

The Multivocal “Citizens” vs. “the Voice of the People”

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Abstract: The paper examines the interplay of three processes. First, it explores how globalization and re-traditionalization interact, with rapid change and societal fluidity leading to a longing for the past, a solidification of borders, and a return to traditional values. In this context, a unified “people” emerges, embodying tradition and place, while multivocal citizens are viewed as outsiders and marginalized. This dichotomy favors a singular, homogeneous subject over the diversity of civil society. The third process concerns knowledge, where “eternal truths” are upheld by the unified “people,” while diverse perspectives are dismissed as false and harmful. Together, these processes challenge the foundations of liberal democracy, promoting a political regime that rejects pluralism. The paper raises the question of whether civil society can unite to defend modern values and pluralist democracy against the rising influence of re-traditionalization and the solidification of “the people” as a dominant force.

Keywords: civil society, “the people,” liberal democracy, re-traditionalization.

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The fall of the Berlin Wall was preceded by demonstrations of many thousands in Leipzig, demanding a change of the system with the insistent shout, “Wir sind das Volk.” The wall – literally and metaphorically – fell and the Eastern European countries “took the path” of liberal democracy. A key concept and prerequisite for this democracy is civil society; as Michael Ignatieff says, “Without civil society, democracy remains an empty shell; without civil society, the market becomes a jungle.”¹ For dissidents in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, the concept of civil society was used as a tool to undermine the monolithic rule of the party-state, as a sign that democracy requires party and civil pluralism.

Thirty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in Bulgaria the voices of “the people” have multiplied, mainly in the form of parties with grand names – “Ima takav narod” [“There is Such a People”], “Vazrazhdane” [“Revival”], “Velichie” [“Greatness”], “MECH – Moral, Edinstvo, Chest” [the meaning of the abbreviation “MECH” is “sword,” but it is an acronym of “Morality, Unity, Honor”], etc., and each of their “people’s” voices claims to be the only one people’s voice in which the unquestionable truth resounds. The multi-voiced civil society is called to silence.

How have these two categories – understood not epistemologically, however, but as embodying active political subjects – related to each other during these 35 years? This is the subject of this text.

Before that, short definitions. “The people” is a popular figure in political language. It means several things: a political community, political sovereign, “we, the people” in the liberal ideology; a rhetorical figure of a subject of resistance against a given authority in the leftist language, “the revolutionary people” (“Wir sind das Volk” combines this understanding with the notion of the political sovereign); a collective subject, ethnically united, defending ancestral blood and territory – “the Motherland” or “Fatherland,” whose energy and will are channeled and expressed by a strong leader – in the nationalist ideology. Populist rhetoric combines all these subjectivities to different degrees – “the people” react(s) against a corrupt elite in the name of restoring democracy, their desires are expressed by a leader.²

¹ Michael Ignatieff, “On Civil Society. Why Eastern Europe’s Revolutions Could Succeed,” March 1st, 1995, <https://michaelignatieff.ca/article/1995/on-civil-society-why-eastern-europes-revolutions-could-succeed/>, accessed July 2020

² See the often-cited definition of Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39 (4), 2004: 541–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x> (accessed 1 July 2019).

The general idea is that “the people” is thought of as a collective, unified subject,³ carrying energy, which is drawn either from ethno-traditions or from revolutionary discontent and a desire for revenge, and this collective subject cannot have many voices – it speaks with one voice, that of its leader, and this voice is presumed to be true. Marx would probably argue that “the people,” which in his case is understood as the proletariat, is always right, its ideology is true, unlike the others, because the people’s interest is universal, since they have nothing to lose but their chains – be it from a foreign empire, from the rich, from politicians, from oppressors, from all those who do not share their truth (for example, intellectuals). “The people” are/is looking for a stable root which bonds them; usually, this is ethnic origin.

On the contrary, the civil society implies a multitude of different groups, citizens, to one degree or another organized, who are in the intermediate sphere between the state and business, beyond the family, and who defend goals, values, and interests specific to them. It is polyphonic and expresses different configurations and views of the socially differentiated modern society. The civil society, even being a part of the liberal ideology, is a carrier of different ideological attitudes related to the different interests of the groups in it. In the civil society there is a battle of opinions and ideological views, there is no absolute truth. In this sense politics should be a dialogue, a discussion, consideration to one degree or another of these differences, a balance of interests that excludes authoritarian rule. The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were a time of dominance of liberal ideology, including the emergence, development, and enthusiasm of civil societies in Eastern European countries. These years had been the period of many large protests, of the establishment of many NGOs. Liberal ideology and the civil society are cosmopolitan; that is why they support the supranational European identity.

From the beginning of 21st century the liberal ideology, mainly in its neo-liberal version, started to lose its influence and to be severely criticized. A little later, the same process has happened to civil society, especially to civil society organizations (CSOs). In Bulgaria the civil society activists started to be branded by the “peoples” in their different party versions, as alien to “the people,” because they represent the voices of those living in the center of the capital, ironically called “zhaltopavetnitsi,”⁴ “the smart and beautiful,” who don’t understand the real needs of “the pure people”; the CSOs serve foreign, not national interests, and are ultimately harmful and dangerous, because they corrupt the inherently healthy Bulgarian spirit and body.

³ That is why I use singular for “the people.”

⁴ The main boulevard at the Sofia center is paved with yellow stones.

The emergence of the figure of the “people” is not from this year, and it does not only include parties that define themselves as right-wing. During the large civil protests in 2013–2014 against the government, certain circles connected to the BSP launched an attack on the representatives of civil society with the aim of delegitimizing the very term and concept of civil society. As an antipode to the latter, they invented the “left-wing majority” of “the poor,” who constitute 95% of the Bulgarian people and who, having to constantly struggle for their “daily bread,” do not at all understand and support the “spoilt Sofianites” and “paid Sorosoids.”⁵ This “left-wing majority” was later transformed into “the conservative Bulgarian people.” The reinvention of “the Bulgarian people” was an ingenious move for several reasons. First, in a society atomized the way the Bulgarian one is according to sociological surveys, there is a need for some sort of glue to hold it together. It is well known that reviving national/ethnic self-consciousness is the best glue for social cohesion and a stable political identity. This move was tested already during the communist period. Second, a collective subject is easier to manipulate politically than a multitude of diverse groups with different interests. What, however, should “the Bulgarian people” be like? The vision that best suits the populists is the romantic one, which associates “the people” with traditional folk – but also Christian – values, with the “naturalness” of life, with the “eternal (ethnic) roots.” The romantically invented “people” does not need to read and debate with arguments because it has “essential knowledge.” For it, any Otherness, characteristic of different people and practices – be they minorities, immigrants, homosexuals – is frightening. Quite a few Bulgarians saw the role of the thus invented “Bulgarian people” as an important one and readily cast themselves in it. The so-called “migrant crisis,”⁶ blown out of proportion by the media and politicians, additionally consolidated “the people” in the bosom of traditional Bulgarian communities. Once invented, “the Bulgarian people” started to take active steps against the adoption of important documents, as suggested to it by some “helpful” media. “The people” renounced the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence because its key messages were completely substituted by an invented fight against “the gender” (dzhendara)⁷, translated into Bulgarian as “third sex” (“treti pol”)⁸; forced the withdrawal of

⁵ See the articles by Volgin, Dūreva, and Koruev in Daniel Smilov and Lea Vajsova (eds.), *Protestat. Analizi i pozitsii v balgarskata presa – lyato 2013* [The protest. Analyses and viewpoints in the Bulgarian press, summer 2013], Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2013: 228, 236–238, 241–243).

⁶ The data show that the number of immigrants and refugees in Bulgaria is small because Bulgaria is a transit country

⁷ The Bulgarian word *dzhendar* has acquired the meaning of a person who is transgender or nonbinary.

⁸ The Constitutional Court also renounced the Convention, ruling that some of its concepts are inconsistent with the Bulgarian Constitution.

the draft National Strategy for the Child 2019–2030 because it allegedly gave children more rights than the “lawful” family and made it possible for the state and “Norwegians to steal our children”;⁹ etc. The voice of “the people” and the voice of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (which is close to the Russian Orthodox Church) coincide – they do not want “Gayropean” values to be imposed in Bulgaria, and they know the God-assigned place of women, the family, children. In August 2024, the National Assembly adopted an amendment to the Preschool and School Education Act, which prohibits the propaganda, promotion, and incitement, in any way, directly or indirectly, of ideas or views related to non-traditional sexual orientation or determination of gender identity other than biological.¹⁰

This “vox populi” also largely legitimizes the actions of active nationalist groups defending “Bulgaria” and “the Bulgarians” and attacking the Roma, immigrants, “Sorosoids,” homosexuals. The emphasis on the “natural,” established over the “centuries,” “traditional” values of “the people” consolidates the ethnonational identity characteristic of the Bulgarian nation and this identity, in turn, incites negative sentiments against marginal and foreign groups. This populism is isolationist, fixated on own territory, beyond the cosmopolitan model of international order of David Held.¹¹ And it is far from being unique to Bulgaria.

The thus-invented “people” is provoked by and convenient for politicians because it cares about and defends “traditional” values such as the family, religious faith, and love for the Homeland, and is less interested in current economic and geopolitical affairs and issues. Since “the people” has appeared on the scene, politicians must heed its voice – this behavior is characteristic for both the ruling and the opposition parties. What we have is a paradox: “the people” invented for the convenience of politicians imposes its views on those selfsame politicians who, in turn, follow “the people’s” voice... The manipulative circle closes, being “democratic” and very convenient. The voice of their “people” is the only true one, and all other voices should fall silent forever... This firm conviction in the truth does not imply curiosity about other views, does not require debate, but feeds hate speech against different opinions.

⁹ For more about this, see, e.g., https://www.eurochild.org/news/news-details/article/bulgarias-national-strategy-for-the-child-2019-2030-withdrawn-following-disinformation-campaigns/?tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=948de7368c6b778d49a93a57f4ac7999 (accessed 1 July 2019).

¹⁰ <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=224947>

¹¹ David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order*. From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995

Of course, there are also different voices of groups of citizens defending certain causes. Unlike the “voice of the people,” in most cases these voices defend marginal groups or seek solutions to specific issues while defending the principles of human rights. For example, Anna Krasteva, Evelina Staykova, and Ildiko Otova highlight the groups of “greens” and contestatory protesters, as well as the figures of the Anti-racist Activist, the Social Entrepreneur, the Human Rights Lawyer, the Minority Activist, the Human Rights Blogger, the Immigrant Activist.¹² As they are recognized as voices of concrete groups, they don’t have the aggressive power of the absolute truth.

The problem lies in the delegitimization of the multi-voices of civil society, of the pluralism of opinions in general, and in this sense of the basis of liberal democracy. As history teaches us, the “single” voice, even if it is “of the people,” leads to authoritarian rule.

The delegitimization of civil society is not just a problem in Bulgaria. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the rise of populism and the subsequent criticism of civil society is unfolding in many countries.

The International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law records that 120 restrictive laws concerning the activities of NGOs were adopted in 60 countries between 2012 and 2015. One third of the restrictions were on international funding, half applied to the general legal framework for CSO operations and 19 % directed specifically against freedom of assembly¹³

The challenges facing civil society organizations – legal restrictions, attacks on civil society activists – are described in detail in the CIVICUS State of Civil Society 2016 report.¹⁴ They mainly affect non-European countries (Angola, China, India, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Laos, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda), but we see that Hungary is also starting to take such measures.

What are the reasons for this trend, for the rise of “the people,” respectively of possible authoritarianism, and the suspicions towards civil organizations as alien to the people’s interests and needs?

¹² Anna Krasteva, Evelina Staykova and Ildiko Otova, “Being a Citizen in Times of Mainstreaming of Populism: Building Post-communist Contestatory and Solidary Citizenship,” in Birte Siim, Anna Krasteva, and Aino Saarinen (eds.), *Citizens’ Activism and Solidarity Movements. Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019: 220–227.

¹³ Douglas Rutzen, “Civil Society Under Assault,” *Journal of Democracy*, No 26(4), 2015: 30

¹⁴ https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2016/summaries/YIR_Civic-Space.pdf (accessed November 15 2024)

Before that, I would like to make a clarification. I in no way underestimate Bulgarian citizens, often called “ordinary people,” with their concerns and interests. This text is not elitist. I am reacting against the manipulative practices of some political elites who construct “the people” to serve their interests and who use real tendencies and fears of different people to instill certain messages in them.

I presume that the contemporary dynamic globalizing risk society provokes a rather pre-modern reaction – self-enclosure in a safe place, return to the family. The many risks give rise to a longing for security. Constant change, accelerated time, and rapidly developing new technologies lead to a foothold in the established traditions. And openness to the world – to enclosure within the familiar and the native locality. The closed space is perceived as besieged, as an island, a haven within the menacing global world. We witness a process of re-traditionalization in a postmodern world, and it is a common global trend, I am afraid. And this trend is being used by political ideologues, fueling people’s fears and speculating on a return to bygone, but articulated as eternal, values.

Zygmunt Bauman has written, “‘Identity’ is a name given to the escape sought from [...] uncertainty. [...] In the case of identity [...] the key word for Modernity was ‘creation’; the key word for Postmodernity is ‘recycling.’”¹⁵ The notions of traditional family and biological gender roles, of invented “old” rituals and folk dances and traditions, ideologemes from the past started to be recycled. New and unfamiliar people and technologies are viewed with suspicion – 5G connections are watching us, Bill Gates is peeking from everywhere, vaccines are there to make us sick, Syrians and Afghans are here to conquer us, etc.

The “us” identity is discerned in the familiar, in face-to-face relations, in the people and practices we know; it serves as a bunker against insecurity, global risks, and the unknown “them.” The atomization or fragmentation of society, as well as the blurring of the major ideologies, of the left and the right, led to the most familiar ideology – the nationalist one.

The modern nations were created to overcome the particularity of the local; they construct a shared supra-familial, supra-local origin that transforms into and unfolds as a national history. They relate the newly created “imagined community” to a specific large territory. My hypothesis is that the reverse is taking place now: the existing and established national “motherland” is being reduced to the “kinfolk,” the “parents,” the “birthplace.” From there, the idea of “native” blood is a step away. The national is ethnicized and linked to what

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Zhivot vav fragmenti*. [Life in Fragments], Sofia: LIK, 2000: 109–110.

is the nearest, to the local. The native element, thus perceived, is not Benedict Anderson's notion of nation as "imagined community"; it is not a "horizontal comradeship" between people who have never met,¹⁶ it is a face-to-face relationship based on spatial proximity. The local and the familial are perceived as and directly related to the national. Protecting the place where "we" live and where "we" were born is equated with protecting the Motherland, and vice versa. This connection is a precondition for the growth of local ideologies generalized into nationalistic ones and for nationalistic ideologies that refer to the local. The vision of glocality is being reversed – the motto is no longer "Think globally, act locally," but "Think locally, act anti-globally."

Another reversal is happening – the united people is multiplying, having many voices, all of them true, and civil society is packaged as a collective subject with a false manipulative voice. The focus on "the people," its proclamation as an active subject, as well as the process of re-traditionalization, return the politics to face-to-face contacts and networks and personal agreements and push it away from institutional relationships.

In summary – globalization leads to re-traditionalization; the accelerated time and the constant change cause clinging to the past; the openness of the world – to the exaltation of the native place; the liquefaction of society (Bauman) – to the solidification of borders; the diversity and complexity of life – to the search for a simple unitary center. This center presupposes a unitary subject, and the unified "people" is restored to the political scene, because it embodies the unity of past (tradition), and place (of kinship), i.e. this chronotype is perceived as an obvious mythical "eternity." The multivocal citizens who oppose "the people" are presented as borderline, accidental, outsiders, foreign to this unitary subject. "The people" is being substantialized, and the citizens, civil society, are being marginalized. From this process follows the third one, which affects knowledge – "there are substantial eternal truths," the bearer of which is "the people." And there are "ephemeral opinions" that problematize "true substance," and which are harmful because they are "untrue." These processes radically reject pluralist liberal democracy and lead to a well-known authoritarian political regime. They are a real challenge to all who perceive themselves as citizens, to all civic activists, to the media, to humanitarians, etc. What should our reaction be? Of course, we, as citizens, as civic activists shall continue to defend the democratic values and practices, we shall not surrender. But what should be the strategy in a situation of rising nationalism?

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. pp. 6–7.

Nothing new. No need for extremist radical views and actions but for upholding impersonal institutional relations and statehood. As well as promoting – publicly and through education – new forms of solidarity, based on what Alexander Kiossev and I prefer to call “civic patriotism,” which forms a civic national identity, respecting the past and our homeland, but with a focus on political participation here and now, and on protecting democratic values – institutions, laws, rights. It sounds a bit pathetic, but it is good to oppose the loud pathos of “the people’s” voices with the pathos of proclaiming civil society and rights.

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