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## VOCIFEROUS PROTEST AGAINST THE OLD ELITES

### BULGARIA'S YOUNG MIDDLE CLASS TAKES TO THE STREET

*Marco Arndt*

Corruption at all levels of society and in the political system, nepotism and patronage, powerful cliques and paternalism, close links between organised crime and oligarchic structures as well as parties and politicians – states that display these characteristics generally also have one other thing in common: their civil society is underdeveloped.<sup>1</sup> Elements of a well-functioning democracy, such as quality journalism, legal certainty, a functioning administration, an independent judiciary as well as policies committed solely to the good of the people, are partly or totally absent. Democratically legitimised governments also frequently polarise society because they want to excise the “mistakes” made by their predecessors. It is not uncommon for the resulting measures to cause unfavourable developments and malfunctions in the democratic system. Some examples of this can be observed in Bulgaria, such as misuse of the justice system to charge or prosecute former senior politicians, frequently via tax proceedings, or coercion of the press to produce continuously negative reporting.

However, many people throughout the world are no longer willing to endure such wrongs and engage in protests – which occasionally turn violent. It was in February 2013 that the first social protests took place in Bulgaria, followed by value-related protests by the middle class, which had previously hardly been organised at all. The demonstrations

1 | In this context, civil society means the joining together of people, the majority of whom belong to the middle class and who advocate good governance, the fight against corruption as well as efforts to curb abuses of office and nepotism.

brought down the government of Boyko Borisov (GERB) and soon turned against the entire political establishment.

## **HALTING TRANSFORMATION PROCESS IN NEW EU STATES**

In its January 2014 Transformation Index, the Bertelsmann Foundation identified such democratic deficits as well as the lack of reforms as the triggers of protest movements in numerous countries around the world.<sup>2</sup> Some states from the former so-called Eastern Bloc currently undergoing transformation, including Bulgaria, are among them. With respect to Eastern and Southeast Europe, the results of the study show that the political and economic transformation has, on average, gone into reverse and that the performance of governments has declined.<sup>3</sup> These findings apply more strongly to the Southeastern European states than those in Central and Eastern and North-

eastern Europe. While there is no danger of any of these countries developing into autocracies according to the Foundations findings, the governments are using their power to weaken monitoring mechanisms and to bolster their own positions of power, which the authors describe as "dominance-oriented power politics". Romania in particular is said to be undergoing considerable regression. But the findings for Bulgaria are sobering as well. The country's entry into the EU (2007) appears to have "so far been without any effect as regards the consolidation of the democratic political system", particularly in the area of a functioning and independent justice system.<sup>4</sup> And these findings do not even take into account the precarious political developments in Bulgaria since the change of government in May 2013, as they occurred outside the

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- 2 | Bertelsmann Stiftung, "Revolts and citizen protests around the world will continue", press release, 22 Jan 2014, [http://bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/bst/hs.xsl/nachrichten\\_119695.htm](http://bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/bst/hs.xsl/nachrichten_119695.htm) (accessed 23 Apr 2014). Examined period up to 2012.
- 3 | Bertelsmann Stiftung, "Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa. Die Krise der EU schlägt durch", [http://bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/bst/xcms\\_bst\\_dms\\_39260\\_39261\\_2.pdf](http://bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/bst/xcms_bst_dms_39260_39261_2.pdf) (accessed 23 Apr 2014).
- 4 | In the 2013 Transformation Index for Bulgaria, Freedom House states deficits in the areas of political rights and civil liberties.

reporting period. However, the activities of the governing coalition of Socialists (BSP) and the DPS party, which defines itself as liberal,<sup>5</sup> have followed the above-described pattern from the beginning and have involved exploitation of governmental powers. An added factor is the extreme social inequality in Bulgaria (and Romania). The income gap between the richest and poorest fifths of the population widened considerably during the period from 2003 to 2011, while it remained roughly stable in the other examined countries. The risk of plunging into poverty has also increased greatly in both countries.

The members of developed civil societies are affected rather less by social plight as they mostly belong to the middle class; their protest is directed against corrupt and poor governance, which undermines credibility in domestic politics and "has already upset the party landscape in some countries" according to the Bertelsmann report. The new Bulgarian government has also been facing such protests for several months now.

#### **ROLE AND SCOPE OF ACTION OF THE EU**

Bulgaria became a member of the European Union in 2007 together with Romania, although both countries did not come up to European standards with respect to the fight against corruption and against organised crime as well as a modern and independent justice system. Both states are therefore subject to the European Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM):<sup>6</sup> The European Commission reports on the progress made by the two states in the above-mentioned areas at six-monthly or annual intervals. The latest reports from January 2014, while couched in diplomatic language, indicate that Bulgaria particularly only fulfils the requirements

**The latest reports of the European Commission from January 2014, while couched in diplomatic language, indicate that Bulgaria only fulfils the requirements to a limited degree.**

5 | In fact, the DPS is the clientelist party of the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. In principle, the constitution does not permit parties based on ethnicity. The DPS is a member of the European Liberals (ALDE Party).

6 | European Commission, "The reports on progress in Bulgaria and Romania", article "Reports approved by the Commission on 22 January 2014", [http://ec.europa.eu/cvm/progress\\_reports\\_en.htm#thirteen](http://ec.europa.eu/cvm/progress_reports_en.htm#thirteen) (accessed 23 Apr 2014).

to a very limited degree.<sup>7</sup> Due to the identified deficiencies, neither country has so far been accepted as a member of the Schengen Area, although they have put in place the necessary prerequisites for controlling the external EU borders in terms of technology and personnel. Membership has been made dependent on progress in the above areas. However, the “Schengen issue” is probably no longer at the top of the political agenda in either Romania or Bulgaria.<sup>8</sup> It appears that the politicians in Bucharest and Sofia are ready to accept the role of outsider for the time being, which does not bode well. It means that Schengen membership is losing some of its importance as leverage for the EU.



“Europe Help Our Fight Against Mafia Government!”: The EU institutions may determine breaches of democratic values but have no way of sanctioning them. | Source: © KAS Bulgaria.

Otherwise, the EU has hardly any sanctions to push for reforms or to punish breaches of standards by actions such as discrimination against minorities, vilification of political opponents, polarisation of society, restricting the freedom of the media, manipulating the justice system

- 7 | European Commission, “Report From The Commission To The European Parliament And The Council On Progress in Bulgaria under the Co-operation and Verification Mechanism”, SWD(2014) 36 final, [http://ec.europa.eu/cvm/docs/com\\_2014\\_36\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/cvm/docs/com_2014_36_en.pdf) (accessed 23 Apr 2014).
- 8 | The Borisov government (2009 to 2013) had placed membership high on its agenda back in 2011/2012.

and weakening the separation of powers.<sup>9</sup> Article 7 of the EU Treaty (EUT) provides a certain amount of leverage. The European Council can determine breaches of values as laid down in Article 2 of the EUT. The sanctioning mechanisms, particularly the suspension of transfer payments, are indeed suitable to act as effective disincentives against breaches of law, but the mechanism is not that workable due to the majorities that the voting process entails. Breaches of democratic values can also be determined by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights or the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. However, like the CVM reports, their votes will at best serve to “blame and shame”. “There is currently no convincing and workable mechanism to rectify democratic deficits in EU states.”<sup>10</sup> This prompts the bitter realisation that EU membership can guarantee neither prosperity nor functioning political systems.

This brief glance at the EU’s scope of action for exerting some influence is of importance because the civil society protest movement in Bulgaria time and again looks to Brussels, hoping to obtain help from that quarter in view of its own obvious state of powerlessness. The EU is held in high regard in Bulgaria, and not only because of the financial support. The protestors suspect that the actions of the governing elites are undermining the country’s association with the West and putting the European sense of values into question. To date, the EU has lost nothing of its prestige or allure, even though Brussels’ above-mentioned scope of action means that it

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9 | See also Timm Beichelt, “Von Steinen und Glashäusern”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 Dec 2013. However Beichelt, professor in European Studies in Frankfurt/Oder, states that democratic deficits are not limited to the transformation states in Central and Eastern Europe, but are a “trans-European phenomenon”. He believes that one can no longer speak of a general gap between old and new EU Member States. Approximately one third of EU states have democratic deficits, particularly in Southeastern Europe (Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Romania and Hungary).

10 | Cf. *ibid.* This diagnosis of powerlessness may also be the cause of the link established between the above-mentioned Schengen Area membership and progress in the reform efforts; membership thereby unintentionally and indirectly becomes a sanctioning mechanism, although that is not envisaged in the Schengen Agreement.

can only provide marginal assistance to the protest movement in its efforts to overcome the political crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Judged by formal criteria, democracy functions in Bulgaria. The country does not merely pay lip service to democracy, and it does not violate EU treaties. The newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* summarises the situation as follows: "It is sometimes virtually impossible to differentiate between the normal manifestations of a democratic community and the pathological symptoms of corruption pervading all political forces and the state".<sup>12</sup> During the nearly 25 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the old communist elites have brought wide swathes of the state and large parts of the economy under their control, which they exploit to benefit and prosper themselves and their networks, probably including funds from EU coffers since 2007. One cannot take any comfort from the fact that the groupings do not form a monolithic bloc, but are in dispute with one another. On the face of it, it is the government in Sofia that takes decisions, but one can assume that the people holding the real power are pulling the strings in the background. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to analyse political events. Added to this is the fact that interests and decision-making processes are very volatile. The EU would therefore be well advised to keep a close eye on where Bulgaria's political development is heading; less trust, closer monitoring and some straight talking would no doubt be of benefit.

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### **FIRST WAVE OF PROTEST IN FEBRUARY 2013: SOCIAL PROTESTS**

How did what was already a precarious situation become exacerbated? On 20 February 2013, Prime Minister Borisov announced the resignation of his center-right cabinet, just

11 | Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Justice, visited Sofia at the height of the protests on 23 July 2013 and supported the protest movement. "EU Commissioner Viviane Reding Backs Bulgarian Protests", Novinite, 23 Jul 2013, [http://novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=152268](http://novinite.com/view_news.php?id=152268) (accessed 23 Apr 2014).

12 | Reinhard Vesper, "Bulgarische Misere", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 Jul 2013.

short of six months before the scheduled end of his term in office. This had been preceded by sudden and unexpected demonstrations by tens of thousands of people throughout the country, which had reached their zenith three days before the resignation. The protests had been prompted by drastic rises in electricity bills, which many people could no longer afford to pay. Particularly in winter, many Bulgarians use electricity to heat their homes as they have no alternative. The price of electricity can therefore be described as the new “price of bread” and the protests consequently as social protests.<sup>13</sup> There are a fair number of similar issues to potentially spark further such demonstrations in the country and many observers wondered that the Bulgarians had been stoically enduring the bad economic conditions for so long. Next to Romania, Bulgaria is still the poorest country of the EU. But it is also one of the most stable ones in terms of its fiscal situation. It fulfils all Maastricht criteria without difficulty, a fact that cannot be overestimated in view of the crisis affecting its neighbour Greece.



Boiko Borissov: In February 2013 the former Prime Minister announced the resignation of his center-right cabinet. | Source: David Plas, European People’s Party (EPP), flickr ©©.

13 | One of the leading political analysts, the political scientist Ognyan Minchev from the University of Sofia, thought the protests were being controlled by pro-Russian oligarchs because Borisov had, crucially, stopped the construction of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant, one of the most important Russian energy projects in the country.

However, this budgetary stability comes at a high price. Incomes are extremely low and have not risen in years; in most cases, pensions are below subsistence level for most retired people. In February 2013, 1.5 million people (20.4 per cent) were living below the poverty line. They had less than 215 leva (approximately 110 euros) per capita per month to live on; 2.5 million Bulgarians (34.2 per cent) have an income below the minimum wage level of 340 leva, 2.3 million (31.5 per cent) below the 565 leva deemed the true cost of living. Only one million of Bulgarians (13.7 per cent) have an income above this level. Other income not included in the statistics, such as that acquired through illicit work or from transfer payments made by Bulgarians living abroad, and the fact that almost all Bulgarians own their own home only alleviate the situation to an insignificant degree.<sup>14</sup> The Bulgarian social protests can therefore no doubt be seen as a movement against the government's austerity program. This indicates that the need for savings measures can only be conveyed convincingly if they are accompanied by significant modernisation and a noticeable improvement in living standards.

The resignation of Borisov's cabinet and the announcement of new elections as well as a reduction in the price of electricity by a few per cent calmed the situation in the country.

There have been no further social protests since, although the economic situation of the population has not improved under the new government either. This might be due to the fact that the majority of the demonstrators were and remain followers of the Socialists, which is why the inhibition threshold for protests is now clearly higher than would be the case under a center-right government. Some analysts also believe that the Socialist Party had encouraged the protests in order to bring down the Conservatives. Also, the 2013/2014 winter has not been nearly as severe as the previous one and energy consumption has therefore been lower. Nonetheless, due to the economic situation, there remains considerable potential for social protests in Bulgaria, which could be activated at any time and which any government should anticipate.

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## **ROLL-BACK TO FORMER TIMES? THE GOVERNMENT IS CAUSING POLARISATION**

New elections were held in mid-May 2013, from which GERB emerged as the strongest force. But they could not find a coalition partner, and so the BSP under Sergei Stanishev<sup>15</sup> joined forces with the DPS to form the government. However, this coalition needs the acquiescence of the right-wing extremist Ataka party due to the stalemate situation<sup>16</sup> in the National Assembly.

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From the beginning, the new government has caused polarisation in the country through measures that have not only outraged Bulgarian civil society with its Western outlook, but also caused great concern among some of the EU partners. State resources were used to weaken the opposition at all levels down to the lower ranks, particularly within the administration, without any concern for proper qualifications and at grave risk of losing expertise and experience.<sup>17</sup> This policy, which is pushing at the limits of legitimacy, called German Ambassador Matthias Höpfner and his French colleague Philippe Autie<sup>18</sup> onto the scene. In a joint newspaper interview, they sided openly with the demonstrators and advocated an active

15 | Born in 1966 in Ukraine to a Russian mother and a father who was a member of the BCP politburo. He studied at universities in Moscow and London. Prime Minister from 2005 to 2009, BSP party leader since 2001. In 2013, Stanishev cleverly avoided taking control of government business. He sent the independent Plamen Oresharski into the race. The BSP has its roots in the BCP, and has still not made a definitive break with the past.

16 | The Socialists and the DPS won over 120 of the 240 seats.

17 | See also: Marco Arndt, "Bulgarien wieder am Scheideweg?", KAS Country Report, 18 Jun 2013, <http://kas.de/bulgarien/de/publications/34745> (accessed 23 Apr 2014); "Proteste in Bulgarien dauern an", KAS Bulgaria, 28 Jun 2013, <http://kas.de/bulgarien/de/publications/34868> (accessed 23 Apr 2014). The government replaced the incumbents in some 3,000 positions (others speak of up to 6,000) with persons from the old guard or with former agents of the state security agency (DS); this applies to 30 per cent of the directorships at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for instance, as well as the directorship of the state archives.

18 | When Autie was transferred by rotation several months later he did not receive the Stara Planina order, which is usually given to departing ambassadors; this was tantamount to an insult.

civil society. Höpfner said that there was no place for the “oligarchic model” in the EU.<sup>19</sup> Although Minister of Foreign Affairs Kristian Vigenin, former foreign affairs secretary of the BSP, explained in a meeting with the ambassadors that the problems they referred to had developed over a number of years and could therefore not be laid at the door of the new government, that government’s first appointment decisions<sup>20</sup> demonstrated very clearly that it intends to perpetuate precisely this deplorable state of affairs. First, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that he intended to reinstate former ambassadors tainted by links to the former state security agency (DS). The GERB government had only been able to recall them after the election of Rosen Plevneliev as new President<sup>21</sup> in 2012 because the socialist President Georgi Parvanov, himself a former agent of the Bulgarian state security agency, had refused to countersign the orders. Under pressure from the media and an announcement by Plevneliev that he in turn would not countersign the accreditations the government gave up on its plan. However, persons from that circle were appointed to lower-ranking positions, for instance those of deputy ambassador, as that did not require any countersignature.<sup>22</sup>

This political hot potato of “DS ambassadors” clearly reveals the divide between anti-socialist politics oriented towards the West and intent on breaking with the communist past and its consequences, and old-time politics looking back to

19 | “Botschafter Matthias Höpfner: Bulgarien ist beliebter Investitionsstandort, aber mit einigen Defiziten”, *Radio Bulgaria*, 21 Dec 2013, <http://bnr.bg/de/post/100276972> (accessed 23 Apr 2014). To express their thanks to the two diplomats, the demonstrators built a “Berlin Wall” out of cardboard boxes in front of the German embassy in July and toppled it in a symbolic act. On Bastille Day, an actress played out the role of “Liberty” bare-breasted in front of the French embassy, making reference to the 1789 picture of the French Revolution by Eugène Delacroix. Beyond serving as gestures of gratitude, these two actions symbolised the people’s wish for their own Bulgarian revolution or for the 1989 revolution to come to fruition.

20 | Further examples of obscure appointment decisions in: “Nichts als Spott”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 Jul 2013.

21 | The competences of the Bulgarian President are similar to those of the German Federal President, i.e. he has hardly any political power.

22 | Approximately 30 per cent of directorships in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were filled with former DS employees.

the old order with all that entails. The divide also seems to run between those of a basically pro-European stance and those who view the EU merely pragmatically and value it predominantly for its financial contributions. It seems that standards are not adhered to out of conviction but merely as a formal prerequisite to gain material benefits.

### **SECOND WAVE OF PROTESTS IN THE SUMMER OF 2013: VALUE-RELATED PROTESTS**

The second wave of protests in Bulgaria was set off by an appointment decision. On 14 June 2013, the National Assembly appointed media mogul and oligarch Delyan Peevski<sup>23</sup> as the new head of the Bulgarian State Security Agency (DANS).<sup>24</sup> The vote was put onto the agenda during a National Assembly session, which made it akin to a surprise coup. Only the previous day, the corresponding law had been changed by adapting the criteria to match the candidate so he could be voted into the post.

**In 2007 Peevski already became involved in corruption scandals and was accused of having misappropriated millions in the course of the privatisation of companies.**

Peevski, now 34 years of age and a lawyer by profession, took over the post of parliamentary secretary at the Transport Ministry at the age of 21 under the government of "Tsar" Simeon (2001-2005) and subsequently became an executive director of the Port of Varna. In 2005, he worked at the Sofia public prosecutor's office as an investigator for seven months, although he did not have the necessary qualifications. Subsequently, he served as a deputy minister in the so-called three-way coalition (2005 to 2009).<sup>25</sup> During this period (in 2007), he already became involved in corruption scandals and was accused of having misappropriated millions in the course of the privatisation of companies. DANS and the Organised Crime

23 | A more detailed portrait: Klaus Brill, "Mann im Schatten", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 7 Oct 2013, <http://sueddeutsche.de/medien/1.1788579> (accessed 23 Apr 2014).

24 | Shortly beforehand, the power of DANS had been increased significantly by the allocation of the Department for the Fight against Organised Crime, which made DANS the key government authority in matters of security and endowed it with police powers. These measures caused concern among European partners. DANS, previously comparable to the German "Verfassungsschutz" (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) was turning into a "Bulgarian FBI".

25 | It consisted of the BSP, the DPS and the NDSV ("Tsarist party" of Simeon II of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha).

Department, which were supposed to come under his control in 2013, carried out investigations against him at that time – although no charges were brought in the end. In late 2009, he became a DPS MP.

Peevski's career was furthered substantially by his mother Irena Krasteva, manager of the state lottery company. Together with her son, she succeeded in taking over the lion's share of the newspaper market, a television station and the majority of the distribution network for print media over the years, although it is not clear how she financed all this. As a result, the two now enjoy a virtual monopoly on opinion-forming in the Bulgarian print media. Knowledgeable observers further maintain that Peevski is a frontman for Tzvetan Vassilev, one of the richest and most influential Bulgarians, owner of the "Corporate Commercial Bank". Vassilev is a member of the old guard, which has dominated the Bulgarian economy to a large degree since 1989.

He holds shares in virtually all areas of business in Bulgaria: newspapers, luxury foods, electronics, the tobacco industry, banks and insurance companies, the automotive trade, etc. In addition, it is highly likely that Achmed

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Dogan, long-time leader of the DPS until January 2013 as well as an influential businessman and ex-DS agent, also exerts substantial influence over Peevski. This soon led to the suspicion that Peevski was merely a frontman asserting the interests of Vassilev and Dogan. As head of DANS and owner of numerous print media, Peevski would have become one of the most powerful men in the country, which explains the dynamic and the duration of the protests. However, it remains unclear as to which interests he was ultimately meant to serve, oligarchic, party-political or even Russian ones.

The vote in favour of Peevski's appointment led to major but largely peaceful demonstrations on the same day, which lasted past the weekend. In Sofia alone, 10,000 people took to the streets on that Friday until midnight. President Plevneliev called upon the National Assembly to reverse its decision, announced that he had lost confidence in the government and convened the National Security Council. He has been under massive attack from the Peevski media ever since.

The speedy protest reaction, mostly organised via the Internet, took the main players by surprise, but most of all the government. The protest is an encouraging sign of the development of a civil society in Bulgaria that has a Western outlook. Like totalitarian systems, the oligarchic system relies on a passive society, whose members are either dependent on the system or endure it in silence. That is the only way appointments such as that attempted in the case of Peevski could be pushed through successfully. Apparently, this is no longer possible in Bulgaria due to the incipient emergence of civil society.



Mainly peaceful protest: In the summer of 2013 several thousand people took to the streets and demanded the government's resignation and new elections. | Source: © KAS Bulgaria.

The protests put the European Social Democrats (PES) in a difficult position, as Sergei Stanishev is not just the leader of the Bulgarian Socialists, but also leader of the PES. While he drew some criticism from the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, and the PES parliamentary group chairman Hannes Swoboda, both of them as well as the PES leadership pronounced their confidence in the Socialist at a conference in Sofia, in line with the usual reflex of fundamental solidarity within the respective family of European parties.<sup>26</sup> Under the influence of events, Peevski offered not to take up the office on the very day of his appointment, and he then made good on this offer.

26 | "Geheimdienstchef abberufen", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 Jul 2013. While Stanishev was not a member of the government, he did exert considerable influence over its decisions. He was also criticised by people from his own ranks.

However, this climb-down did not calm the situation; every day, several thousands of people took to the streets in Sofia, now demanding the government's resignation and new elections. They had realised that the affair around Peevski's appointment was only the tip of the iceberg and that similar appointments, albeit less prominent ones, would follow in other areas – a suspicion that proved to be justified. In mid-June, the Deputy Minister of the Interior was forced to abandon his office after just four hours when it emerged that he had belonged to a Mafia-style organisation in the nineties.

### OLD CADRES AGAINST NEW MIDDLE CLASS

The "Peevski case" is a symbolic illustration of how shamelessly the oligarchic system is infiltrating and controlling the government.

Almost 25 years on from the "made-up revolution";<sup>27</sup> people from the old guard are still occupying key positions in the economy and in society. Through the established networks, their children enjoy substantially better (starting) opportunities than those Bulgarians who grew up without these connections. As probably the bitterest legacy of communism, access to positions is being controlled by family clans and corporate interests, keeping out outsiders. It is connections that count rather than achievements. Yet the correlations between the networks and the mechanisms whereby power is exercised remain hidden. This lack of transparency fuels uncertainty and makes it difficult to find concepts to combat the model.

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One thing is certain: it produces people who lose out. Those who have experienced this for years in spite of a good education are now being joined by a new generation of losers; these are the young, who are also well educated but still have no prospects. The recent protests are therefore of a different nature than the social protests of February 2013. They are the protests of a new middle class, a civil society of citizens who are no longer willing to endure the prevailing conditions. What they are interested in is the

27 | Title of a book by Ilja Trojanov, in which he illustrates that while there has been a regime change in Bulgaria, there has not been a change in elite: Ilja Trojanov, *Die fingierte Revolution*, Munich, 1999.

realisation of values; they want Bulgarian politics to change its character, not just in style but also in substance:<sup>28</sup> Parents with small children demonstrated peacefully with intelligent slogans on home-made placards; next to them were people in their twenties, born in the period following the fall of the Iron Curtain and therefore without any memory of communism. For them, it is the first time, while many of the older people had participated in previous protests back in 1989 or 1997,<sup>29</sup> but not taken to the streets since. Others had preferred to seek their fortune abroad – a brain drain, which is affecting Bulgaria not merely economically but also politically.

**The discontent meet up in front of the building housing the Council of Ministers every evening, chanting their slogans before marching through the city.**

Some of them have returned, influenced by having lived and worked in foreign Western countries.<sup>30</sup> They want to stay and engender change. The discontent meet up in front of the building housing the Council of Ministers every evening after a day at work or university, chanting their slogans before marching through the city center. They are done by 9 p.m. because they need to return to work the next day. Everybody is united in the feeling of having been “repeatedly cheated” over the years.<sup>31</sup> They trust none of the established parties; and no wonder, seeing what has happened during those 25 years. Without confidence in the political elite, democracy cannot function in Bulgaria in the long term either. However, in view of the fact that the political class has been thoroughly discredited, only very few upstanding and bright people are brave enough to enter politics – a vicious circle.

**BRIEF ESCALATION AND MARGINALISATION OF THE PROTESTS**

The government did not and still does not know how to handle people’s demands for good governance, against the oligarchic model and for prospects in their own country.

28 | Antony Galabov, “Civil participation and the uprising of the ‘new losers’”, *One World*, No. 148, 2013, 16-17.

29 | The year of hyperinflation in Bulgaria. The protests during that year brought down the socialist government.

30 | Ambassador Höpfner coined the term “ERASMUS Generation” for the university students returning home.

31 | Georgi Gospodinow, “Der protestierende Mensch ist schön”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 Jun 2013, <http://nzz.ch/aktuell/feuilleton/uebersicht/1.18106078> (accessed 23 Apr 2014). Gospodinov is a writer and publicist living in Sofia.

It would be easier to distribute largesse to the population. The government is sitting out the protests to this day, ignoring the people and their demands. This has been causing frustration and resulted in some first minor clashes with the police in mid-July,<sup>32</sup> when demonstrators attempted to remove some barriers from in front of the National Assembly that were being used to secure an extended security zone around the building. On the evening of 23 July 2013, the 40<sup>th</sup> consecutive day of protest, the situation escalated.<sup>33</sup> The budget committee had been holding a meeting at the National Assembly during the evening to discuss the supplementary budget. At the end of the meeting, the MPs and employees, some one hundred people in total, found that the protesting demonstrators were blocking them in. At approximately 10 p.m., the police decided to evacuate them in buses, but this was prevented by force. Projectiles hit one bus and there were bloody confrontations with the police. 17 people, including five policemen, were injured. The blockade was not abandoned until later that night. During the following days, the demonstration marches once again passed off peacefully as usual as if nothing had happened. Stanishev indirectly blamed the escalation on the President<sup>34</sup> as well as other parties, who had supported the protesters. But nothing has changed where government activities are concerned.

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However accurate the analyses of the underlying ill and however justified the demands for the government's resignation and for system reform may be, the protest movement has lacked concrete alternative proposals from the beginning, some of its suggestions being utterly utopian.<sup>35</sup> There has been no central organisation, and no leadership personalities have emerged. The fear of being infiltrated or instrumentalised was too great. There were no stages or speakers at the demonstrations. The demonstrating

32 | The police are stretched to the limit by the continuous daily deployment.

33 | "Proteste in Bulgarien: Minister und Abgeordnete sitzen stundenlang im Parlament fest", *Spiegel Online*, 24 Jul 2013, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/a-912739.html> (accessed 23 Apr 2014).

34 | He had, however, previously expressly warned against an escalation.

35 | Petyo Tsekov, "Was there a Bulgarian 'spring'?", *One World*, No. 148, 2013, 12-13.



crowds consisted of numerous groups, which arranged to meet over the Internet. This produced a heterogeneous mass of people, united merely in their negative demand for the government to resign. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported the following quotation by the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev in relation to the protests:

**Considering the power and ingrained nature of the oligarchy, there is in fact no quick solution, and its disempowerment is therefore not likely to happen even in the medium term.**

"They want change, but they have no clear idea of what this change should consist of; they are brilliant in devising political gestures but weak where practical politics are concerned."<sup>36</sup> The citizens have no concept

and no course of action for achieving the goal of a modern political system freed from the clutches of the oligarchs. Considering the power and ingrained nature of the oligarchy, there is in fact no quick solution, and its disempowerment is therefore not likely to happen even in the medium term. Against this backdrop, the demands for resignation are short-sighted as this would trigger new elections, which would merely bring old established parties back to power, although almost half of all Bulgarians would like to see a "new beginning", as surveys show.<sup>37</sup>

The protests are mostly restricted to Sofia. There have been smaller demonstrations in Varna and Plovdiv, which did not last for long. However, there was a case of self-immolation in Varna back in February, which drew a great deal of attention.<sup>38</sup> Plamen Goranov set himself on fire in protest against Mayor Kiril Yordanov, who was known as a man aligned with the powerful oligarchs of the Varna TIM group. Several days after the event, Yordanov resigned from office under pressure from the ongoing protests.

36 | Michael Martens, "Ihr Vaterland ist die Welt", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 Feb 2014.

37 | Ilija Trojanow, "Auf verlorenem Posten", *taz.die tageszeitung*, 28 Aug 2013.

38 | Markus Bernath, "Selbstverbrennung in Bulgarien: Ein neuer Jan Palach", *Der Standard*, 23 Feb 2013, <http://derstandard.at/1361240908688> (accessed 23 Apr 2014). Norbert Mappes-Niediek, "Selbstverbrennung gegen organisierte Kriminalität", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 7 Mar 2013, <http://fr-online.de/1472596,22024274.html> (accessed 23 Apr 2014). Further cases of self-immolation followed, 13 of them with fatal consequences.

The fact that the demonstrations mainly remained restricted to Sofia also illustrates that civil society requires a metropolitan environment to be able to emerge, grow and act. In many smaller towns, protests were prevented by threats and intimidation. Consequently, the wave of protest died down in the heat of the summer without the energy having engendered the formation of a new political organisation or a new party. After the summer break, it did not reach anything like the force it had in the beginning, even though students in Sofia demonstrated solidarity at the beginning of the semester, "went on strike" and occupied the university. Having said that, there are still several dozen, and occasionally even several hundred, intrepid demonstrators who regularly assemble in front of the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers building.

Has the protest movement failed? So far, it has not achieved its major aim, namely to bring down the government and produce a shift in policy – although the demand for resignation does have a chance of being realised. The disempowerment of the oligarchic circles, however, is a far more difficult task, which could only be realised in the long term, if ever. The protest movement was capable of preventing Delyan Peevski from taking office as head of the State Security Agency, and it has proved that there is now such a thing as civil society in Bulgaria. It is a tender shoot in the process of growth, which has not taken deep root in society as yet. It was a different story in former times, but communism eradicated the civic elite totally. The old cadres will do what they can to oppose any revitalisation in order to maintain their own powers. A full 25 years on from the revolution, Bulgaria is still in the middle of a transformation process, whose end is nowhere yet in sight.