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Bulgaria:

The wave of protests, 2012-2013

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In the past half-decade, post-socialist Bulgaria has witnessed a persistent wave of protests. These protests have coincided with the global wave of anti-neoliberal mobilization against austerity, debt, and precarity, heralded by the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Indignados movements. Yet, interpreting the Bulgarian protests as part of the same protest wave might turn out to be dangerously misleading.

In this paper, I explain the dynamic of contestation and frames of protest by discussing the three peaks of the 2012-2013 protest wave. I show a number of characteristics of the political and social landscape of post-socialist Bulgaria, which have made the anti-neoliberal or anti-capitalist framing of the protests increasingly difficult. I claim that a reason for this has been a few mutually reinforcing characteristics of the Bulgarian protests, typical not only for Bulgaria, but also for other post-socialist countries.

First, the recurrence or persistence of a strong neo-liberal capitalist party in power - which draws on the symbolic legacy of state socialism but fervently destroys socialist welfare institutions - perpetuates a strong 'anti-communist' framing of the protests. Second, the trope of the 'hard-working middle class' - a main slogan of the transition to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism since 1989 - has made inter-class alliances between the economically vulnerable low- and high-skilled workers impossible. Last, but not least, given the decades of creation of neo-liberal hegemony in the country, 'smoothly functioning capitalism' has been seen as a solution to, and not the cause of, impoverishment, indebtedness, and precarity. These three motives, which are all present in the Bulgarian case, make it impossible to frame protests in an anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist way. They also draw a line between parallel but not coinciding waves of social protests around the world: a demarcation that might turn out to be a frontline in emergent mobilization for global social change.

The protest wave emerges

Since 2007, Bulgaria has witnessed a continuous wave of protests. Triggered by the increasing construction on protected land, they took place mostly in the capital city of Sofia. Despite the protection of Bulgarian reservations under the European Commission's Natura2000 program, a massive wave of semi-legal and unregulated construction was brokered by the Bulgarian political class and profit-seeking developers. Spots of natural significance were turned into concrete wastelands, resulting in the destruction of water sources, soils, and natural habitats. The protest wave was paralleled by campaigns against genetically modified organisms (GMOs), shale-gas fracking, and the ACTA agreement: all framed as important assets of middle-class consumption, health, and access to education and leisure. This wave peaked in June 2012, when a new Forestry Act was passed in Parliament. The capital city's central boulevard was occupied for days by protests. Pressed by the massive unrest, the political class passed the law without the clauses concerning reservation lands.

Ecological activists hailed these protests as a success. Yet, their struggle for nature was not grounded in debates about crisis-born alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. Slogans against oligarchy and corruption have eclipsed the debate of similar practices in other sectors since 1989. In the process of mass rapid privatization and draconian austerity, governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s dismantled the infrastructure and welfare institutions of the socialist state and led millions of Bulgarians into unemployment, precariousness, or misery-forced migration. Yet, the protesters against the Forestry Act, shale-gas fracking, ACTA, and GMOs showed little solidarity with teachers, academics, students, miners, factory workers, and drivers, who marched in parallel to them in order to contest the

privatization of industries and the cutting of public-sector jobs, salaries, securities, and services. Despite their use of slogans inspired by Occupy Wall Street and other anti-austerity protests, Bulgarian environmentalists did not see capitalism as a problem. Not only did they declare themselves 'anti-communist' and thus opposed to the state socialist past and its metastases in state power, but they often declared capitalism as an ideal, problematic not in its global manifestation (e.g., the crisis since 2008, to name but its most recent failure), but in its local 'oriental' version: disrupting the consumption and leisure of the hard-working middle class.

Due to the same reasoning, in the summer of 2012, the environmental activists ignored two crucial possibilities to engage with people who were concerned not with leisure, consumption, and the long-term ecological survival of the planet, but with making ends meet. First, they haughtily ignored the counter-protest of peasants from the reservation areas, for whom the development of these regions could only mean jobs and economic survival. Second, while protests about reservation land were taking place, the environmental protesters did not challenge the 13-percent increase of the price of electricity, which occurred when they were still marching in the streets of Sofia. At that point, activists had already pointed out that the increase would mean that half of the monthly pension or minimal salary of millions of Bulgarians would go into the accounts of privatized power redistributive companies. And while no one took the topic seriously in the summer of 2012, all Bulgarians began paying a steep price for their lack of response to electricity price hikes starting in the winter of 2013.

'Civil vs. social'

In late January, Bulgarians woke up to enormous electricity bills, which many could not pay. The response was incendiary: an increased suicide rate and casualties among elderly people culminated in seven self-immolations of unemployed and working-class people. The cases did not cease during the winter: two more acts of self-immolation also occurred this past summer. The bills and the casualties catalyzed social mobilization around the country starting in the winter of 2013. Protesters were mostly rank-and-file Bulgarians: middle-aged men and women, young couples with children and students, and also a number of right-extreme football hooligans. Using different protest repertoires, they all questioned the high energy costs, mediocre living standards, and blatant corruption. The protests were not massively joined by the environmental movements from the summer of 2012, although they also protested throughout the winter season against the Belene nuclear power plant and against new legislation that outmaneuvered the Forestry Law. Trying to please the government that made the concession in the summer, the environmentalists insisted that only the Minister of the Environment - and not the entire government - should resign. In their discourse, they said that they did not want to join the contestation of price hikes, emphasizing that they fought for 'civil' and not 'social' causes. The salvation of the Bulgarian forest was a cause of a 'civil society', while welfare, labor rights, and access to services were seen as 'social' - ergo, irrelevant - causes.

The counterproductive division between civil and social causes was reproduced in the next peak of the protest wave, which started in the summer of 2013. After clashes between protesters and the police in February 2013, the center-right government of GERB resigned and was replaced by a similarly neo-liberal government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Movement for Rights and Liberties (DPS, representing the Turkish minority in the country), and the right-extreme party Ataka. This coalition between social Democrats, ethnically based liberals, and a right-extreme party could be seen as a true contradiction in terms, yet it was completely aligned with the traditional procedure of Bulgarian political coalitions throughout the past 23 years of transition: parties of allegedly different segments of the political sector converged around the interest of global power blocks and local capitalist elites. BSP, an oligarchic structure with roots in the socialist nomenklatura, and its post-socialist national and transnational allies elected Plamen Oresharski - a financial minister of two former cabinets, declared as left- and right-wing - to head a coalition cabinet.

Oresharski's promise of reforms that would benefit the economically vulnerable Bulgarians could not suppress the moral panic among many anti-communists. They feared the return of BSP to power, which would make Bulgaria subservient to Russian interests. Curiously, the fear of power blocks beyond Russia was mostly eclipsed. At the same time, the distrust against the new government was fueled by an increasing crisis of political representation and the apparent lack of any political and economic program that could fill the emptied state treasury. Successive appointments of oligarchic figures made the government's credit of trust quickly dissipate. The straw that broke the camel's back was the election of Delyan Peevski as Head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). Oresharski announced Peevski as a fighter for transparency, but in the eyes of most Bulgarians, the media monopolist and beneficiary of shady privatization deals was corruption incarnate. Even when Peevski resigned, people continued to go out in the streets on a daily basis. As of the writing of this article, thousands of Bulgarians (mostly high-skilled workers and students) still gather on the streets (mostly in Sofia) on a daily basis, demanding Oresharski's resignation. They equate the neo-liberal, capitalist BSP and its oligarchic parties in power and the opposition as 'Euros'communist'. As in the summer of 2012, the protesters mostly neglect the daily counter-protest staged by Bulgarians with less symbolical and economic capital: those for whom a change of the government would not mean much, whereas cosmetic reforms would mean a few more crumbs to survive the winter.

Winter vs. summer?

The protests of the summers of 2012 and 2013, in addition to those of the winter in between, seem to be part of the same protest wave in Bulgaria. Since they coincided with protests in Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, and other countries in Europe and beyond, they were also at times interpreted as part of a larger wave of anti-austerity and anti-privatization protests. Yet, the reality on the ground was more complex. While the protests during the winter were an outburst of people suffering poverty and deprivation amid the economic crisis, those in the summers of 2012 and 2013 were caused by a moral panic of oligarchic and illiberal ruling forces. And while all of the protests made claims against the state's takeover by oligarchic networks, the February protests articulated some anti-capitalist demands for security and equality, while demands in June have either eclipsed or been watered down to claims for democratic liberties. In this, 'Euros'oligarchy' is justly equated with the current political elite. Yet, instead of seeing it for what it is - a typical state power elite, defending the interests of big capital - the Bulgarian neo-liberal oligarchy is seen as 'Euros'communist', and thus any claims against it have to be either anti-communist, or invalid and futile.

What is more, while many Bulgarians who were in the street in the winter of 2013 also came out to protest in the summer, the liberal media has taken to dividing the two waves as incompatible, using the trope of the 'Euros'middle class' borrowed from the protests of the summer of 2012. This motif eclipses the reality of those with mediocre incomes in the European Union's poorest member state, who hardly make ends meet on an average salary. Yet, the rhetoric of the 'Euros'middle class' remained present in local narratives in favor of the protests. It was used by the protesters in the summer of 2013 and also one year earlier, in order to defend their 'Euros'civil' cause of 'Euros'values' against the 'Euros'social' cause of 'Euros'starvation'. Intellectuals who sided with the protests have claimed that the split between winter and summer has been between those who read and those who don't; between those who comprehend European civilization and values, and those who don't; between the 'Euros'poor' and the 'Euros'morally indignant'; between those who can pay their bills and taxes, and those who can't afford to do so and who therefore live off of welfare. This fake division has enraged many socially minded people, and made them stop going to the protests.

At the same time, the protesters' economic demands during the winter and summer remained rather unclear and intrinsically contradictory. In the summers of 2012 and 2013, the discussions of how reservation land or public resources could be managed by the people in a more transparent way usually drew blanks. Privatization was seen as wrong only when it hit reservation lands or when it happened in a non-transparent way. Green capitalism, green energy, low taxes for the rich, and a rapid smooth privatization to earnest and moral capitalists were some of the demands raised by the summer protests. And while they shared the concern of anti-corruption and transparency,

their analysis did not see the current economic system as unjust or problematic. Western free markets and representative democracies, all shaken by substantial crises, were still idealized: 'Europe' was asked in protest slogans to help Bulgarians out of corruption. The winter protests allowed for anti-privatization rhetoric, but only initially. Once the key demand of 'the end of all monopoly' was raised, it transpired that the majority of people blamed the not-sufficiently privatized power distribution companies for the high electricity prices. They glossed over the fact that prices were kept high by a cartel agreement and because they were not regulated by the government. On the issue of political rights, winter and summer protesters also did not significantly diverge: they made various mutually incompatible demands, and the expert government, majority representatives, and direct democracy were all to be seen and heard as slogans born from the streets.

Opportunity openings and closures

All of these mutually contradictory claims have presented an equally fangless diagnosis and prognosis that would allow people to mobilize against the current political and economic system. What they showed, more than anything, was that the amnesia of 23 years of transition to a liberal democracy and market economy has emptied the political imagination, dictionary, and repertoire of the protesters. Despite the global wave of protests against neo-liberal capitalism, it was still celebrated consensually by all parties of the Bulgarian transition, and seen by the people in the streets as the only way ahead. The prevalent 'anti-communist' frame of the protests made any appearance of a left-wing, socialist, or anti-anti-communist frame impossible. The middle-class trope precluded coalitions built with those suffering not only moral, but also economic, deprivation.

Still, a small number of critical voices emerged among the ranks of the summer protesters, who stated that they shared much in common with those who went out during the winter, but also with the summer counter-protesters: that all people are suffering from the current political and economic situation, and that precariousness is a country-wide condition. It is now their call to reframe the protests in a more inclusive way, and to make the Bulgarian protests resonate with the global wave of anti-austerity mobilization. If this does not happen, Bulgarian protesters will still remain on the opposite side of the barricade. They will increasingly represent the outrage of the peripheral wannabe elite, who wishes to maintain the powers that be in a different constellation and fight to the last drop of blood for the early transitional utopia of global capitalist prosperity - a cause that has been withering away in the core countries of the global capitalist system.