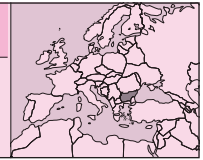


BULGARIA

Divided movements, divided rights



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Introduction

Thousands of people crowded on the streets of Sofia, Varna, and Bulgaria's other major cities in the first months of 2013 demanding change and immediate reforms in government. But unlike previous waves of protest over the past two decades, this time it was not about removing one party from power and replacing it with another. The crowds now chanted against all political parties together, both ruling and opposition. What had ignited a spark in 2012 as an environmentalist protest against unlimited construction in the country's pristine natural areas has now expanded into a firestorm of social and civil society demands against corporate monopolies, overwhelming corruption, privatisation of the national railways, and ever tightening austerity. Demands were made by civil society for reforms that would guarantee adequate public participation in decision making, transparency, access to justice, fairer politics, and improved living standards. The wave of anti-status-quo protests reached its peak in February, when the centre-right government of Boyko Borissov (a police general and former security guard) resigned, the parliament disassembled, and preliminary elections were scheduled for May.

The purpose of this article is to examine the way in which women's, gender and LGBT rights movements and activists have been part of these recent developments in Bulgaria, touching on the role of the internet in creating virtual communities.

Policy and political background

In what appears to mark an important new stage in Bulgaria's post-socialist developments, civil society has reacted decisively against democratic and economic dysfunctions¹ that had accumulated over the period commonly described as "transition"². A problematic

concept in itself,³ "transition" implies a unidirectional development from something supposedly ultimately evil (dictatorial state socialism) to a supposed capitalist paradise of democracy and market economy. This concept has been instrumental in sidelining and marginalising critical thought, and preventing alternative solutions and views of how society should operate, paving the way for a prevailing discourse which prioritises economic development and financial profit over collective and social interest.⁴

Although the development of civil society has been largely influenced by this mainstream discourse, "islands" of resistance have taken shape around issues and problems of collective interest, such as the protection of nature, endemic poverty, quality of health care and education, access to justice, and the rights of minorities. In this context gender rights have also received attention. Civil society structures around these issues have consisted mostly of project-based grant-funded NGOs and policy think tanks. Grassroots activism and participation has been relatively rare, concentrated around specific issues (e.g. threats on protected areas, changes to family laws, etc.) or occasions (e.g. Sofia Pride – the annual LGBT parade), and very few organisations have enjoyed sustainable membership across the past decades.

Growing access to the internet,⁵ and particularly Facebook and other social networks, have brought change to this picture. The internet and social networks have offered a medium for unlimited communication and exchange of ideas and thoughts, which has compensated for the decline of independent mass media and deteriorating standards of journalism and freedom of speech in Bulgaria.⁶ Arguably the internet and social networks have

- 1 Brunwasser, M. (2009) Bulgaria Still Stuck in Trauma of Transition, *New York Times*, 10 November. www.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/world/europe/11iht-bulgaria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- 2 Smith, A. and Pickles, J. (1998) Introduction: Theorising transition and the political economy of transformation, in *The Political Economy of Post-Communist Transformations*, Routledge, London.

- 3 Welsh, H. A. (1994) Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe, *Comparative Politics*, 26(4), p. 379-394. www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/422022?uid=3737608&uid=2134&uid=2474118273&uid=2&uid=70&uid=3&uid=2474118263&uid=60&uid=21102634803483
- 4 Smith, A. and Rochovská, A. (2007) Domesticating neo-liberalism: Everyday lives and the geographies of post-socialist transformations, *Geoforum*, 38, p. 1163-1178.
- 5 Internet World Stats (2010) *Bulgaria: Internet Usage and Population Statistics*. www.internetworldstats.com/eu/bg.htm
- 6 Reporters Without Borders (2013) *World Press Freedom Index*. fr.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/classement_2013_gb-bd.pdf

gradually become the primary field for social engagement, participation, and intellectual and political debate, with developments in real-life spaces and institutions appearing often as mere reflections of what is happening in this virtual “world”. At the same time, processes, dynamics and tensions in the outside world have often been aggregated and extended in the social media space. Unpredictable and volatile, net-based activism came in to complement actual real-life social movements, increasingly standing in as a substitute for them where they had been absent.

Defending the rights of minorities

Influenced by different stereotypes and prejudices, few Bulgarians are prepared to defend the rights of minorities, including LGBT minorities. “Bulgarian democracy is not yet in that stage that the majority cares about the minority; the minority has to justify the lack of equal rights,” said Monika Pisankaneva,⁷ an LGBT rights activist and founder of Bilitis Resource Centre Foundation. In her view, Bulgaria’s government has achieved the minimum standard, for example, with the Anti-Discrimination Act, through which it has complied with EU accession requirements. But few further steps have been made since 2007 when Bulgaria joined the EU. Bulgarian societal attitudes toward homosexual, bisexual or transsexual people can still be categorised as negative. According to a 2012 report by Amnesty International,⁸ unjustified violence against these groups persists, with a lack of concern shown by state institutions.

There were minor improvements over the past two years, mostly due to increased access to the internet, which has made it possible for people to organise protests on the streets. Through the new channels of communication, various civil society movements have arrived at a common ground, and formulated common demands, such as transparency of institutions and civic oversight of their operations. However, interestingly, this cohesion was not sustained. Referring to the recent protests in Bulgaria’s major cities, Tatyana Kmetova,⁹ executive director of the Centre of Women’s Studies and Policies (CWSP) Foundation explains: “The February 2013 protests were organised through social media. When people communicated in forums or

social media there was a high level of agreement between them. However, when they went onto the street, they couldn’t articulate a common message. They immediately divided and started to fight. They started fighting in conventional media against each other.”

The primary discussion within the LGBT community emerged over the possibility of modifying the constitution. “If there is going to be a revision of the constitution, of course the LGBT movement will demand that it be changed on the topic of marriage,” Pisankaneva explains. However, advocating openly about LGBT rights has been difficult. Stana Iliev,¹⁰ a German activist in Sofia, confirms that “nobody was asking for social change in the sense of, we have to respect minorities, be more aware of gender.” Iliev, a Red Cross social worker, has also seen a change inside Bulgarian society in her five-year stay in the capital city: “For sure, civil movements increased tremendously and social media have a big role in this.” Some of the LGBT activists participate in the protests, but do not represent their struggle, and even hide their homosexual identity, Pisankaneva adds.

Fear of rejection, aggressiveness, prejudices and hate are some of the reasons that stopped the LGBT collective from taking part in the last protest in Bulgaria. As reported by Pisankaneva: “LGBT people simply don’t know how people will react. It’s a common prejudice that LGBT people are demanding special rights. Maybe if LGBT people go with their own demands as part of a national protest, people from the other protest will start beating them or something.”

At the same time, prominent LGBT activists have engaged with other causes, not necessarily linked with the values and goals of the movement. For instance, lesbian activist Desislava Petrova (alias Soldier) has joined a freedom of choice movement whose primary focus is in favour of tobacco smoking and against recently adopted legislation that prohibits it in public. This has been met with some disapproval. “It is worrying to see an LGBT activist joining forces with industry front groups against a piece of legislation which aims to resolve a problem that has proven to have grave effects on women and young girls in Bulgaria,” commented Dr. Masha Gavrilova, a co-founder of the Women Against Tobacco Society and a former public health official.

Gender and women’s rights issues did not get a prominent place in the course of the recent protests, either. While many individual women led and participated in the protests, few organisations

7 Monika Pisankaneva, personal interview, 17 April 2013.

8 Amnesty International (2012) *Changing laws, changing minds: Challenging homophobic and transphobic hate crimes in Bulgaria*. www.ilga-europe.org/home/guide_europe/country_by_country/bulgaria/changing_laws_changing_minds_challenging_homophobic_and_transphobic_hate_crimes_in_bulgaria

9 Tatyana Kmetova, personal interview, 19 April 2013.

10 Stana Iliev, personal interview, 18 April 2013.

placed special emphasis on it. According to Kmetova, women were present and participated, but without raising their specific voices and demands. She explains that women were visible and active and their presence in the protests was even better justified because they are more affected by issues such as rising prices, but civil organisations related to women did not seem to be present. The reason for this lies in the common misperception of feminism, dating from the days of state socialism, Kmetova believes. Back then, feminism was seen to be a decadent concept promoted by the West. For her part, Krassimira Daskalova¹¹ points at the persistence of stereotypical myths among feminists, which contribute to the persistence of a gap between the sexes: there is the common myth of women's emancipation and full gender equality in the labour market, and the myth that women have the same status as men in education.

A strengthening of civil society action using ICTs can be seen in a number of examples on the internet. With regard to the women's rights movement, the BG-Mamma Forum¹² is a good illustration. Through a virtual forum, its members discuss issues that are common to Bulgarian mothers, and they gather on the streets when negative measures are taken by the government. As for the LGBT rights movement, you find small protests, such as the one organised by the youth organisation Deystvie in November 2009 in the town of Pazardzhik.¹³

Still, the most paradigmatic example in gay rights is the pride parade that has taken place in Sofia every June since 2008. Since then, this demonstration has become the most powerful tool for the LGBT movement to express their discontent in Bulgarian society. Sofia Pride attracts a lot of people who do not participate in the event, but "like" it through Facebook and express their positive attitudes towards it online, said Pisankaneva.

Not everyone has remained inactive. Still far from achieving rights such as legal marriage or adoption for LGBT people, organisations like Bilitis and LGBT Deystvie in the capital city and LGBT Plovdiv in Plovdiv have been struggling for the self-confidence and self-reliance of LGBT people in Bulgaria. Explaining the movement's actions, Marko Markov¹⁴ clarified

that it "is focused on the community itself" and its members "encourage people to come out."

Markov, who claims to have met almost all the LGBT people in Sofia, says that some cannot even imagine always being gay and raising a family as gay people. "They will eventually marry someone of the opposite sex and hide their homosexuality for the rest of their lives," he says. Markov, a 27-year-old activist, maintains that the main challenge of the movement is "coming out". The problem in Bulgaria is that the LGBT community is largely hidden and people are not open to accepting them, he believes. "When you go out and talk about gay couples and their needs it is like talking about the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus," Markov adds with a smile.

The persistence of negative and stereotypical myths inside their own community suggests that the movement has started in a hostile environment. "A lot of gay people believe in the homophobic lies: that gay people should not have children because they will become homosexual as well; that gay people are not normal. I've heard one of them say that it's disgusting for two men to hold hands on the street," said Markov. This movement's members still need to deal with the acceptance of their own identities.

Indeed, during the Communist era, LGBT people were thought to be the result of the moral decline of Western countries. Despite an increase in women's rights during the socialist period, LGBT rights were totally restricted. As a consequence, there were strict laws against them, which remained in force until 2002, when the EU accession process began.

In comparison to the LGBT rights struggle in Bulgaria, gender equality movements have a longer history of development. As a consequence of the socialist regime, "Bulgaria had the highest [percentage of] employed women in the world by the end of Communism," according to the executive director of CWSP Foundation. With the fall of Communism, she maintains, the plight of women became worse, with women running the risk of falling into poverty and sexual exploitation.¹⁵

The impact of patriarchal values on the gender rights struggle is a matter of disagreement within the movement. According to Kmetova, in the last 20 years Bulgaria has reproduced Western traditional roles, with women desiring to stay at home. For Pisankaneva, socialist ideology did not eliminate patriarchal relationships. In "The Forbidden Fruit:

11 Daskalova, K. (n.d.) Bulgarian Women's history and socialist myths, CWSP, Sofia. www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/history_and_myths_en.pdf

12 Shenter, O., Stoyanov, A. and Yordanova, M. (eds.) (2010) BG-Mamma.com: From discussions through advocacy to charity, in Civil Society in Bulgaria: Trends and Risks, Center for Study of Democracy, Sofia.

13 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Bulgaria

14 Marko Markov, personal interview, 17 April 2013.

15 Gorse, K. (2004) Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women's Emancipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria, *L'Homme European Journal of Feminist History*, 1, p. 15. www.academia.edu/225663/_Red_Nostalgia_Communist_Womens_Emanicipation_and_Economic_Transformation_in_Bulgaria

Sexuality in Communist Bulgaria”,¹⁶ she claims that gender equality was just a slogan that reflected the economic vision of the socialist movement, and that patriarchal values dominated in the vast majority of Bulgarian families.

Nowadays, four networks of NGOs, two trade unions and other important international organisations¹⁷ devote themselves to defending women in the social, political and economic spheres in Bulgaria. Although disagreements persist, they have managed to address most issues, such as domestic violence, labour market gender gaps, trafficking of women, the need for gender parity policies, etc.

Perhaps because of a lack of self-confidence, there are only a few activists behind the LGBT movement. Around the country, Markov has counted no more than 20 or 30 activists. This is one of the reasons why Stana Iliev was asked to participate for the first time in 2010 in the organisation of Sofia Pride. At some point in her stay in Bulgaria she decided to become an activist: “The longer I stayed here, the more frustrated I became. I couldn’t say I got angry, but I got, like, annoyed by constantly having to defend basic human rights.” Despite the fact that she considers Bulgaria “more progressive than other countries,” she believes there is no awareness about gender stereotypes.

Conclusions

Women’s, gender and LGBT rights groups had a low profile in the civil society protests of January-February 2013 in Bulgaria, in spite of their members’ access to ICTs and activism on social networks. The LGBT movement is prominent online. Analyst Monika Pisankaneva confirms that the members of this activist community define themselves mostly as a virtual community. The main reasons for this lie in civil society dynamics, unfavourable social attitudes and the inadequate role of the state.

Civil society organisations lack proper engagement with the rights of gender minorities. Although Bulgarian citizens are demanding a change in the political, economic and social systems, the demands of minorities – including gender minorities – are not listened to or even accepted. But an increase in the number of participants in Sofia Pride has shown that there is an improvement in this respect, mostly thanks to social media like Facebook.

Participants interviewed for this research have confirmed that the LGBT rights struggle is very far

from achieving its goals. Rejection and hate against this collective have had a negative influence on their own self-reliance and self-confidence. A slow process to improve the situation has already started. However, society’s attitudes and behaviour are supported by the negative speech of political institutions.

With regard to women’s rights, Bulgaria’s situation still needs to improve, even though women are well positioned in society. Gender think tanks do not appear well connected to activist and civil society organisations. Women also do not appear to be aware about gender organisations or feminist concepts. Myths about women and women’s roles mask the problem: the stigmas and stereotypes related to patriarchal values.

State institutions aggravate the situation. Anti-discrimination and parity policies are not applied. In relation to LGBT rights, the actions and language of political parties and the inactions of law enforcement institutions, provide a negative example to society. Homophobic attitudes are justified by the majority of the population.

Action steps

- The state has to commit to implementing policies to improve social attitudes towards gender and LGBT rights. The perspective that these are “special rights” must be done away with in order to make these rights normative. Promoting respect and tolerance is a requisite for empowering people to “come out” or to fight for their rights.
- In this sense, efforts at the educational level – in schools and universities – need to be increased.
- The gender movement in Bulgaria is divided and has lost its main purpose: to involve women in their actions. A way to tackle this problem could be to empower women who are already engaged in protests at the street level. Understanding the concept of feminism could help them identify the deeper lack in society and start to battle this lack.
- Both the women’s rights movement and the LGBT movement have to continue improving their use of new ICT tools in order to avoid misunderstanding, to increase public debate and to organise social struggle. ■

¹⁶ Pisankaneva, M. (2005) The Forbidden Fruit: Sexuality in Communist Bulgaria, E-magazine LiterNet, 7(68). litternet.bg/publish14/m_pisankaneva/forbidden.htm

¹⁷ www.cwsp.bg/en/htmls/page.php?category=123