

## COUNTRY POSITION PAPER

### Civic Unrest in Bulgaria – a Good Example for Growing Civil Society

Political representation in Europe suffers for recognized by the citizens and this may be comes by the unclear political platforms, false news, euroscepticism and rising nationalism. All detected problems in European countries seek their answers and when such are not seen on the horizon civil disobedience appears as natural phenomenon. So the big question is: How Europe to find balance between economic development, ecology and social justice? Do the protests give answers and what are they? We hope that at least new ideas will be heard.

Bulgaria nowadays is a country on a crossroad between western democracies and post-communist oligarchy. As recently adopted democracy (10.11.1990) Bulgarian democracy is still 'façade' but no doubt that the direction is to Europe. Political representation suffers for recognition by the citizens all over Europe, but in Bulgaria is easy to be seen because of the low quality of following of the law and legislation. In the recent years the Euroscepticism, rising populism and lack of citizenship demand their price to all Bulgarians. The eurosceptic and nationalist populist parties are members of the supposedly mainstream European alliances so Bulgaria is not an exception. The nationalist populism (mainly promoted by Bulgarian Socialist Party) has not only failed to preclude an openly pro-Russian stance but has also led to the party explicitly rejecting the Istanbul Convention (to combat violence against women and domestic violence). Despite taking populism to new extremes, BSP is apparently still not perceived to be populist at the European level. Thus on the face of it, Bulgaria seems like a pro-European country whose nationalist populists cannot threaten the future of the EU. The same is with the pro-Russian attitudes – they exist for sure, but they are not possible to influence in great scale. Yes, there is Russian propaganda stepped on nationalist and ex-communist parties (former communist nomenclature, what is left from security services and the old cultural elites) as their advocators in common social themes in Bulgaria, but it is melting along with the melting of the Bulgarians in the face of the older generation. For these people nationalist populism and sovereignty are rarely an existential credo but rather an excellent smokescreen under which to counter even the slightest attempts at external control by European institutions. Meanwhile, anti-liberalism and the lambasting at the civil nongovernmental organizations (so called Sorosoids) are the preferred means for blocking domestic resistance and in this way nationalist populism is a tool for state capture. Populist discourse in Bulgaria is vastly more present now than five years ago, even if outright populist parties have never won a majority. Meanwhile, press freedom in Bulgaria has suffered as falling from 87th in 2013 to 111th in worldwide ranking for 2018 according to Reporters Without Borders. United Patriots being coalition partner in the government continued to affirm the



anti-democratic discourse and to seep into common language usage among all political parties, including the so-called mainstream ones. At the same time the democracy in Bulgaria has clear signs of authoritarianism – an oligarchy in the style of Vladimir Putin’s, Viktor Orbán’s or Erdogan’s, even Trump in USA – not to wonder why as having so many examples worldwide. This is also why the European elections in 2019 could be presented as a victory of pro-European forces in Bulgaria, even as having massive energy dependence from Russia based on gas supply, nuclear power plants and other energy projects that are in full bloom. So the big issues to be solved are not euroscepticism, pro-Russian attitudes or populist speaking. The big issue to be solved is the lack of citizenship which is a main instrument for struggling them.

We could say that first steps of Bulgarian civil society in the recent years could be indicated through rebellion acts against the status quo and street protests. The last massive citizen protests were against the decision of Ministry of Environment and Water to allow constructions at UNESCO protected Pirin National Park. The government approved a new management plan for the National park on 28th December 2017 allowing construction of a second gondola cabin lift in Bansko, Bulgaria’s largest skiing resort. Several thousand people took the streets of Bulgarian capital of Sofia with hundreds more protesting in nine more cities across the country chanting “Mafia”, “Save Pirin” and “Resignation”. The protesters blocked the Eagles’ Bridge in central Sofia. Protesters said the cabinet’s decision to expand the ski area breached a number of nature protection laws and would lead to the destruction of centuries-old pine trees endangering wildlife at the UNESCO World Heritage site.

“I am here because I am a Bulgarian and a European citizen and the government’s decision is in contradiction with Bulgarian and European legislation,” said journalist Simeon Tabakov, one of the demonstrators.

The citizens demanded the resignation of the environment minister who, they say, is sabotaging the main goal of his Ministry.

Meanwhile, supporters of the investments plans in Bansko (mostly paid groups and Bansko Municipality administration) have also staged counter-protests around the country, blocking the international E-79 road that connects southwest cities of Blagoevgrad and Simitli. The supporters of the construction works carried posters with slogans “green parasites”, “green octopus”, etc. Both citizens and environment protecting activists were vigorously opposing the government plan having the fear that it would allow extensive construction and logging. US celebrities, organised by WWF-Bulgaria, also joined the global campaign for saving the Pirin National Park from construction and felling. Finally The Supreme Administrative Court ruled at first instance that Minister's decision not to undergo a new ecological plan for Pririn NP was in violation of Bulgarian and European legislation, as well as according to the decisions of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, of which Pirin National Park is part.

All this was discussed at National conference under BRING project that held on 27 March 2019 in New Bulgarian University, Sofia. The conference was entitled "Europe in the wake of the EP elections: perspectives, risks and Russian propaganda". The following main themes were discussed in three separate panels:



- Prospects and risks for the EU;
- Euroscepticism: Information and disinformation in the European Union;
- Europe of nation-states in global context.

The event took place with increased interest by students, lecturers and representatives of partner organizations. The academic staff of NBU managed to provoke guests with interesting conclusions on the basis of their research and experience, and the moderators with the exceptional sense and professionalism led the thematic panels and the discussion sections.

During the conference one of the storytelling videos that were produced under the project was shown. It was interesting a voice of the young generation, active in the protests, to be heard. Here is what was said by Deyan Trifonov:

“First of all European Union is built upon the idea of freedom, equality in front of the law and democracy. In order this to work we have to know our rights and responsibilities and all together to follow these principals in everyday life. On the other hand democracy helps for keeping the right way with having the possibility to vote for the right people – honest, possessing knowledge and willing the benefit for all Europeans. Of course when one is thinking that his/her rights are violated or the rights of a whole group or nation are violated then he/she or the whole group goes to the street to protest hoping that by protesting the injured justice will be restored. This happened last year when Pirin National park in Bulgaria was threatened of massive construction works and the government seemed to allow this. But not every cause is worth to protest for in the streets.

For me the most important thing is we, the European citizens, to be duly informed. If we are informed then we are possible to orientate and to seek the truth where is likely to be found. I think the democracy is the right and necessary tool the problems to be solved with minimum risk for the freedom of the citizens.”

The same topics were discussed during the European online debate competition that was launched in June 2019 between 16 teams of young people from the four countries - Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Germany. The debate was in a specific way a continuation of the already published video interviews within the project with focusing on key EU topics such as the Future of the EU, Euroscepticism and the European elections in 2019. The debate competition followed a classic Karl Popper approach with teams of two supporting/not supporting preliminary given topic. The teams had 24 hours to debate on the topic, where the responses were judged by jury. The winning team from a particular debate advanced in the next round – all 4 for the competition. What was written by the young competitors was really a new point of view and precise cut of what happened in the EU society and especially showing the attitudes of the young generation of protesters.

Here is what one of the Bulgarian debaters had answered to oppose the given topic that: “Civil disobedience and actions are justified when the justice system and rule of law are undermined”:

“It is indeed true that civil disobedience has been pivotal to most of the great political transformations in a very turbulent 20th century. We agree with our colleagues on many of the

merits such nonviolent acts can bring to a society on the brink of major change. However, a few points need to be made in order to fully grasp the essence of this debate.

The first of them is the distinction between civil disobedience and civil resistance. Although Debau's definition of civil disobedience gives a good overview of the general cause, the way it is presented by our colleagues is at best ambiguous and therefore dangerous to be used in such a debate. This is most certainly so, because acts of lawful protests and demonstrations also fall in the category of 'political acts that serve a greater social purpose of bringing about change in the law or policies of a government'. Another important notice is that even though Gandhi spoke of civil disobedience, he did employ law-abiding tactics and often preferred the term "civil resistance" (in a definition slightly different to the commonly accepted one). In the modern meaning it encompasses a broad spectrum of nonviolent actions, which mean to oppose a particular policy or regime, often using pressure, coercion and appeals to the said adversary. Some examples are marches, petitions, boycotts, demonstrations. All of those are justified by our authority as citizens and in democratic societies they can be more than effective enough, especially as they appeal more to the general masses and may bring deeper understanding of the conflict without the repercussions of law-breaking activities."

It is almost full review of the protest activity as way of the citizens to the cases of non-proper working of the justice system in one country. On one hand we have civil disobedience which in a working democracy should not be needed. On the other hand we have our concerns that the civil disobedience, particularly in countries struggling with the implementation of major democracy principles, is the only way for correcting the wrong doing of the legal authorities. Civil disobedience hides risk of growing into violence, vandalism and civil wars. It is one thing to talk about nonviolent civil disobedience from a position as a citizen in the EU and completely another to do it from the position of a person in a third world country. Even if civil disobedience is morally the right choice, from a practical viewpoint it is very dangerous, in a way that 'willing to accept lawful punishment' cannot properly convey. Another way to fight the injustice is to continue living for a cause and every drop counts, if done correctly. Strictly speaking, our freedom extends to where those of the others stop. Not to mention that in our country even the most throughout organized actions of protest, be it resistance or disobedience, can be misreported or simply deformed by means of paid aggressors in the midst of the protesters, as has often happened. Even in old EU countries, such as France for example, this summer there was movement called "yellow vests" that from our point of view is very worrisome for the state of democracy and symptomatic for the scale of uncivilized acts that could happen when huge mass of malcontent people get out at the streets. This is a result of the widespread view that material well-being is almost equal to happiness and inner satisfaction, which indirectly leads to insufficient educational integration and low cultural status. The idea of a "prosperous Europe" has been maintained for decades. This is also the reason why hundreds of thousands of migrants flock to Central Europe because there is no force that can stop a person in his quest for a better life, at a time when continuing conflicts ruin lives in Southeast Asia and Africa. Various mechanisms are being sought for and applied to extinguish the tension coming from the obvious desire to be consumed material goods without being accompanied by responsibilities and obligations to the consumers. The accession of countries from the former socialist block to EU, where totalitarian communist regimes led to the devaluation of personal responsibility and its replacement



by collective irresponsibility, further added to the tension and revived pro-nationalist movements in the old EU member states that were considered forgotten.

Considering the points above we think that the act of civil disobedience is, although useful and a classical way of showing a change is needed, not necessarily justified. More above, it is useful to have in mind what stands inside the motivation of one to protest. Sometimes it is just the need to speak loud or the necessity to find vent of his/her own dissatisfaction of his/her life. Discontent could come sometimes merely of not drinking the usual coffee in the morning or serving it cold instead of hot by the waitress. This is not wish to underestimate the civil disobedience as way to move the society up closer to rule of law and justice, but wanting to show all aspects of civil disobedience. Surely in both cases – working democracy and façade democracy, we think the civil resistance is more appropriate because of the advantages that give for future development of any contrary positions. In the very essence of civil resistance sits the respect of the other who holds the different point of view, who is man/woman like you given with life by unnamed force. At the same time there is the understanding that for achieving a valuable goal you should be persistent, consistent and unlimitedly patient. A good example for this is Sisyphus. As Vaklush Tolev, a famous Bulgarian theologian has said, the secret of Sisyphus is not the pointless work but lack of despair, because the stone that Sisyphus is constantly pushing up the hill and then it rolls down at the end it will become a small pebble that he will put in his pocket and clime the peak. So it is much important to be awoken enough to see the spreading lie, to be brave when people around are afraid, to be strong to stand up the position that you know that is worthy nevertheless what other people say, and to find enough love in your heart for forgiveness when your enemy has come to you to seek help.

In conclusion, the current policy brief does not aim to identify all possible ways EU to fight the existing challenges in front of European citizens, but the mentioned above are among the most strategically important and global for Europe, because EU policy cannot be only subject of investment. Owning material possessions is a human right, but as Jesus Christ has said: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust eats them away, and where thieves can steal. Because where the treasure is, there is your heart."

Sofia, October 2019

