality in the political life. They opposed the breaking of the social contract in which it became possible that a dubious figure as Peevski could be elected first as an MP and then as a Head of National Security. After their public apologies, BSP and Oresharski have stated that they did not take as valid the demands of protesters in the streets: they have asked for the public's patience so they could carry out a program for salvation of the nation from the current crisis. In the mean time, however, they voted some clearly lobbyist laws (including the controversial Law on Gambling) and made numerous errand appointments, some of which they have withdrawn, sometimes the very same day. This has made protesters' resentment of the government ever larger, and more and more people have appeared out in the streets of Sofia to demand Oresharski to resign. In the streets, slogans from the 1997 hyperinflation crisis that overturned the BSP government of Jean Videnov came back to life: "red crap out!" or "those who don't jump they are red" were the main refrains of the protesters, trying to overturn the next government of BSP that has tried to mask its oligarchic interests behind shallow populist slogans.

Protesters who opposed the government were recognized by the liberal press as "well educated, well dressed middle class citizens who can pay their taxes and electricity bills but demand morality in politics". This distinction has drawn a clear line of class division between the June and the February protests: a division which is more a matter of liberal media framing than of reality on the ground. A growing number of articles have already come out in an attempt to recall the gravity and save the dignity of the demands from the February. Some even show how the tragedy of the winter protests is coming back as a farce in summer [1]. What is different, though, are a number of significant issues which has made the tragedy of last winter come back as a farce in summer: a stance already taken by a. In February people were in the streets, protesting against the rapid increase of electricity prices. The increase was due to the privatization of power distribution companies, partly achieved by "left-wing" neoliberal government of Stanishev. Hundreds of suicides, among which seven self-immolations, have happened during and since the electricity bill crisis, due to poverty and economic dead-end street for indebted poor families. I have claimed elsewhere that in the cold Bulgarian winter the demands of people marching all around the country were rather confused and contradictory [2]. Yet, many touched upon the need for renationalization of key industries and a large process of redistribution and reinforcement of equal access to all citizens to common goods and services.

Caught in the wider crisis of political representation, the winter protests did not articulate a political alternative. Interestingly and alarmingly, they fed into the electorate of right-extreme parties as ATAKA: one which came out with a 96 pages manifesto with strictly anti-neoliberal and globalization critical rhetoric. In this election program, called "Siderov Plan", named after their Chair Volen Siderov, ATAKA sounded at times radical left-wing. Already before the election Siderov said that Bulgaria needed a Hugo Chavez to surmount the crisis. In the Plan his party called for anti-American and alterglobalist trade agreements with BRICS countries as Russia, China and Brazil. They declared themselves openly against neo-liberalism and market fundamentalism, in favor of exiting the EU and

NATO, and for breaking-up of the agreements of the Bulgarian government with the IMF and the World Bank. In terms of economic and social policies ATAKA called for a welfare state with strong state regulation, nationalization, state-led redistribution of extra taxes in the healthcare and child-care system. ATAKA claimed it wished to nationalize key industries, common goods, and utilities, establish a national airline, and safeguard the priority of Bulgarian companies in competition for large infrastructural projects. Besides the leaning toward state-capitalist countries as Russia and China, both on international and national level "Siderov Plan" sounds as suggesting reasonably progressive policies, which no Bulgarian left-wing party expressed in public. As other extreme right-wing parties in the region, they sound radical left-wing when it comes to discussions against corporate capitalism, but resource-nationalism and anti-minority sentiments are latently if not openly present in all their programs. In ATAKA's program, for instance, high childcare allowance was promised to those parents who were university students: a status which is usually a privilege for the country's ethnic majority. They also called for the appointment for a country-wide network of sheriffs and grassroots self-protection guards: such, they said, were needed not in the city center of Sofia, but in ethnically mixed villages.

While the extreme right-wing has not taken advantage of the last wave of protests, the liberal right has experienced a comeback. Since the election Volen Siderov has helped significantly to destroy his and ATAKA's media image. He lost support by his radical-right voters who declared him "a Turk" and "a communist" for being the only MP supporting the Oresharski cabinet of BSP and DPS. Siderov and his party lost their soft right voters by trying to sabotage the June protests with provocations and violent means. Yet, while the position of the right-extreme has been challenged, the liberal right seems to be emerging again. The June protests have been concentrated mostly in Sofia and in Plovdiv and have accumulated support mostly among the former voters of the former Union of Democratic Forces SDS. As the protests were against neoliberal "Socialist" party BSP, their demands have been framed as "anti-communist". They have also been latently anti-Turkish because of DPS's involvement.

No anticapitalist slogans or economic demands were made by the protests. They were against oligarchs and mafia, but for a free market and a "less oriental" capitalism: a stance that demands uncritically that Bulgaria adopts as an absolute value advanced forms of capitalism as it happens in core-countries, with no analysis why those same countries were swept by anti-austerity protests especially since the Greek winter of 2008. While new faces of the protests have not emerged, Radan Kanev - the new Chair of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) founded and previously chaired by former PM Ivan Kostov who carried out most privatization reforms in 1997-2001 - has claimed the return of "a reform majority". The latter would, according to Kanev, bring the values of the transition to neoliberal capitalism, liberal democracy, and law and order back to life. Last but not least, a group of liberal intellectuals have just published over the last weekend a document with what they believe are the demands of the protesters. Called "Charter 2013" the document proposes media freedom, reforms judicial system, and fight against corruption. Yet the authors of the charter, symbolically called so to recall the Czechoslovak Charter 77 in its fight against state socialism, have repeated the old mistake of the liberal dissidents. While claiming the role of democracy and civil society, they have shied away from formulating claims and proposals to end the economic crisis and poverty. Instead of moving forward in tact with the February riots, the clock of the current protest wave is set back to the 80s. For the time being, the radical left in the country is too tiny and weak to spin it around.

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P.S.

* LeftEast, 26 June 2013:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/a-vicious-cycle-some-notes-on-the-bulgarian-protests-from-the-summer-of-2013/>

Footnotes

[1] In Bulgarian:

http://hystericalparrhesia.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/first_time_as_tragedy_second_time_as_farce/

[2] See on ESSF (article 30050), [The Bulgarian winter: between the devil and the deep blue sea](#).