

2013 – The Year of Bulgaria’s discontent

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Abstract

The article links the latest protest phenomena in Bulgaria since 2013 to a deepening crisis of the country’s system of representative (party) democracy. In particular, it looks at two waves of protest in 2013 and the respective relevant actors and their claims and analyzes the reasons for the movement’s relative failure. It also discusses the question of potential long-term effects of protests on the functioning of Bulgaria’s political system.

Keywords

Bulgaria, Post-1989-transformation, crisis of representative democracy, political protest

2013 – Das Jahr der Unzufriedenheit in Bulgarien

Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz setzt die jüngsten Protestphänomene in Bulgarien in Verbindung mit einer sich vertiefenden Krise der repräsentativen (Parteien)demokratie des Landes. Zwei Protestwellen im Jahr 2013 werden in Bezug auf relevante Akteursgruppen und Forderungen betrachtet, und die Gründe für den relativen Misserfolg der Bewegung werden analysiert. Außerdem wird die Frage nach möglichen längerfristigen Auswirkungen politischer Proteste auf das Funktionieren des politischen Systems Bulgariens diskutiert.

Schlüsselwörter

Bulgarien, Transformation nach 1989, Krise der repräsentativen Demokratie, politischer Protest

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Introduction: Bulgaria after 1989 – high volatility of governments and parties, growing apathy of citizens

When people took to the streets in the beginning of 2013, something remarkable seemed to happen in Bulgarian society: in a country with a rather weak track record of social mobilization and upheaval against *any* – dictatorial or democratic – form of government, growing numbers of citizens started to express their discontent with the overall economic and political situation. Protests were organized all over the country and, as a result, the legitimacy of the democratic regime in its current fashion was called into question.

The events of 2013 broke the trend of deepening dissatisfaction and passivity that had been characteristic of the society for a long time. Bulgarian state socialism had been best known for its stability and loyalty to Moscow; systemic crises similar to those in East-Central Europe, had never occurred (Crampton 2005). The transition to democracy was brought about by a coup d’état of the inner circle of the politbureau¹² whose members had realized that maintaining the Communist party’s monopoly was no longer feasible or in their own economic interest. However, with the exception of a short-lived mobilization at the dawn of post-socialist democracy in 1989/90 and a rather chaotic episode of popular unrest in the mid-1990s, culminating in the storming of the parliament, protest movements did not play any significant role in shaping the course of democratic politics after 1989/90. Different governments came and left; new parties and personalities appeared and failed to fulfill their promises. While showing obvious signs of frustration (diminishing trust in institutions and political parties), most citizens remained passive. In this sense, the two waves of protest that started in February and June 2013 and continued throughout the year were seen as a potential turning point in the history of post-socialist democracy, which until then had been marked by a constantly deepening crisis of the system of representative, multi-party democracy established after the first free elections in 1990.

I. Post-socialist transformation and its discontent²

The protests of 2013 broke the trend of growing dissatisfaction and political demobilization of Bulgarian society. Any understanding of the protests in 2013 requires at least a brief look into the history of the Bulgarian transition

from a single-party dictatorship and a centrally-planned economy to political pluralism and market economy. When Bulgaria embarked on the transitional path in 1989, the society was still caught in the state of “early post-totalitarianism” (Linz/Stepan 1996, 295)³. The ouster of the long-term communist party leader Zhivkov and the foundation of an oppositional anti-communist umbrella movement (*Union of Democratic Forces*) gave rise to an intensive, but rather short-lived wave of mobilization against the old regime, its symbols and its eminent figures. However, many of the crucial prerequisites for a successful democratization of the political system were lacking at the outset of the transition. The *Union of Democratic Forces*, an organization composed of revived historical parties, dissidents’ and victims’ organizations (Dimitrov 1996), even failed to defeat the former communists at the first free elections in 1990. The legacies of “early post-totalitarianism”, namely the “nearly flat civil, political [...] societies and a strong antipolitics strain in the parties and much of the public” (Linz/Stepan 1996, 343), had a lasting effect on political developments in the transition period. The will to get involved in politics and, in general, in issues of public concern was rather weak right from the start of the transition to democracy. The accumulating frustration with the immediate consequences of economic transformation further deepened such attitudes.

The phenomenon of (mass)emigration from Bulgaria also started to play its crucial part in (further) demobilizing Bulgarian society. Many saw themselves confronted with the dilemma of “exit” or “voice”, while for most of the period after 1989 “exit categorically prevailed over voice” (Krasteva 2016, 177). Large numbers of citizens decided to vote with their feet and left the country, draining Bulgarian society to a significant extent of its critical potential. This reinforced the existing deficit in authentic interest representation on the level of political elites (parties and interest groups). Given the rather egalitarian structure of Bulgarian society and the limited experience with political pluralism in the first decade after the end of dictatorial rule, party support was based on a highly symbolic identification with “communism” or “anticommunism”. In that time of socio-economic

1 Crampton (2005, 212) describes the ouster of long-term party leader Zhivkov as “work of the party hierarchy”. Linz/Stepan (1996, 334) offer an account of the events they characterize as a “regime-controlled transition”.

2 The following part of the article offers *one* explanatory framework for the emergence of political protests in 2013. It mainly focuses on the structural problems of the current system of political representation

through political parties. For other interpretations see Gueorguieva’s (2014) analysis of the anti-government protests in 2013 as “reactive mobilization” and Krasteva’s (2014; 2016) highly nuanced analysis of different protest movements (teachers’ protests in 2007, environmental protests and different protest waves in 2013) that interprets the recent mobilizations as a “second democratic revolution” leading to the emergence of “contestatory citizenship”.

3 Linz and Stepan distinguish three types of “post-totalitarian regimes” and link them to specific transition paths, namely negotiation (Hungary), collapse (Czechoslovakia) and control (Bulgaria).

cleavages, deeply held political beliefs or interests could not function as factors shaping the emerging bi-polar party system (Karasimeonov 2004). The same holds true for individual motives for party engagement that became “assessed from the viewpoint of the costs and benefits ensuing from” it (Todorov 2011, 26).

Under these circumstances, politics and, in particular, privatization, the key policy field of post-socialist transformation, turned into a huge opportunity for massive undue enrichment on all levels of government, leading to large-scale “preying on the state” (Ganev 2007), deindustrialization and harsh socio-economic consequences for large parts of the society. The adverse cultural legacy of state-socialism⁴ was further reinforced by the consequences of the economic transformation. Especially after 1997, the predominant neoliberal credo⁵ left its mark on social policy (Petkov/Vladikov 2011) that otherwise could have cushioned the socio-economic blow of the transformation. Unemployment, losses of status, increasing social inequality⁶ and the fact that a majority qualified itself a “loser of the transformation” also affected the perception of the democratic regime. Since “democracy” was seemingly not able to provide answers to the most pressing questions of everyday life and changes of government brought about little change, many ultimately turned their back on political parties and the system they were representing.⁷ Symptoms of increasing dissatisfaction with the current state of representative democracy became more visible during the 1990s and continued during the second decade of transformation:

- *Shrinking voter turnout*: the minimal form of political participation steadily lost popularity.⁸
- *Unstable government and growing volatility of the party system* (Autengruber 2008): until 1997, no government could complete its mandate. The winner of the 1997 elections, a UDF-led electoral coalition that followed a policy of “macroeconomic stabilization” (Riedel 2004, 594) with harsh social consequences only achieved a third of the votes in the elections in 2001

and since then has been struggling to return to government. Having very little to no prospect of being reelected enforced a grab-and-run mentality among office-holders.

- *Shrinking trust in established parties* due to two trends: first, the inability of all governing parties to implement policies that would lead to a significant improvement in terms of the country’s economic and social situation; second, a sheer endless series of scandals involving corruption and wealth-grab by office-holders from all parties.

At the end of the 1990s, the new government led by the UDF brought relative stabilization after a period of hyperinflation and a severe food and energy supply crisis during the preceding government of the BSP. However, the economic hardships created by its macroeconomic stabilization policies undermined its electoral support. Given that the two big political camps – the socialists (BSP) and the democrats (UDF) – had used up their initial political capital at the end of the first decade of the transformation, the situation then already could have grown into a full-fledged crisis involving protests and pressure on the government comparable to the events that were to follow in 2013. However, varieties of political populism appeared on the scene as an alleged cure for the obvious crisis of representative democracy. Political messianism, as epitomized by the former Tsar Simeon II, whose *National Movement Simeon II* (NDSV) won a landslide victory at the parliamentary elections 2001,⁹ proved to be a temporarily working tool to overcome widespread political apathy and to build new trust in power. It was bounded with the hope to influence the course of societal development in the interest of broader parts of society. Simeon Sakschoburggotski, the charismatic leader of the NDSV, presented himself as a returned emigré not linked to any of the discredited party camps, and made the populist promise to improve the standard of living of every Bulgarian citizen within 800 days. In fact, little but the names of the protagonists changed. The royal prime minister’s credit was used up quickly. The NDSV lost the following elections and joined a coalition government led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party. The elections in 2005 saw the rise of a new form of aggressive and radical mobilization by the party ATAKA, which represented a kind of right-wing populism. It exploited sentiments against a “corrupt elite” and a “criminal transformation” and combined it with nationalist resentment towards ethnic minorities and a slightly leftist agenda in the field of economic and social policy.¹⁰ The elections in 2009 brought the success of a new type of political savior, Boyko Borissov, whose par-

4 For a summary of the debate on the influence of cultural factors as an obstacle to post-socialist democratization see Segert (2013, 164–167).

5 For a nuanced discussion of the influence of neoliberal thinking in the course of the Bulgarian transformation see Ganev (2005; 2005a).

6 The everyday clash between the members of the new class of the newly rich with its conspicuous wealth and a significant part of the population struggling to make ends meet (especially retirees and people in rural areas), illustrates the combined outcome of a highly corrupt privatization process and neoliberal approaches in the sphere of economic, social and health policy.

7 Jacobs (2004, 171, 177, 194, 201, 206) provides ample empirical data on the development of the perception of one’s own social situation and the support for the democratic regime in Bulgaria and other transformation countries.

8 For detailed results see Rose/Munro (2009) and the archives of the Bulgarian Central Election Commission on results.cik.bg.

9 See Barany (2002) for an account of the “Tsar’s” return to politics.

10 For an analysis of ATAKA’s programme and its rhetoric see Meznik (2011).

ty *Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria* (GERB), like the NMSII in 2001, won a majority when participating for the first time in national elections. The alleged citizens' movement was entirely built around the figure of its leader, a former high-ranking official in the Ministry of the Interior whose media image had allowed him to build a reputation as a reliable representative of law-and-order against corruption and organized crime. It seemed like the GERB-formula – the figure of the strong leader in touch with the people *and* strong support by mainstream media – would work out. The negative effects of the global financial and economic crisis after 2008 could be felt in Bulgaria as well. However, rising unemployment, wage stagnation and decline did not lead to any broader protests, until the beginning of 2013, when the first protests all over the country occurred. Given the above-described developments, the protests were a long overdue reaction to the ills of Bulgarian politics and society that had grown even more acute as a result of the economic crisis.¹¹

II. Finally the sovereign enters the stage – the two protest waves in 2013

2013 saw two waves of protest that were triggered by different events and targeted different aspects of the crisis of Bulgarian politics and society. The first movement formed in the beginning of 2013 and can be interpreted as a form of protest against the socio-economic situation in the country. It lasted two months, led to the resignation of the GERB-government, gave rise to intensive public debate, but soon lost its momentum. The early elections held in May 2013, only three months after the peak of the protests, actually confirmed GERB as the strongest party, but a hastily formed coalition led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party took over government. The appointment of a scandalous political figure as head of the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security (DANS) triggered a second wave of protests that lasted – with changing levels of intensity – for almost a year. It also spread to the universities in the capital and some other cities. Its focus shifted over time. It started with the demand for revising the appointment of the new head of DANS, then mainly focused on the resignation of the socialist-led government, but also called for a more fundamental change of the political system.

a) The political moral behind your bills – the protests from January to March 2013

When people took to the streets in several cities and

¹¹ In a public survey conducted in 2012, a year before the protests, 47.8% of the interviewed supported the statement “whoever rules the country, nothing will really change” (Todorov 2014, 194).

smaller towns at the end of January 2013, both the political elite and most observers treated this as a huge surprise.¹² The first wave of protests was initially triggered by high electricity bills of January 2013, which confronted a significant number of people with the dilemma of either paying sums that – given the low-income level – were very high or having no electricity at all.¹³ Protests were not limited to the traditional stronghold of political activity, the capital Sofia, and were attended by constantly growing numbers of people in more than 35 places all over the country. Protesters initially appeared with banners directed against electricity companies and, soon after that, against other utility companies. Not surprisingly, the first demands focused on issues concerning people's bills and the companies' policy for handling undue payments. However, the protests became political and managed to formulate demands addressing structural problems in the energy sector, the country's deeper social and economic problems *and* their relation to the fundamental deficiencies of the current system of representative democracy and its political elite. The protests managed to articulate the widespread perception that the current political system, or more precisely its main representatives, over the whole course of post-socialist transformation, had systematically failed to take into account public interests. Furthermore, the protesters felt that those who, instead of acting for the public good, had only served their personal interest had never been held responsible for this. Given this set of popular dissatisfaction with a selfish and out-of-touch political elite, it was not surprising that political demands directly aimed at increasing the accountability of political decision-makers and citizen control over public institutions (Todorov 2013):

- *Changes in the electoral system and the introduction of majority voting*: electoral reform was seen as a means to better ensure that people's interests, especially their preferences for certain candidates, should be expressed in the composition of legislating bodies. Furthermore, changes in the election code that would facilitate the participation of citizens' representatives were proposed.

¹² The spontaneous – almost synchronized – outbreak of protests in several places gave rise to speculations concerning the role of behind-the-scene forces, namely powerful interest groups from the energy sector, in staging the protest in order to get rid of a government detrimental to their strategic interests. This hypothesis may contain more than a grain of truth. However, after the initial phase the protest movement attracted many followers and managed to articulate citizens' authentic concerns about their difficult individual life circumstances and a political system partly responsible for them.

¹³ The situation was worsened by several factors: Providers followed a rather strict policy towards customers with due payments, the bills had been two times higher than in the preceding month, their composition was not transparent which fostered feelings of arbitrariness on the expense of the ordinary citizen.

- *Changes in regulations regarding immunity of members of parliament and the president.*
- *Creation of a mechanism to allow citizens to recall individual members of parliament.*
- *Compulsory citizens’ representation in public institutions and regulatory agencies.*¹⁴

Who were the protesters in January and February 2013? As far as the social groups who were involved at different stages in the protest, the heterogeneity of the movement soon became obvious. Of course, it comprised those who were most affected by the issues around the utility bills. But there were also many whose economic situation made them immune towards this issue and people from different age groups and social strata with different views that were united around the general feeling that a fundamental “change of the system” was needed. Emotions and passions ran high and notorious political figures from all parties were turned into objects of criticism and ridicule.¹⁵ The resignation of Prime Minister Borissov a few weeks after the beginning of the protests caught protesters by surprise and, initially, gave rise to euphoria. In spite of this success, the protest movement, which at least in the beginning enjoyed support by many of those who were not actively participating in the demonstrations, soon lost its momentum and was replaced by the intensifying campaign for the upcoming early elections in May 2013. Broad societal support for the protest mobilization, especially the support of the overwhelming majority who did *not* actively participate in the protests, was further decreased by the fact that most of the initial demands, especially with respect to utility prices, were not implemented. This, at least by more pessimistic observers, was interpreted as the ultimate proof that even massive protests were not able to bring about any change for the better.

How did the political elite respond to the protests? Except of Prime Minister Borissov’s resignation, which in the mid-run proved to be the right choice in order to secure his return to power at a later stage, no spectacular moves happened. In fact, the reactions of the established parties were mixed and went through different stages. The size and intensity of the protests soon made ignoring them almost impossible, so that not only the parties in power had to react. However, one of the

early core messages of the protest was that people were fed up with established party politics and its seemingly never-changing personalities. This strong anti-party sentiment was a very visible factor in the protests and

was well understood by parliamentary parties. Hence, at least in the first phase of the protests, they abstained from directly interfering with the events on the street. Attempts to instrumentalize the protest occurred, first by various groups of the radical right, later by ATAKA, which was obviously trying again to capitalize on anger with corrupt elites. In the run-up to the early elections in May 2013, the established parties opened their party lists for trustworthy and popular nonpartisan figures, but this remained a merely symbolic act, since the latter’s influence was rather limited and did not change the logic of internal party decision-making. As subsequent developments would show, it was still governed by the iron law of party oligarchy, which in the Bulgarian case also meant by oligarchical economic interest groups with close ties to all parties.

b) The second wave – protests in June/July 2013

Borissov’s GERB lost almost 600,000 votes at the early elections in May 2013,¹⁶ but remained the strongest party in parliament. Since no other party was willing to enter a coalition with GERB, a government led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) was formed with the socialist technocrat Plamen Oresharski as prime minister, the support of the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* (DPS)¹⁷ and the hidden backing from ATAKA. At this time, the protest movement from February and March had totally disappeared from the public sphere. Right after the elections, some smaller protests occurred that were mainly concerned with alleged manipulations of the election results.¹⁸ The first political staffing decisions of the Oresharski cabinet attracted some critique and were able to mobilize the rather small but highly active circles of environmentalist activists who feared that some appointments could reverse the progress made in protecting zones of the Black Sea Coast from construction projects. Other topics of these rather small demonstrations included the reopening of the project of the Belene nuclear power plant.

Finally, large-scale protests were triggered by the appointment of the highly controversial figure of Delyan Peevski¹⁹ as head of the State Agency for National Secu-

¹⁴ The regulatory body most protesters then had in mind of course was the state agency responsible for creating the framework for the national energy market.

¹⁵ For an ethnographic look at the protests, protesters’ attitudes and their slogans see Gueorguieva (2014).

¹⁶ After almost 1,700,000 votes in the elections in 2009, Borissov’s party only got about 1,100,000 votes in May 2013.

¹⁷ The Movement for Rights and Freedoms had emerged right after the end of single-party rule as the political representation of the country’s Turkish and Muslim minority. It had served as coalition partner in several governments.

¹⁸ A scandal with unofficial ballots found shortly before the elections had given rise to fears that the elections could be manipulated. Most observers and a parallel count by independent experts dismissed these fears.

¹⁹ Peevski then was an MP for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Before that he had been involved in various corruption scandals. He was also the head of a big communications company with huge influence on Bulgaria’s media landscape. The company had initially been built by his mother with the support of a bank where much

rity (DANS). Contrary to the ruling socialists’ claim, this decision had not been spontaneous but rather diligently prepared before the elections. Furthermore, only weeks before the decision to make him head of the agency, the powers of DANS had been extended significantly. Peevski’s appointment caused a public outcry and was interpreted as a symptom for the continuing “oligarchic” control over Bulgarian governments. The immediate demands of the protest were directed against this scandalous staffing decision and the “Peevski Model”, understood as the obvious dependence of the Bulgarian parties on powerful behind-the-scenes actors, representing economic interests often linked to structures of organized crime. Revising the decision could not stop the protesters who soon began to demand the resignation of the Oresharski cabinet. The protest continued over several weeks and attracted 10,000 to 15,000 participants, mainly in Sofia’s city center, while other cities like Varna, which had served as one of the strongholds of the first wave, remained calm. The repertoire of forms to express discontent with the ruling coalition significantly widened (Shemtov 2013; Gueorguieva 2014). Protesters started to gather in front of the parliament every morning, in order to “have a coffee” with MPs; sit-ins and blockings of Sofia’s main boulevards were organized. Internet and social media played a key role in facilitating the organization of demonstrations and internal communication within the movement. It also contributed to the emergence of a “digital diaspora” (Krašteva 2016, 177), Bulgaria’s numerous diaspora communities in Western Europe and North America which also managed to organize protest activities in their respective cities. The second protest movement went through different stages, both in terms of intensity and political message. With some exceptions, the most remarkable being the staging of a siege of parliament on the 40th day of the protests, the second wave remained peaceful. It was able to maintain its mass character – at least in Sofia – for around two months, after which the number of participants significantly decreased. With the beginning of the parliamentary vacation in August, the intensity of active protests went further down.²⁰ In October 2013, student protests and occupations of universities occurred, which can be seen as a continuation

of the movement started in June. The following period from autumn 2013 to the final resignation of the BSP government in July 2014 saw the revival of protests on several occasions, but never reached the initial numbers

of the funding for state projects used to be invested until its bankruptcy in the following year. In sum, he was a typical representative of the Bulgarian “oligarchy” that had emerged from post-socialist economic transformation.

²⁰ A part of the protest movement “followed” MPs to the Black Sea Coast, where the latter usually spent their vacation.

of June and July 2013. The final withdrawal of the BSP from power exactly one year after the siege of the parliament was not directly linked to the protest movement, but had been mainly the result of conflicts within the governing coalition.

A certain evolution in terms of the main messages sent by the protest was visible. It had started as a rather spontaneous outcry against Delyan Peevski’s appointment and the model of politics it was representing. Again, public outrage was directed not only against the governing party, but all political parties and the “system” as a whole. Just like during the first wave, protesters came up with ideas for changes in the electoral system. However, in the course of the protests against the Oresharski government, attention was focused more and more on the resignation of the BSP-led government. This goal became increasingly dominant, superseding all other issues and replacing the more general popular discontent with a strong anti-BSP sentiment. This gave rise to a certain renaissance of old “anti-communist” rhetoric that seemed a bit out of place given the development of Bulgarian society since 1989/90. In a certain sense, the protests in the summer of 2013 marked the return to symbolic politics and morally loaded antipolitics that was seemingly obsessed with finally getting rid of the “red mafia” but at the same time was not fully in touch with social realities of Bulgarian society in 2013.

What were the reasons for that? Personal continuities played a role – many of the participants in the protests in June/July 2013 had also been on the streets in the mid-1990s, some even in the early 1990s when socialist-led governments, which had been moving the country away from the “euro-atlantic” path, were brought down by protests of the UDF and its followers. Hence, many were inclined to decipher the current political situation – a “BSP-led government against Bulgarian citizens” – as a reenactment of these events. Furthermore, more indirect and open political interventions attempted and – at least partly managed – to influence the course of events.²¹ Mainly movements and parties from the right including, the political successors of the UDF,²² several nationalist organizations and Borissov’s now oppositional GERB, tried to capitalize on the revived attitudes against “com-

munists turned socialists” and their influence on state and society. The key figures of the movement were aware of this (party) political instrumentalization of citizens’ discontent and openly spoke out against it.

²¹ Of course, new explanations of the events of June/July appeared mainly within the ranks of the counter-protest camp and nationalist circles. They mirrored the conspiracy theories of the first protest wave in February, stressing the role of NGOs and think tanks driven by their (western) donors’ agenda.

²² After the defeat in the elections in 2001 the UDF was not able to reenter government. Internal conflicts also lead to splits and the emergence of successor organizations.

How did the now socialist government react to the second wave of protest? Obviously surprised by the intensity of opposition against the appointment of Peevski, Prime Minister Oresharski acknowledged the “mistake”, revised the decision and apologized in public. Otherwise, the government either tried to ignore the protests or made attempts to enter a superficial dialogue with some of its participants who were lacking formal legitimacy to speak on behalf of all protesters. The general line of the government was to downplay the significance of what was happening in the streets and to dismiss the protesters’ claims. At the end of July, a counter-protest movement appeared, which attracted a much smaller number of participants and received significant organizational and financial support by the two governing parties. The counter-protest movement peaked in November 2013 when counter-protesters from all over the country – using logistic support of BSP and DPS-structures – gathered in Sofia. Relations between protesters and counter-protesters remained peaceful.

c) June is not February – why did the two waves fail to connect?

What is striking and had already been an issue while the protests were still under way is that no organizational and intellectual links between the two protest movements of February/March and of June/July were established. In fact, such links had not been envisaged by the main actors within the two groups. Given their differing social composition and aims, this would have been hard to achieve. Of course, many of those who had been on the streets in February and March – according to one study around 50% (OSI 2013a) – had also participated in the demonstrations in the summer of 2013. However, there were no clearly discernable attempts to establish a dialogue between structures or leading figures of the two movements that would combine their respective perceptions of the most pressing problems in order to formulate a broadly legitimated agenda for substantial change.

What were the main reasons for the non-relation between the two waves of protest?²³ In general, the socio-structural basis of both movements was marked by great heterogeneity, which can also be seen as a proof of their overall authenticity. However, protests in the beginning of 2013 were strongly motivated by the social concerns of the huge number of Bulgarians negatively affected by the socio-economic outcomes of transformation. They expressed their discontent and – in many cases – despair with economic hardship and a lack of perspective.²⁴ The second wave in June/July 2013 also attracted

diverse groups of participants. However, it soon became clear that the core of the protest was formed by members of the Bulgarian urban middle class, located mainly in the capital Sofia and in most cases having a higher-than-average income and a centre-right or right political leaning (OSI 2013). In addition to this, other lines of division, namely a gap between generations and the major cities (Sofia) and rural areas and smaller towns (OSI 2013a) soon became obvious.²⁵ Objective socio-economic disparities, the incompatibility of the corresponding perceptions of the most pressing problems (“jobs and economic stability” vs. “civic engagement and moral”) and rather different ways of expressing one’s discontent with the current state of political affairs hindered any meaningful dialogue. Beyond these structural obstacles to constructive cooperation, symbolic politics and discourses contributed to deepening the gap between the two groups. Of course, those interested in maintaining the political status quo of a BSP-led government – and therefore in dividing protesters – were inclined to over-emphasize the social and economic differences between the participants in the two waves (Smilov/Vaysova 2013, 20). On the other hand, within the second wave of protests, at least parts of its participants showed a strong tendency to either completely ignore the events of the beginning of 2013 or portray them as an attempt of economic interest groups to get rid of a government that would stand in the way of their long-term interests. In this logic, those who had taken part in the demonstrations in the beginning of 2013 were merely seen as instrumentalized *lumpen*, mainly interested in having their bills reduced, but unable to fully understand what was at stake then and during the following events of June and July 2013.²⁶

The following two excerpts from articles that appeared in mainstream media in the summer of 2013 capture the specific relation between “February” and “June” and the competing interpretations of who was “right” or, more precisely, who was protesting for the “more legitimate cause”:²⁷

tivated to states of total despair linked to the individual’s severe socio-economic status.

25 The lack of demonstrations and other forms of protest in smaller towns and rural areas during the second wave has also been attributed to demographics (more older people living outside the urban centers) and greater fears of personal negative consequences of political activity (job losses) in certain municipalities (Goranova 2013).

26 There are two volumes covering the protests of 2013, a very comprehensive collection of media coverage including articles, commentaries and documents (Smilov/Vaysova 2013), and a collection of photographs and slogans (Shemtov 2013) that take no notice of the events from the beginning of 2013.

27 Most likely, both articles were not intended to draw lines of division in Bulgarian society, especially between the citizens who had been on the streets to protest, but were authentic expressions of the respective author’s perception of what was going on. They are documented in Smilov/Vaysova (2013, 169-171, 178-180) and translated from Bulgarian (M.M.).

23 This question deserves more scholarly attention than it receives in this article. Here, only some hypotheses will be presented.

24 2013 also saw a wave of self-immolations in public places. In total, ten people set themselves on fire. Most likely, most cases were mo-

Velislava Dyreva’s article, published under the title “The revolt of the sated” in the leftist daily “Duma” on 24 June 2013, explicitly contrasts the two movements:

February

They take to the squares: despaired, furious, angry, wild, bad, hungry, poor, grumpy, left behind, stolen from, humiliated, pressed, smashed, without any voice and power, miserable, without a drop of hope, without tomorrow and today [...] They spring out of the cold in February [...] without songs, without music and drums [...] They have no PR, no money, no work and no programme, [...] no geniuses, talents, protestants, speakers, agitators [...]

June

They do not worry about electricity and bread. They are not interested in heating, child benefits and pensions. They have their wonderful jobs [...] are secure and secured [...] They spring out of their offices, bureaus, directorates, foundations [...] in the heat of June [...] They come for their next party [...] a ceremonial manifestation with kids on your shoulders (let them bring down communists from an early age) [...] They do not protest against prices, but for values [...]

Dyreva’s article openly criticized the allegedly snobbish attitude of the second wave and prompted critical reactions accusing her of artificially dividing people. Boyan Rashev’s article, published on 2 July in the liberal and openly pro-protest daily “Dnevnik”, can be read as a statement of the other camp:

I see myself a thousand times. Fathers (and mothers) in their thirties with small children, who are obviously better off. Managers and entrepreneurs, creative types and professionals, all people of my type, who simply do not give up. Self-assured, because they have achieved something. [...] We achieved everything with perseverance and fight, and they offer us child benefits [...].

Notwithstanding all these differences²⁸, there had been common ground between the two waves and the camps of protesters in them. Both were an expression of justified feelings that something was not right with the way the political system had been working since 1990. Both agreed that the current system of political representation was highly dysfunctional: almost a quarter of a century after the beginning of the transition to a multi-

party democracy, none of the established parties could be perceived as authentic representative of the interests of any of the relevant groups in society.²⁹ Neither had the Socialists of the BSP managed to play the role of the defender of those negatively affected by economic transformation, let alone to propose any real alternative to the neoliberal transformation, nor were the non-socialist parties any more credible as defenders of the liberal values appealing to the majority of protesters in June 2013. There was a general feeling shared across all groups that the political process in itself had been distorted by personal interest and forces lacking any democratic legitimation (economic interest groups, economic and political “oligarchs”), and had therefore become unable to take into account core concerns – economic interests *and* moral values – of the citizens. Based on this analysis of the situation a joint minimal program uniting “February” and “June” could have been worked out. However, this did not happen, the other dividing factors prevailed and no joint statement, not to speak of a joint organizational structure, emerged. The lack of a new, recognizable structure with at least a certain mass appeal can be seen as the main reason why both protests simply faded out and could not lead to any significant change.

It seems that Bulgarian society is trapped in a stalemate: the country’s own economic elite is mainly a product of the privatization process of the 1990s and is not interested in any change that would loosen its grip on politics and foster transparency and accountability. The – potentially active – urban middle-classes tend to withdraw from public life in order to pursue their individual projects. Although the events of 2013 showed that they can become active very quickly, it also became clear that their specific experience during the transformation – achieving things on their own, even against an adverse socio-political environment – has made them reluctant to participate in any political organization. Furthermore, this group shares a strong contempt for “communism”, “socialism” *and* is rather critical of any leftist policies too. Last but not least, economic transformation has created a (widening) gap between this group and the majority of citizens – the latter seem stuck in economic everyday life struggles and are only willing to interfere when their basic needs are at stake.

Actually, in June 2013 a paper titled *Charta 2013. A Charta for dismantling the plutocratic model of the Bulgarian state* appeared.³⁰ It had been drafted by a group of independent intellectuals during the first weeks of the anti-Oresharski protests. It offered an analytical sketch of

²⁸ The core demand of “June” – the resignation of the Oresharski government – never started to play a role within the organizers’ circles of the protests in February. They reemerged in public in February 2014 to commemorate their actions one year before and to criticize the lack of the new government’s action with regard to their initial demands.

²⁹ The most visible result of this process was the steady decrease of voter turnout after 1999.

³⁰ Its full title was *Charta 2013. A Charta for dismantling the plutocratic model of the Bulgarian state* (An independent citizens’ initiative to reestablish democracy and the rule of law); it is documented (in Bulgarian) in Smilov/Vaysova (2013, 75–82).

the status quo in Bulgarian politics and society and made some general suggestions in which directions to work in order to overcome the fundamental crisis. It found clear words for the current state of affairs:

Information available so far and our own experience allow us to summarize the following as a starting point for our further activities:

State government has itself permanently alienated from its legitimate foundations, the interest of the citizen.

Corruption has become the main content of power relations and the main motif for participation in power [...].

The public spheres function like nepotistic networks of secret communities and corporate cartels [...].

The judiciary is put in a weak and vulnerable position by consolidating its dependency from political and economic influence [...].

The political system functions as a clearing house for all spheres, in which the oligarchic model exists – there, power resources and capacities are redistributed, so that plutocracy can secure its existence in the following political cycle, while at the same time a public sphere and democratic principles are imitated. The forms of façade democracy help legitimize the status quo in front of international observers, but at the same time make it more difficult to unmask and investigate the hidden centers of power.

The document received a certain amount of friendly media attention, but was not able to act as a point of reference for further concrete demands and actions of the protests.

III. The protests and the future of representative democracy in Bulgaria

It would be tempting, but too easy to put the blame for the ongoing crisis of political representation exclusively either on “totalitarian legacies” or “neoliberal ideology”. In fact, both aspects mutually reinforced each other. In the mid-1990s, Linz and Stepan (1996, 342) concluded in their work on the problems of democratic transition and consolidation that “[f]rom the perspective of prior regime type, Bulgaria from 1989 to 1995 probably ‘overperformed’ democratically.” In retrospective, their findings may have been a bit too optimistic. The legacy of “early post-totalitarianism” – little experience with political pluralism and a lack of authentic, interest-based party representation – combined with an increasingly neoliberal approach to politics brought about highly negative socio-economic results which, in turn, affected the gen-

eral perception of the democratic regime and gave rise to feelings that democratic politics does not have any effect on citizens’ lives. The vicious cycle of political alienation, the tendency of deepening estrangement from politics, which has been observed in many post-socialist democracies (Segert 2013, 216–222), was initiated: an ever-increasing number of citizens tended to see politics as a pointless exercise, a game played to secure elite interest at the expense of the overwhelming majority of citizens.³¹ In fact, elites profited from growing public apathy and disengagement, which created additional incentives to engage in pursuing particular interests.

Where are the protests from 2013 in the bigger picture of post-socialist democratization in Bulgaria? From today’s point of view, Bulgaria’s year of discontent and its aftermath are open to different interpretations. A more pessimistic view sees the events of 2013 as a lost moment in the history of democracy, a short appearance of the political sovereign that showed his complete inability to organize independently and was followed by the return of the old faces and citizens’ final withdrawal into private life. Social media channels proved to be powerful tools to support the creation of *online* communities, but these communities cannot replace forms of real life organization as a prerequisite for creating sustainable alternative structures to the existing, discredited political parties. In this logic, the protests turned out to be a failure, since they were not able to bring about “the change” they had called for. In the aftermath of the protests in the summer of 2013, the country’s political right managed to recover from its decade-long crisis and formed a new coalition, the *Reformist Bloc* (RB). Two established nationalist parties formed the electoral coalition *Patriotic Front* (PF). Several other new parties were hastily founded, some of them authentic organizations with little mass appeal, others more resembling the products of political engineering that had appeared at earlier stages of the Bulgarian transformation without contributing to effective change.³² The influence of these new organizations on the further course of political development, namely the elections in 2014, remained minimal. The most influential new movement, the *Reformist Bloc* (RB), turned into a kind of representation of parts of the movement of June and July 2013. However, it could by no means be interpreted as a symbol of the so much called-for “change”, since it included both “recycled” organizations and figures that actually had been

31 Empirical data from the Pew Research Centre cited in Segert (2013, 221) provides support for this claim. When asked who had profited from the changes in 1989 around two decades later 92% named “politicians”, 82% “entrepreneurs” and only 11% “citizens”.

32 The party *Bulgaria without censorship*, founded in January 2014 and led by the relatively popular former TV host Nikolay Barekov, can serve as an example of a party that was a product of political engineering by powerful behind-the-scenes interest groups. It won 5.69% of the vote in the parliamentary elections.

discredited by their role in former governments. The same holds true for the *Patriotic Front*. An authentic new movement capable of canalizing citizens' discontent and presenting itself as an attractive alternative to the established parties for broader strata of Bulgarian society did not emerge. Observers who are more skeptical may see this as further proof that Bulgarian democracy is doomed to continue in its established – dissatisfying – way. The outlook may become even more negative, if one takes into account that the protests, which have been associated with so big expectations, in fact had been attended by only 3.5% of the population (OSI 2013a).

A more optimistic reading may see the protests as a herald of coming change. From this point of view, the events of 2013 should not be judged by their immediate outcome, but by the long-term process they initiated. The return to political business as usual after the elections in 2014 would then be a temporary setback. As the second protest movement often stressed, the events of summer 2013 were not just a “protest”, but a “process”. It is true that both movements mainly formulated isolated demands, but were not able to offer a complete program to overcome the multiple crises. This was their weakness *and* a proof of their authenticity. Hollow programmatic documents, formulated by technocratic elites inside the NDSV or GERB, have not brought any results either. There is now a new generation of Bulgarian citizens entering public life. They are able to gather information, interact in ways that “were totally unknown to preceding generations” and show a different attitude towards politics too (Todorov 2011, 23). It remains to be seen if this still rather weak tendency turns into a social reality not limited to affluent urban centers, but the whole of the country. In any case, this new type of citizen is urgently needed and a necessary prerequisite for breaking the vicious cycle of apathy and ignorance among citizens *and* the further detachment of the elites. As Krasteva (2013) noted in a blog entry commenting the first wave of protests, this time no cry for new saviors was heard. The new figures that appeared in the aftermath of the protests and could fit this role by far could not repeat the successes of Simeon's movement in 2001 and Borissov's GERB in 2009. The two waves of 2013 have made clear that there is a demand for authentic political representation of different social groups in Bulgarian society and that a certain number of citizens has finally realized that the ultimate price for not getting involved in politics may be too high. The current system of representative democracy provides a framework that so far has mostly existed on paper and has to be filled with life. Given that building from scratch a new political organization opposed to the existing “political cartel” turned out to be an enormously difficult task, the strengthening of internal party democracy appears as a more viable path to change. Currently, political or-

ganizations are caught in the stranglehold of party and economic oligarchs. The first wave of protests brought at least some symbolic improvement when party lists were opened to non-partisan figures. If those active in the protests overcome their understandable anti-party sentiment, in the mid-run new attitudes to politics may exercise a positive influence on existing organizations and on all levels of governments.

Notwithstanding what has been said so far concerning attitudinal changes, the future development of democracy is also closely linked to socio-economic issues. Of course, the relatively tiny middle class is affected by the problems the current underrepresentation of public interest creates, but after all, it still has chances for a “normal” life in spite of a dysfunctional political system. Currently, those who are most dependent on political change due to their low socio-economic status, very often also are the least capable of actively participating in it. Therefore, the long-term consolidation of representative democracy, defending it against populist and even authoritarian alternatives, will also strongly depend on the handling of social issues that emerged because of post-socialist economic transformation. After all, a quarter of a century after the initial transition from dictatorial rule, a slightly positive perspective for the further development of representative democracy seems more justified than right at the start of this process.

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