Civil Society in Bulgaria – Stages, Opportunities and Limitations

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Abstract

This article analyzes some features of civil society development in general – the framework within which it can function and be effective. Another emphasis is placed on some peculiarities of the development of the civil society in Bulgaria. One of the main conclusions is the proximity of these peculiarities to the characteristics of civil society in the other former “socialist” countries.

Keywords: civil society, framework, significance, benefit, effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Actually, civil society in Bulgaria was not born in 1989. Its intensive development began after Bulgarian liberation from Turkish slavery. It also exists during the “socialist period”, albeit in quite specific kinds and forms. The last years of this period, so called “perestroika”, helped to bring the forms of civic activity closer to those in countries with democratic regimes. Since 1989, civil society has continued to develop in new forms, with varying intensity, goals and subjects.

The first years of the transition were something like an intoxication of political freedom. People wanted to enjoy their right to use various forms of civic activity. And they waited for goods to fall on their heads. Not only didn’t goods go on all the heads, but a lot of problems have been met by the majority of people. People wondered, snatched, deactivated. Moreover, the propaganda machine of the new regime activated all means to deactivate the civic activity of masses. Time passed, and we see that without civilian activity we will be drowned by the problems and started a new activation, but with new motives and new expectations, without overreaching to democracy, with less idealization of the new society, with new enthusiasm and skill in the organization of struggles.

2. Euphoria

The first stage of civil society development after the beginning of the transition period I called “euphoria”.

At the very beginning of the transition, the enthusiasm for citizen participation in political life was enormous; people massively voted, participated in different forms of civic activity. But these activities were usually related to political struggles and less to solving specific cases, specific problems of their existence. In fact, the most complex and terrible personal and social-group problems have not yet emerged.

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At first there were strikes and protests in support of directors or against directors of industrial enterprises. Unfortunately, these strikes and protests by ordinary Bulgarians were used in the struggles to master the nodal points of Bulgarian industry by the new capitalists. They thought they were contributing to their own future prosperity and wealth. In fact many workers helped killing Bulgarian businesses, and pledged their future unemployment and poverty. At the beginning were the struggles against the communist symbols (The Communist Pentagram, the monument of Lenin, the mausoleum of G. Dimitrov) and against the Communist Party – against Article 1 of the Constitution about ruling position of Communist party, against primary party organizations, etc.

During this period, democracy has come upon us as an exhilarating expectation of radical change. Her visible impressive features were the crowd in the squares, the tents, the high political activity that left a mark on everyday life, on the professional relationships, on the family and the friendship. Then democracy was to a great extent direct. The citizens tried to be one of the main actors.

3. Disappointment

The second stage may be called “disappointment”. In the beginning, side by side, different categories of people were struggling for the success of the new political subjects - from business representatives to the most ordinary and exploited workers, Ethnic Bulgarians, Roma and Bulgarian Turks, Christians and Muslims. Over time it became clear their problems were becoming increasingly different, their interests were becoming increasingly contradictory. And, slowly, they began to protest individually more and more often, to make protests and counter-protests. They began to resist one another physically on the streets. Local authorities increasingly had to take care of providing different routes to prevent collisions between protesters and counter-protesters. It reduced the belief in the magical power of democracy as a cure for all the troubles.

Many of the workers who stood behind the frankly right-wing Union of Democratic Forces have begun either not to vote or to protest against the masters they had themselves brought. Many of those who supported the Bulgarian Socialist Party at the beginning of the transition also began not to vote, or to vote for other parties, or to protest against the right policies of the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

At the beginning of the transition, protest activity was, to a great extent, initiated or organized by the opposition Union of Democratic Forces, the trade union “Support” and the other opposition forces that still managed to attract the masses, inspiring hope for something new. Little by little, more and more citizens were aware of the essence of the Union of Democratic Forces and other opposition parties. They understood that the opposition political forces were fighting about power and prosperity mostly on certain narrow strata of people, not the whole Bulgarian people, and oriented themselves towards more independent forms of struggle. They understood that the trade union “Support” actually supported the deindustrialisation of Bulgaria, the illegal gain of the new economic elite, the increase in unemployment in the country, the impoverishment of large strata of people. It reduced the interconnection of civil struggles with the main trade unions and parties to reach the point where protestors from the spring protests in 2013 did not want to hear about parties and the unions wondered whether to support the protests or not.

After its turbulent start in the new conditions of the transition, connected with the activity of ordinary people, swirled around the struggle between the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Union of Democratic Forces for power, a certain reduction of the intensity of the struggles took place. A large part of the population had not yet separated from the hopes of a better future. After the initial blast of activity, there was some reassurance that once democracy came, we would be able to get it right. People’s activity seemed to have focused on the economic changes in their own
being - to return ownership, to fight for their new economic status. After the explosion of social activity in the early years of the transition, from the late 1990s onwards, apathy, withdrawal in the private sphere, and increasing atomization occurred (Koleva, 2011). There were mostly striking. Other forms of struggle were rare.

4. Involuntary active

The third stage I called “involuntary active”.

But slowly and with more and more frequent evidence of the direction of development, with the worsening of economic prosperity of huge strata of people, the occasions for civic activity increased. Under the new conditions, large masses of people began to get bogged down in troubles, some of which were difficult or unsolvable. More and more people have come to the point of having nothing to lose, and their only chance of some improvement was to fight. It would take years to be seen the new problems, to be deprived people of their illusions and to start relying on themselves and stepping up in political struggles. People understood that without their activity too often there is no one to solve their problems, or at least that they have to remind to certain subjects of the necessity of solving them. And the intensification of the struggle began again. But protests have become less and less connected with conflicts between major parties and increasingly with the solution of specific problems – national or local, collective or personal. The struggles were increasingly differentiated by community, professional and village principle.

Little by little, many people became aware of and began to struggle for clearer, more specific problems. They became more and more aware of how their struggles could be used for foreign interests. They began to become more careful in the choice of goals and followers in their struggles. In addition to strikes, other forms of struggle began to be widespread, especially in connection with the development of the Internet and mobile phones. New technologies are an additional power resource.

Now electronic technologies revitalize interest, enthusiasm and hopes. The children of people in the square in the beginning of transition are today active on the forums (Krasteva, 2009). But in the third stage, the new technologies aren’t the major factor for the people’s activation. More important factor is the consciousness, that there is no one else to help. Technologies are just an additional power resource.

It seems to me that such stages have also passed the protest activity of the peoples from the other former “socialist” countries. Of course, in each of them there are some peculiarities.

5. Public significance of combating

The Bulgarians during these years participated in struggles of varying degrees of public significance. They concern more or less people, more or less settlements.

Less significant are the protests for the protection of their own houses from dangerous nearby buildings; against specific physicians who have made medical errors; against specific police officers who have exceeded their powers; against unacceptable convictions for crimes, and others.

With higher degree of public interest are protests to protect the interests of residents in different residential neighbourhoods and settlements – to protect common green areas or childcare facilities, to reduce local taxes, against poor transport and poor road infrastructure; to protect the income of workers from different businesses and occupational spheres, against unpaid subsidies for different types of business; to improve the working conditions of different professional groups; to care for children and people with rare diseases; to provide an accessible environment for people with disabilities; against the closure of schools and hospitals, theatres and
operas; against the demolition of historical monuments; to criminalize violence against animals; against the intrusion of homosexuality; for equal rights of fathers in divorces and distribution of children among parents; in protection of the electoral right of certain categories of people; for the return of teachers, directors and other categories of people to work; towards discrimination against certain categories of people, etc., etc.

The highest degree of public importance are the protests against wars in various parts of the world, against the participation of Bulgaria in various wars; against police violence; for preservation of important for the whole country natural objects - Bulgarian mountains, the rivers and the sea. A number of environmental protests appear to be of local significance, but due to the principle of interconnection of natural phenomena, they are, in fact, of national and even greater significance. The development of the environmental movement is an example of the tendency for more and more people to become more and more involved in general causes (Krastanova, 2013). And the joy is that more and more young people are involved in this movement, realizing that they have to fight for their own world and the world of their children.

In protests of the highest degree of public significance we may include protests against certain governments because they concern the interests of the whole nation. Protests to increase care for education and science, against increase of the prices of electricity, water, the most important goods and services are also with the highest significance.

6. Public benefit from struggles

The Protests of the Bulgarians have different degrees of public utility. This utility can be interpreted from a different point of view. Depending on their interests, understandings and values, people consider differently the usefulness of the same civic activities. For example, the strike of Bulgarian teachers in 2007 has been interpreted by different strata of people in a completely different way. Part of society judged this strike to be necessary and supported it. But there were other people, usually struggling with the strike parents, who did not approve of it.

People protest for any cause (even harmful and regressive), based on their personal interests and values. Public utility is a relative notion ... Useful for some is harmful to others. It would be nice to be simpler and less controversial, but life shows that this is not the case. And democracy is about allowing any purpose and interest to try to gain popularity and protection.

But in any case, the manifestations of civic activity have some beneficial effects:

- The authorities are informed of the most intolerable problems;
- Political actors update their management programs;
- Different kinds of solutions are rethought;
- Information, experience and solidarity are gaining on the part of citizens;
- Active citizens serve as a staff reserve for the political elite.

Civic struggles are also useful because of their impact on election results. They inform the political subjects of what to place in the next election campaign. Sometimes coalitions, parties, political leaders listen to citizens’ demands, embrace them as their cause, and increase their electoral performance. For example, this is the case with the BSP and the “Attack” after the spring protests in 2013, when these parties have somehow managed to show concern about the problems of the protesters. There are also opposite examples of political subjects who do not recognize the wishes of protesters as their own and lose voices in the subsequent elections.

The facts of the Bulgarians’ struggle activity talk about another type of utility of social struggles – through them part of the fighters find their positions within the elite (Zografova, 2010).
For them, this is also an important motivation for participating in relevant civil events. This was especially true for opposition supporters at the beginning of the transition period of 1989 and 1990 because they had a real chance of falling into the spotlight and power through such actions. Participation in these protests is beneficial at least for the participants themselves – especially in this first stage. It may be argued on a case-by-case basis whether the going in power of these protesters is also beneficial to society as a whole.

One of the great effects of the various struggles of the Bulgarians, especially the more successful ones, is the creation of leaders who are ready to engage in various kinds of civil appearances – people with a strong civic sentiment, with organizational skills and experience.

For the time being, this the most political nature of the protests has been changed and the struggles for other causes have increased. And the protests, whose leaders are not fighting for political positions, have increased. Even when the ruling elite try to incorporate them into power, they refuse to take political positions.

Another result, even from unsuccessful protests in general, is the accustomedness of people to accept such protests like the normal daily life, to increase their tolerance towards them, their readiness to be active, and to solve their problems with their participation.

Protests are always in some sense useful, even when they do not achieve their specific purpose. They at least remind different institutions of problems. Remind them to be careful in the process of making decisions. Assist in the creation or maintenance of the civic skills of the population, to maintain the tone of civil society.

7. Effectiveness of struggles

When we think about the effectiveness of a movement, protest, strike, it should be taken into account that what is visible to the naked eye is often not equal to what is behind the scenes. A protest may seem effective, it may seem to us that it is the main reason for solving a problem as the protesters wanted. In fact, in most cases, there are more important reasons to be solved the problem, which are invisible or at least difficult to capture, difficult to recognize by the average person, even the researcher.

Much of the protests, which at first look seem to be a success for protesters, are actually successful because major and important interests of certain subjects have intervened (Bezlov, 2012).

Naturally, in the struggles with more general, more global, more difficult objectives, the effectiveness of protests is much less. In them usually were included fewer people, but more strongly motivated, ready for greater risks. In struggles for more specific purposes, there was more or less complete, or at least partial, or temporary success.

We can talk about different kinds of effectiveness of the social struggles of the Bulgarians. Some of them fully meet the demands of the participants, others – partially. One part of struggles has long-lasting effect, while others have only a temporary effect. And some protests have not been successful.

But it is unreasonable to exaggerate the role of ordinary citizens’ struggles in social life, their effectiveness. The functioning of civil society is within the frames defined by the capitalist state, obey to the laws of capitalist society (Popivanov, 2005).

The ruling class is the one that ultimately makes the decisions, allows one or another struggle to be effective. When its interests are only slightly affected it allows some struggles to be effective. But in other occasions, she is making more effort to fight civilian struggles. He repressed with all the strength – threatening, firing, arresting, beating, killing. And her reprisals in a very
large proportion of cases are successful because there are very few people who are willing to lose their heads for an idea. With increased repression on the part of power, most people are scared and shut up.

*Effects of the Bulgarian protests* during the transition are different.

When it comes to more general, changing the game's rules causes – there is a failure. This also applies to struggles where new technologies have been used, and to protests from the earlier years of the transition when there were no such technologies.

When it’s about to super-specific requests, not particularly detrimental to the status of the local and central elites, protests often have partial, temporary or overall success. In such cases, citizens' protests may serve as a reason for the government at the relevant level to be able to press certain economic or other subjects to decide on a way that is right for the citizens.

When it comes about to protests of large masses of people, involving diverse social strata and having realistic and concrete messages to power, it is very likely that the protest will have some success. Chances of success in these cases diminish along with the increasing importance of these phenomena to strong domestic or especially foreign subjects that have great potential for pressure on power. And in such situations, foreign subjects are often representatives of trans-national corporations with global interests and influence.

*Some professional groups* generally have greater resources to influence the decisions of the elite. Such are the more masculine and, at the same time, massive and important professions - miners, taxi drivers, public transport drivers in cities, and so on. Such are the professions in which there are more active unions that can strengthen the organization and energy of the protest. Such are the professions on which vital functions of the public life depends – physicians, policemen, working people in the energy system. Generally speaking, in these professions often have limitations on expressing the views of these people, and they have fewer rights to organize protests (for example just a symbolic protest). But even in such a protest their discontent is more often taken into account in full or at least in part.

Such are the professions and in which people are generally more rebellious - younger, less inclined to patience, discrimination, low reward, and so on. These are sometimes ethnic or minority groups that are subject to international observation and protection, and their protests are the cause of international pressure from countries or international organizations. Perhaps a good example of such a group is homosexuals as well as Roma.

If people from business sphere protest, the representatives of the government take quicker measures. For example, in the border conflicts with Turkey and Greece, ministers are periodically required to step up to solve the problems of carriers.

*The more protests are directed at more general principles or phenomena more directly related to the characteristics of the public system as a whole, the more they affect the principle distribution of power resources in society between the main strata, the more their chances of success reduce.*

In general, the protests against major economic actors, against large foreign investors, which underlie the functioning of the modern world economic system and impose the principles of the development of this system, are generally doomed to failure. For example, spring protests in 2013 in Bulgaria failed to move foreign monopolies. Their monopoly position is preserved.

Protests are often ineffective because they concern the interests of important economic actors who are stronger, with more resources to influence political decisions, with the ability to organize counter-protests. Protests are more effective when deals with fewer and less powerful social groups.
Generally unsolvable for the present is the question of a fundamental change of the party system. The calls of the spring protest in 2013 (and some other protests) against all parties, against the parties in general, blurred the protest, directed it to failure, and in the end did not move the party system. And worst – have prevented major achievements in basic service prices, the initial request of the protestors in 2013. Similar demands have also been heard on other protests – with the same result. Protests influence somewhat the behavior of political parties (their election campaigns, their promises), but within the established party system (Spasov, 2013).

All protests that have affected the electoral system’s problems in the name of a fundamentally different distribution of resources between elites and masses have been unsuccessful. The demands of the spring and summer protests of 2013 in this respect have not achieved anything significant. The changes proposed by the authorities after them in the Electoral Code were insignificant.

The main function of the democratic elections is to domesticate the struggles and discontents, to channel them into the less dangerous for the ruling class and her elite direction (Goranova, 2013). Electoral systems around the world, including the Bulgarian, are so fictional that they do not allow the common people too much to interfere with the entire elite, no matter how unhappy they are.

It remains the domination of party candidatures, the main parties, the discrimination of independent candidates, the threshold for entry into parliament and other characteristics of electoral legislation that ensure the dominant position and representation of the elite in electoral political bodies. The distribution of the main power resources would not be substantially improved by the adoption of a majority system, the introduction of machine and internet voting, whether the parliament or the president would elect the Central Electoral Commission and others minor changes that some sociologists and political scientists are trying to present as very important changes to the system to calm citizens.

Rules about election organization are too important to maintain the dominance of the ruling class to allow it to introduce substantive changes to challenge this dominance.

For the time being, protests with other demands for important changes in the functioning of the legislative and executive powers have been unsuccessful. Hardly achievable are also special results in the protests against some essential features of the modern judicial system. Periodically there are requests to invalidate the principle of the independence of the representatives of this power by removing their immunity. But it is a basic principle of the judiciary in the bourgeois state – magistrates are to some extent independent of the constant changes in the executive power, but at the same time – by the common people. And therefore, there is hardly any chance of an effective protest in that direction.

The ruling class keeps being independent from the people’s voice, and immunity is an important mechanism for that. But power allows successful protests against the appointment of concrete figures in these authorities for example.

When it comes to specific requests to increase someone’s sentence or to bring some non-elite criminal into the courtroom, the protest has a chance of success and there are such bright examples. When judges and prosecutors are supported by many people on the street, they usually increase sentences or take other appropriate decisions concerning certain individuals. Of course, this is not particularly relevant for the more senior representatives of the elite. For their sentences, protests are very ineffective, and perhaps they are not often used.

When it comes to fundamental changes in the organization and the essence of the legislative and executive powers, and judiciary system there is no evidence of successful protests.

It is also difficult to overthrow whole governments. It is only when large and
important layers of the elite want it. Otherwise, the elite mobilize its repressive and manipulative organs and suppress protests with more or less blood. The first option took place in 1997 when the economic elite understood each other that it would remove the BSP government in order to make the necessary price shock that favoured the whole Bulgarian economic elite. This shock devalued its credits and harmed the common people economic interests by destroying its stocks. The role of ordinary citizens protesting around the parliament at that time was of statistics, of third-party players, of destroyers. The dirty work has been done for those who, after taking power, have continued to worsen the economic situation of the majority, including some of those protesters.

Generally, protesters against governments are supported by some important political subjects. In situations where the entire ruling elite is interested in changing the ruling party through protests, the ruling party is not very active in sanctioning the protesters’ vandalism. As in the above mentioned case. The BSP wanted to prove just how modern and democratic it was, so the police were tolerant, while the president Petar Stoyanov was bothering the other side – the vandal mercenaries of their most aggressive protesters.

The summer protests in 2013 failed to move the government of Oresharski until June 2014 because it was supported by sufficiently strong business structures and strong enough agreements between the main political forces.

A common feature of Bulgarian struggles, as probably in other former “socialist” countries, is their little commitment to, and in most cases even, the ideological opposition of left-wing ideas. The ideological treatment of the masses during the “socialist” period has come to its effect. The vast majority of Bulgarians believe in the socialist, even communist character of that society. Even worse, under the influence of their ideological treatment during the transition years, they associate this characteristic not with its bloom and utility, but with its collapse and its weaknesses. Thus, citizens were alienated from the left-wing ideas. They have approached right-wing ideas and political subjects and too often rely on such subjects to solve their “left” problems. But left-wing ideas are normal basis for most of the civil protests. Without these ideas they are impotent, ineffective.

In fact, the Bulgarian struggles are quite similar in their basic characteristics to the struggles of the Western peoples. The postmodern age has a legitimate impact on their character and organization (Mizov, 2014).

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