

6 Left in translation

The curious absence of austerity frames in the 2013 Bulgarian protests¹

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Abstract

This chapter offers an analysis of the political and economic developments that led to the 2013 Bulgarian protests and of the different framings of grievances and identities that were put forward by the protesters and their opponents. The frames provided by activists, politicians, and journalists, among others, have been highly relational, contested, and often shifting over time, but one thing is certain: the austerity frame did not gain any prominence during the Bulgarian 2013 protests. Hence my main question is: why did protesters focus exclusively on oligarchy and corruption but did not address austerity or more redistributive social questions? Or to put it differently: why was leftist thought left out in the various narratives of the Bulgarian 2013 protests? Frames are not some disembodied entities floating in space but are elaborated and put forward by political subjects. Thus, the absence of austerity frames can be explained by the absence of strong leftist subjects alternative to the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which long ago started pursuing right-wing policies. Several reasons for this weakness of the left can be pointed out: the involvement of former communist elites in preying on the state that compromised them politically; the dominance of neoliberal think tanks since the beginning of the 1990s; the unprecedented entanglement of media, business, and politics, which makes it difficult for new voices to emerge. If an emphasis on austerity and a more left-wing political perspective are to gain popularity, left-wing political projects should work on the ground and reach out to people in order to counter more traditional nationalist or anti-communist narratives.

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6.1 Introduction

“The boulevard is closed because of the protests. We can’t pass by the National Assembly.” That was the first thing the taxi driver told me on my way home from the airport. It was the 18th of February 2013, day seven of the mass mobilizations that started as protests against high electricity bills and evolved into an anti-government movement. Two days later, the cabinet of Prime Minister Boiko Borisov resigned and a turbulent year of political reshuffling, social mobilizations, and widespread enthusiasm followed. Three years later, Bulgaria is ruled by a government led once again by Prime Minister Borisov. The protest cycle has closed, citizen anger and energy have faded away, and young citizens in their most active political age increasingly emigrate, choosing “exit” instead of “voice” as they perceive protesting as a dead end, a closed street that hasn’t led anywhere.

In this chapter, I combine a careful empirical account of the 2013 protests with an attempt to bring capitalism and political economy back into the study of social movements. Following della Porta’s research on social movements in times of austerity (2015), I consider the temporal and spatial dimensions of capitalist development across the globe, situating the Bulgarian protests in the shadow of two major events: the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007. I analyze the complex processes that led to an eruption of civic anger, taking into account firstly, the recent transformation of capitalism related to the shift from social protection towards increased market liberalization and cuts in public spending; secondly, the important distinction between hegemonic power and dependent economies in the world system; and finally, the insights from the literature on varieties of capitalism, and more specifically, the varieties of capitalism within the common neoliberal wave (della Porta, 2015: 8-9).

The political project of integration of the Central and Eastern European periphery into the EU as a regional hegemon came with the major task of transposing EU rules and managing the interdependence of economies at very different stages of their development (Bruszt, 2015). But once Bulgaria transposed all the thousands of pages of EU rules and entered the single market, the EU’s ability to sanction local politicians diminished considerably. Meanwhile, the effects of the financial crisis became more and more acute and the increased role of the state in distributing EU funds in

conditions of economic stagnation led to an unprecedented entanglement between media, business, and politics. It was in this context that the 2013 Bulgarian protests erupted. And while a political economy analysis allows us to understand better the processes that led to many of the grievances Bulgarians felt in 2013, social movement studies teach us that grievances do not automatically lead to a process of mobilization but are mediated by complex relational processes of politicization and framing (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Zald, 1996).

Thus, the second part of the chapter explores chronologically the main events in the three consecutive waves of protest in Bulgaria in 2013 and the ways in which protesters framed their grievances and different and conflicting identities. In this part of the analysis I draw extensively on framing theory that was developed in the context of social movement research by Benford and Snow. The authors emphasize that “social movements are not viewed merely as carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or existing ideologies. Rather, movement actors are viewed as signifying agents, actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (2000: 613). Snow and Benford perceive framing as active and processual, and often also highly contentious. The products of framing activity are “collective action frames.” There are three main types of frames: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, which are the results of collectively negotiated meaning. Diagnostic frames identify the problems and assign blame, prognostic frames suggest solutions and desired future change, and motivational frames mobilize and call for action.

I find particularly useful the authors’ effort to elaborate the connections between framing and collective identity constructions. Hunt, Benford, and Snow introduce the concept of “identity fields” in order to account for the avowal and imputation of identity to three different clusters of actors: protagonists, antagonists, and audience (1994). They refer to these categories of identities as identity fields because “the identities within each category overlap and hang together, and because the categories are elastic and expand and contract across time” (1994: 185). The authors associate the antagonist field with diagnostic and prognostic framing, as these types of framing provide a description of the situation, point at an enemy, and prescribe a recipe of what is to be done. On the other hand, the protagonist field is instead associated with motivational framing as it entails the construction of identities and motivations that serve as an impetus for collective action.

The strong attention to the protagonists' identity during all three waves of the 2013 Bulgarian protests can also be interpreted through the threefold analytical schema proposed by Mary Bernstein: identity for empowerment, identity deployment, and identity as goal (2008). In my analysis I will focus exclusively on "identity deployment," which means "expressing identity such that the terrain of conflict becomes the individual person so that the values, categories and practices of individuals become subject to debate" (Bernstein, 2008: 281). Once a group enters a debate deploying its identity as a strategy, it invites an "identity contest" and makes its very identity subject to debate. As I will show, this is precisely what happened with the Bulgarian summer protesters, for example, who presented themselves as the young and the beautiful, forcing them to constantly discuss and defend this identity.

One of the main things I note in the process of analysis is the curious absence of an austerity frame in any of the three waves of protest. In the third and last section of the chapter, I try to explain why protesters did not put forward such a frame, and why there was no prominent left-wing self-identification in the 2013 Bulgarian protests – which, after all, were protests in times of austerity. Or to formulate it differently and with reference to my title, the main question I pose in this chapter is: why was leftist critique left out in the various framings offered by the 2013 Bulgarian protests?

In order to address the main question I pose, I have analyzed multiple primary sources: I have coded more than 150 news articles from both left- and right-wing newspapers from the period of the protests, as well as fifteen texts produced by protesters themselves (manifestos, lists of demands, blog posts). In addition, I have interviewed five of the protest organizers, two experts in energy development, one journalist, and one sociologist. I have also read thoroughly the editorials and analytical articles selected in the volume *#The Protest: Analyses and Positions in the Bulgarian Press, Summer 2013* (Vajsova and Smilov, 2013) and the first available academic articles on the protests by Bulgarian sociologists and social movement scholars – many of whom engaged in participant observation of the 2013 mobilizations (Ganev, 2014; Gueorguieva, 2016; Nikolova, Tsoneva, and Medarov, 2014). Finally, I have explored the secondary literature on varieties of capitalism and the backsliding of democracy in Eastern Europe (Bruszt, 2015; Greskovits, 2015; Greskovits and Bohle, 2012). The current chapter does not aim to test hypotheses but, instead, to offer exploratory research that takes place at the intersection of political economy and social movement studies. In the next three sections of the chapter I try to shed light on some of the causes for the grievances faced by Bulgarian protesters, the particular

ways these grievances were framed, and why some framings turned out to be impossible in the Bulgarian context.

6.2 Left in translation: the political and economic context of Bulgarian protests

There can hardly be a better beginning for an analysis of the protests that shook up the Bulgarian political system in 2013 than the events of 1989, which laid the foundations of the democratic regime in the country after more than 40 years of state socialism. The 2013 protests questioned profoundly the quality of democracy that the 1989 events brought about. It has been acknowledged that the transition to democracy in Bulgaria happened not as a result of violence, protest, and mass mobilization, but rather as an elite coup carried out by members of the Bulgarian Communist Party, who tried to save some of their power as the Soviet Bloc was falling apart (Rossi, 2012). The peaceful nature of the transition allowed former members of the Communist Party to asset-strip state firms for a long period of about seven years before mass privatization followed (Doncheva, 2014).

During the transition period, the communist party *nomenklatura* transformed its political power into economic power (Tchalakov, Bundzhulov, and Hristov, 2008). The former communist functionaries deliberately weakened the state and subverted the infrastructures of governance in order to maximize their informal advantages under the new political conditions. The causes of state malfunctioning in the first decade of transition have more to do with the deliberate actions (or lack thereof) of key economic actors, aimed at subverting the infrastructure of governance, than with the usual suspect: neoliberal ideology (Ganev, 2007). The 1990s in Bulgaria were marked by well-intended reforms that halted as soon as they started and created an unstable environment for both local business and foreign investors. Only towards the end of the decade, after the major economic crisis during Zhan Videnov's government and the unprecedentedly big protests that took it down, did Bulgarian politicians embrace neoliberal ideology and achieve a cross-party consensus around its main tenets (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012).

The process of accession to the EU finalized in 2007 helped increase state capacity in Bulgaria but at the same time led to a further entrenchment of neoliberal logic in the programs of the well-established parties of the country, both to the left and to the right of the political spectrum. The Chief Negotiator of the Republic of Bulgaria with the EU, Meglena Kuneva,

was commonly referred to in the press as the “Yes Woman” (Burgis and Parker, 2009) for her response to every demand coming from Brussels. In his insightful analysis of EU integration and the backsliding of democracy in the Central and East European countries, László Bruszt observes that the EU put much effort into managing the interdependence between the two parts of Europe because the core EU member states could not easily externalize the potential political and economic costs of the eventual negative consequences of norm transfer. In addition, once becoming members, the CEE countries could not be denied access to EU development funds and the EU-15 wanted to keep the costs of enlargement under control – especially considering that the southern member states made clear that they would support eastern enlargement only if they could keep their shares of the development funds (Bruszt, 2015: 7). Thus, the EU invested many resources into safely bringing the new member states into the single European market. However, the focus of EU strategies was on detecting and alleviating potential negative externalities and not on achieving positive externalities such as the capacity to improve the position in the European markets or creating conditions of broad based distribution of economic gains (2015: 9).

Focusing on the case of Bulgaria, this neglect of development goals and redistributive issues on the part of the EU was not problematized by Bulgarian politicians in power (regardless of party affiliation) for several reasons. First, politically, there was no other option than to push for joining the EU, even at the price of accepting multiple unfavorable conditions; and second, questions of social redistribution and inequality were less salient in Bulgaria during the early 2000s: a period of influx of foreign investments, booming household credits, and steady economic growth after the turbulent and insecure 1990s (Economic Research Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2014). Somehow, the belief persisted that once the country entered the EU, everything would be better, the economy would flourish, and corruption and clientelism would be constrained (Bulgaria in the EU, 2008). But the reality turned out to be different.

In the post-accession period, the EU had far fewer mechanisms to influence the politics of the country and constrain undemocratic tendencies. Venelin Ganey describes the prevalent form of elite misconduct observed in Eastern Europe as “post-accession hooliganism”:

Once the era of EU carrots and sticks was over – that is, after accession – politicians no longer felt bound by the formal and informal constraints to which they had adhered while endeavoring to “rejoin Europe.” In other words, these politicians behaved just like soccer hooligans, who by day

do just what they need to in order to earn a paycheck and stay out of jail, but then behave completely differently at the match (Ganev, 2014: 38).

The situation would have been less serious if the financial crisis had not hit soon after Bulgaria's accession to the EU, making developmental problems and conflicts over distribution particularly acute, precisely when the attention of the EU as the regional hegemon was distracted by the rampant crisis in its southern peripheries. As László Bruszt observes, domestic political entrepreneurs in CEE exploited this situation by blaming the EU for the development problems of their countries and cemented their political basis by relying on nationalistic policies (2015: 4).

Indeed, two consecutive Bulgarian cabinets – the triple coalition of BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party), DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), and NDSV (National Movement for Stability and Progress) (2005-2009), and later the cabinet of Boiko Borisov's party GERB (2009-2013) – diligently implemented neoliberal economic policies. It was the triple coalition led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party that accepted the ideologically right-wing flat-rate tax in the country. Throughout the mandate of the triple coalition, the government maintained budget surpluses under the guidance of the technocrat finance minister Plamen Oresharski, a former vice minister of finance in Ivan Kostov's right-wing cabinet at the end of the 1990s. Borisov's successor center-right government followed the line of maintaining strict fiscal discipline. Bulgarian finance minister Simeon Djankov, former chief economist of the Finance and Private Sector Vice-Presidency of the World Bank, famously compared the budget of the country to a pizza, which might be smaller and meatless because of the crisis but was real and well-appointed.² Financial stability was firmly maintained in exchange for more sovereign debt. Djankov was so dedicated to pursuing austerity policies that during a meeting of the Council of Ministers he even proposed an amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (CRB), outlining his idea for a "Bulgarian Pact for Financial Stability" that would be stricter than the German one: "The three main elements of the Pact were: (1) limit of 3% for the budgetary deficit; (2) the State's redistribution role to be maximum 37%; and (3) a requirement of 2/3 majority at the National Assembly for any future increase of taxes. The Prime Minister, in the concluding remarks of the meeting, expressed his strong support for the initiative of the Finance Minister" (Vatsov, 2015: 27). After long debates and procedural uncertainties,

² "Bulgaria MPs discuss Djankov's 'Pizza' State Budget 2010." www.novinite.com/articles/110061/Bulgaria+MPs+Discuss+Djankov's+'Pizza'+State+Budget+2010/.

the amendments to the constitution were not adopted; but the very proposal is indicative of the economic views of Borisov's cabinet.

The Borisov administration's response to the recession with an austerity package amounted to a gross mishandling of the crisis: "Not only was the austerity program unnecessary painful, but it also missed its target. The package trapped the economy in a largely self-inflicted vicious circle of economic downswing and a swelling fiscal imbalance" (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012: 252). The austerity regimes in East and Central Europe, while praised as ultimately financially responsible, proved highly irresponsible towards the populations of the countries where they were imposed. The Economic Research Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (2014: 60) noted in their report on 2013 that maintaining fiscal stability prevented the unfolding of populist scenarios of uncontrolled government spending but ultimately failed to stimulate economic growth.

What is more, the state became more and more centralized and the government increasingly intervened in economic policy without any visible benefits for the economy or society in general. Of course, some would discover a contradiction here, invoking the famous myth that the essence of neoliberalism goes against state intervention; but as numerous authors such as Nicholas Hildyard (1998), David Harvey (2005), and recently Mirowski and Plehwe (2009) aptly demonstrate, the ascent of neoliberalism has not meant so much the retreat of the state (even though neoliberals claim this in their public statements), as the remaking of the state in order to impose an all-pervasive logic of marketization and to bypass democracy. In Bulgaria, neoliberal economic policies curbing public spending went hand in hand with a gradual backsliding of democracy and the development of clientelistic structures, explicitly defined as "circles of firms" by DPS leader Ahmed Dogan in a leaked video from the 2009 election campaign (Dogan, 2009) in which he claimed that he rationed the portions and redistributed the money from the EU funds in the country. Dogan's statement provoked wide public outrage, and while the extent of his power at that time cannot be determined with certainty, it is undisputed that the state's increasing role in the redistribution of EU funds facilitated widespread practices of corruption. The outrage at Dogan's claims was one of the reasons for the crushing 2009 defeat of the parties from the triple coalition and the victory of Boiko Borisov's center-right party GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria).

But as already mentioned, the advent of GERB did not bring substantial change in political or economic terms. The former bodyguard Prime Minister Boiko Borisov and his yuppie finance minister Simeon Djankov were

nothing but the two faces of the same process of democratic backsliding. In June 2013, the technocrat Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski appointed Delyan Peevski – a media mogul and DPS member whose rise to power was marked by numerous corruption allegations – as head of the National Security Agency DANS (Stier, 2016). The technocrat Oresharski and the shady “entrepreneur” Peevski in a sense repeated the logic of the Djankov-Borisov duo. Governments changed, protests erupted and faded away, but the same logic of power resurfaced again and again: prestigious technocrats legitimized local politicians and businessmen’s struggles for influence in a situation of expanding clientelistic networks.

Bulgaria has become a good example of the way really existing democracies in times of neoliberalism have entered into a post-democracy stage (Crouch, 2004), characterized by the implementation of a mix of the following mechanisms:

- Coordinated collusion. A small, oligopolistic class of politicians-business people is formed through the political protection of small circles of individuals who, thanks to political protection, are able to exploit the enrichment potential of financial capitalism.
- Organized clientelism. Having lost the capacity to create collective identities, parties build their electoral support through individual/corporate integration in patronage networks.
- Participatory cooptation. Some selective form of participation of citizens as individuals is used in the attempt to contrast the decrease in political trust (della Porta, Introduction to the current volume).

While for some the financial crisis meant austerity, for others it meant new opportunities (Vasilev, 2011). For a number of years, the oligarchs Tsvetan Vasilev and Delyan Peevski participated in weaving a conglomerate of media, political, and business power, at the heart of which was Vasilev’s Corporate Commercial Bank, which hosted the money of most state enterprises and used it to finance different deals, including buying crucial media outlets. The media and the influence upon the judiciary system were used as weapons against any opponents but also provided comfort for those in power. Those in power, on the other hand, provided public bids for the circles of firms around the group and secured for the Corporate Commercial Bank a privileged access to financing (Peev, 2014). The system seemed infallible for a long time until it broke down due to its own centrifugal tendency.

It is important to note that the monopolization of key sectors of the Bulgarian economy did not happen due to total lack of state control; on the contrary, it happened with state support. For example, in the field of

the media, Peevski's monopoly became possible through the decisions and laws passed by several consecutive governments. Nelly Ognyanova (2014), an expert in media law, emphasizes the role of the state in facilitating what happened. Why did different governments participate in this? The answer can be found in an interview of Peevski himself, who claims that he had agreed to requests to provide a "media umbrella" for Borisov's GERB party and particular criminal bosses.³ Securing "media comfort" by buying media and pressuring journalists with direct threats and indirect economic means has become crucial for both politicians and big business (Gueorguieva, 2013). Another circle of interrelated political, media, and economic agents can be discerned around Ivo Propkopiev, the owner of *Dnevnik* and *Capital*, whose connections can be traced to both the center-right party GERB and the right-wing Reformer's Block, which consolidated its ranks during the "#ДАНСwithme" protests during the summer of 2013 (Rone, 2016).

The combination of austerity policies, on the one hand, and increased monopolization of crucial sectors of the economy, on the other, has led to rising inequality in Bulgaria. Over time, the middle class has been disappearing, while those at the bottom of the pyramid are becoming more and more numerous (Tsanov, Ivanova, Panteleeva, and Bogdanov, 2013). There is widespread poverty in the country, with 60.1 percent of the population living in material deprivation (Zahariev, 2013). This process is complemented by mass emigration of young people of working age (Usheva, 2011). In the period from 1989 to 2011, the total population of Bulgaria decreased by almost 2 million people: from 9 million to 7.36 million (Population Census, 2011). According to a rather pessimistic assessment by the sociologist Ivo Hristov, there are three main inflows of money into the country: money that Bulgarian emigrants abroad send back home, Euro funds, and contraband (Interview BG9). Apart from energy development, the main economic sector in the country is in services, although it produces little added value. In addition, in the sphere of agriculture, there is a clear trend toward concentration of land and finances in the hands of a few groups, and toward a monocultural latifundium type of agriculture (Hristov, 2014).

Especially relevant for the 2013 protests that I will explore in the following paragraphs is the situation in the energy development sector, whose share of GDP and relative importance substantially increased during the crisis. The state tried to use energy development as a covert means for social policy by keeping the price of electricity artificially low (Interview BG7).

3 "Peevski: Tsvetanov wanted from me a media umbrella for crime bosses." *Dnes. Dir.bg*. <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/tzvetan-tzvetanov-deljan-peeovski-16105189>.

In addition, there has been widespread corruption in the sector, with firms draining resources through shady contracts for consultancy and repair works. This money could have been used instead for investment to improve the efficiency of plants and the distribution system (Tchalakov, Hristov, and Mitev, 2011). Another serious problem in the sector is the economic bubble of renewable energy. Under the EU 2020 program, Bulgaria committed that by 2020, 16 percent of all energy consumption in the country would be of renewable energy (Energy Strategy, 2011). The country overachieved in advance the stated aims due to the fact that multiple entrepreneurs (some of them related to politicians from all parties) took part in building plants for renewable energy, whose electricity the state operator NEK was obliged to buy at preferential prices. The oversupply of such energy and the contractual obligations to buy it have led to a stalemate situation of increasing deficits in the energy system (Interview BG8).

The problems in the energy system were precisely the trigger that started the 2013 Bulgarian protests. However, protesters' framings of the problems with energy development differed substantially from those of the experts I interviewed. To give just an example, people protested because they considered the prices of electricity too high. Experts claimed the prices were in fact artificially kept too low. Protesters demanded nationalization and the abolition of licenses of foreign power distribution companies; experts claimed that, while there were many practices of power distribution companies that could be improved, the real problems of the system were elsewhere. The more I read on the protests, the more I noted that protesters often mentioned political corruption and façade democracy but never mentioned austerity policies or distributive economic issues. In the following paragraphs, I will explore in detail the ways in which protesters framed their grievances and demands, and their own identity, before I try to account for the curious absence of austerity frames in the Bulgarian 2013 protests in the last part of this chapter.

To sum up the argument so far, the 2007-2008 financial crisis made more acute the developmental and distributive issues ignored in the process of EU accession, as part of which Bulgaria adopted a wide range of neoliberal policies and opened space for social mobilization and political contestation. The mass impoverishment of the population and the unprecedented economic inequality provoked civic anger that could no longer be contained and which erupted with full force in 2013.

6.3 The good, the bad, and the ugly? Framing protesters' identity and grievances in the 2013 Bulgarian protests

The protests of 2013 can be generally separated into three waves: the winter protests against high electricity bills; the summer protests against Delyan Peevski and the Plamen Oresharski cabinet, also known as the #ДАHCwithme⁴ protests; and finally, the student occupation that took place from October 2013 until mid-January 2014. In the following pages I will briefly outline the main events connected to each wave of protest and analyze, in particular, how protesters framed their grievances, their identities, and the identities of their antagonists.

“Let’s burn the monopolies”

The winter protests started on February 4, 2013, in two big cities in southwestern Bulgaria – Blagoevgrad and Gotse Delchev – where people protested against their high electricity bills by symbolically burning them in front of the offices of CEZ, the Czech power distribution company responsible for the region.⁵ The cities of Petrich, Sandanski, Veliko Turnovo, Plovdiv, and Sofia followed. People claimed that the procedures for calculating the bills were non-transparent and that their numerous complaints were neglected and ignored. Many of the organizers of the mobilizations had participated previously in protests against the rise in the price of combustibles. As commented by Doncho Dudev, one of the main organizers of the protests in Sofia, most had experience in previous protests and had read extensively on the topic of energy development (Interview BG1). In the year before the protests, 2012, they had toured various neighborhoods in Sofia, showing an educational film on the topic and provoking public discussions. After a protest organized in the autumn of 2012 did not attract enough public attention, the informal group of like-minded people decided to wait for the right moment, i.e., the first months of the New Year. December electricity bills are by definition higher, so people could not fail to pay attention to the billing issues. But even the organizers had not expected the demonstrations to reach such an unprecedented scale when the right moment came. People all over the country protested electricity bills that sometimes reached 100

4 The name of the protest is a play on words. The abbreviation of the State Agency for National Security in Bulgarian is ДАHC (DANS), which sounds exactly like the word “dance” as in the popular TV show “Dance with me.”

5 “The high electricity bills caused a rebellion in southwestern Bulgaria.” http://society.actualno.com/Visokite-smetki-za-tok-vdignaha-na-bunt-Ugozapadna-Bylgarija-news_414574.html.

euros. Considering that the average monthly wage for Bulgaria was around 300 euros per month,⁶ these costs were prohibitive.

On February 10, an hour and a half after midnight, two cars belonging to the power distribution company EVN were set on fire.⁷ On the same day, thousands of people protested in over fifteen big Bulgarian cities under the slogan “Let’s burn the monopolies.” The protesters formulated their main demands as follows:

- nationalization of power distribution companies in Bulgaria;
- eliminating all intermediaries and transferring their functions to NEK (National Electricity Company);
- providing public access to all contracts in the sector of energy development and demanding that their signers assume responsibility for them;
- distributing the energy produced in the Nuclear Power Plant in Kozloduy only in the internal market and for the needs of the Bulgarian citizens and society;
- eliminating the obligations of NEK to purchase electricity.⁸

The protests reached their peak on February 17,⁹ when hundreds of thousands of people mobilized in more than 35 cities throughout the country. Over 30,000 took to the streets in Varna alone, and were supported by the police in their protest.¹⁰ Residents of Blagoevgrad blocked the international E79 highway, which caused transport chaos and a traffic jam of over 20 kilometers. People all over the country chanted slogans like “Mafia” and “Resignation,” and there were numerous posters with messages such as “Electricity + Unemployment = Genocide.”¹¹

On February 18, Finance Minister Simeon Dyankov resigned; but this did not appease the already angry protesters, who claimed that Borisov’s government had taken no actions to address their demands. On the 19th of February, the day of the official commemoration of the hanging of the

6 www.translationdirectory.com/articles/article2479.php.

7 “Two cars of EVN were burnt-down in Plovdiv.” www.bnews.bg/article-69445.

8 “High voltage in society due to high electricity bills.” <http://btvnews.bg/gallery/bulgaria/obshtestvo/protesti-pod-nadslov-zda-zapalim-monopolite-v-15-grada-na-stranata.html>.

9 “Spring started on the 17th of February.” http://bulgaria.actualno.com/Prolet-pukna-na-17-fevruari-news_415838.html.

10 “The protest in Varna in photos and video.” http://offnews.bg/news/България_1/Протестът-във-Варна-в-снимки-и-видео_159997.html.

11 “The poorest country in the EU rebels! Stanishev tries to surf the wave demanding resignation.” http://society.actualno.com/Naj-bednata-strana-v-ES-vystana-Stanishev-jahna-vylnata-za-ostavka-na-pravitelstvoto-news_415832.html.

national hero Vasil Levski by officers of the Ottoman Empire, the protests in Sofia turned violent. After provocations on the part of some protesters, the police attacked them and a number of people were injured.¹² On the morning of February 20, the 36-year old alpinist Plamen Goranov set himself on fire in front of the municipality in Varna, demanding the resignation of the mayor.¹³ Hours after his self-immolation, Prime Minister Boiko Borisov resigned. Even after his resignation, a wave of self-immolations followed, the number of cases from February 2013 to May 2015 reaching 30.

The winter 2013 protests in Bulgaria were protests of the “people” – those who got burnt while the former elites were playing with fire during the transition period. The most popular diagnostic frames that emerged from my coding of texts produced by protesters were “monopolies,” “corruption,” “minority rule” (protesters qualified as “minorities” both ethnic minorities and financial elites). The most popular prognostic frames were “nationalization,” “reform of the system” (I included here demands for electoral law changes, demands for curbing the number of deputies, and other suggestions for “tweaks” of the system), “Bulgaria for Bulgarians,” “citizen/expert rule,” and “no mediators” (here I included both demands to bypass political parties and demands to transfer the obligations of the power distribution companies to the National Electricity Company). The protesters called for action with motivational frames claiming that it was the task of “responsible citizens” to protect national pride. While the protesters framed their antagonists as “mafia,” “the oligarchy,” and “privileged minorities,” they defined themselves as “the people,” the “responsible citizens” who were honest and non-corrupted by previous participation in power struggles.

Later in 2013, there were attempts by some summer protesters to frame the winter protests as protests of the ugly, the poor, the ones who could not pay their bills.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, such definitions were rejected by the participants so described. As emphasized by a prominent organizer of the winter protests, Doncho Dudev, many of the leaders and participants in the winter protests were successful in their careers and were representatives of small and medium-sized businesses – so to call them “poor” and “ugly” would be highly misleading (Interview BG1). The social basis of the protests was in fact extremely diverse, consisting of workers, the unemployed, the

12 “Bloody confrontation on the day of Levski in Sofia.” http://news.ibox.bg/material/id_105484605/.

13 “The Varna Jan Palach.” www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2013/02/25/2010632_plamen_goranov_-_varnenskiiat_ian_palah/.

14 “The Rebellion of the Sith,” www.duma.bg/node/56961/.

pauperized middle class, retirees, and representatives of small and medium-sized businesses all across the country.

Even though both the ruling party at the time (GERB)¹⁵ and the oppositional BSP¹⁶ attempted to use the protest in their favor, the protesters managed to protect their independence and keep a separate identity. A strong differentiation from the political class was a crucial feature of the winter protests, and it was one of the reasons why some of the most active protest organizers, Doncho Dudev, Yanko Petrov, and Ioanna Ivanova, declared their refusal to provide moral legitimation to any political party and to join traditional political organizations.¹⁷ The three of them fought instead to establish citizen councils that would monitor the work of the major institutions in the country and give voice to citizens' concerns.

Winter protesters who did try to establish political parties or organizations were often frowned upon as traitors. Yanaki Ganchev, who organized protests during working days in February, later formed the "Orlov Most" Movement ("Orlov Most" means literally "Eagle's Bridge" – the place where the protesters often gathered and blocked traffic). He subsequently attempted to form a party based on the "Orlov Most" network but did not receive enough support by fellow protesters, who expressed opposition to the party system itself (Interview BG2). Another of the leaders of the Sofia mobilizations, Angel Slavchev, joined the political party called "Bulgaria without Censorship" – secretly financed (as it transpired later) by the notorious banker Tsvetan Vasilev – and was accused repeatedly of betraying the identity of the protest.¹⁸

One openly leftist organization in the winter protest was the communist movement "Che Guevara," founded in the 1990s by Zhan Videnov, the left-wing Prime Minister who will be remembered for the biggest economic crisis in the 1990s, followed by massive protests. It is only in the official statement of "Che Guevara" that "capitalism" is named as a cause for the

15 Protestors: "Pelovska betrayed the protests: We did not give her the right to talk to the Prime Minister." www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/02/19/2005965_protestirashti_pelovska_pre-dade_protesta_ne_sme_i/.

16 "Liudmila from Blagoevgrad at the Congress of BSP: Show that you are on the side of the People!" <http://novinite.bg/articles/30379/Lyudmila-ot-Blagoevgrad-na-Kongresa-na-BSP-Pokajete-che-ste-na-stranata-na-horata>.

17 "The Faces of the February Protests: We still Fight Against the Monopolies!." http://offnews.bg/news/Протести_17652/Лицата-от-февруарските-протести-И-днес-се-борим-срещу-монополите_294905.html.

18 "Tsvetan Vasilev: I financed the 'reality show' of Barekov." <http://economic.bg/news/31699/1/1/Cvetan-Vasilev-Finansirah-rialitito-na-Barekov.html>.

protests and something to fight against.¹⁹ In spite of the fact that the winter protests targeted a center-right government, few of their leaders self-qualified as leftists, and the demands for nationalization were legitimized not as measures against capitalism, for example, but as measures for saving the Bulgarian nation, i.e., in a nationalistic key.

To sum up, I agree with the convincing analysis of Nikolova, Tsoneva, and Medarov (2014), who emphasize the internally contradictory rhetoric of the winter protests that blurred the boundaries between civil society and the nation as a warm community. They were protests of “us”: the people, the Bulgarian civil society, against “them”: the ethnic minorities and political oligarchies. At the same time, they demanded more expert governance, direct citizen participation, and less politics conceived in the classical terms of Left and Right, representation and mediation of interests. The protests seemed incapable of imagining a sustainable solution beyond the neoliberal ideology defended by the same political parties they were attacking. The winter protests did not lead to the formation of strong new political subjects, and the continuity between them and the summer protests was not evident but subject to constant negotiations and debates, both among the protesters themselves and on the pages of popular media.

#ДАHCwithme: the summer protests in Bulgaria

After the parliamentary elections, on May 29 a new cabinet was formed with the mandate of the second parliamentary represented party, the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) – in coalition with DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), which is often considered a representative of the Turkish minority in the country, and with the support of the nationalist Ataka. After only two weeks in power, the government led by former finance minister Plamen Oresharski quickly lost public trust due to its already mentioned scandalous decision to appoint the media mogul Delyan Peevski as head of the State Agency for National Security (ДАHC) – after the law had been quickly changed several days before the appointment to make it possible. Peevski was appointed to this crucial position with the task of fighting corruption.

The public reaction was immediate and unanimous. Ivaylo Achev, chief editor of the news site Actualno.com, commented that he could hardly believe this was happening and at first thought it was a joke (Interview BG6). A protest event was created on Facebook with the playful title

19 “Address of the ‘Che Guevara’ movement to the media and the protesters.” <http://komunist-ibg.wordpress.com/2013/02/22/изявление-на-движение-че-гевара-до>.

#ДАHCwithme. The Facebook page received more than 80,000 “likes” in the course of the day, and in the evening thousands took to the streets of Sofia to protest Peevski’s appointment. As Ivaylo Achev said: “Those in power would always steal from us. That’s clear. But it’s all a question of measure. The protests showed the rulers that they had lost their sense of measure and proportion” (Interview BG6). Peevski resigned, but regular street protests continued every evening for several months. In what followed, Peevski’s media machine and the government tried to discredit in every possible way the protesters who used the Internet and Prokopiev’s right-wing newspapers as platforms to elaborate and defend their identity in a highly interactive and conflictual identity contest.

On the 15th of June, *Montior* (one of the newspapers owned by Peevski) claimed that provocateurs, criminal elements, and activists paid by the center-right GERB party had conspired to destabilize the government.²⁰ As a response in the following days, articles in the right-wing *Dnevnik*, unofficially known as the newspaper of the protest, emphasized the spontaneous and peaceful nature of the mobilization. On the 18th of June, *Dnevnik* even published “A Guidebook for Positive Protesting”:

- 1) First of all, take care of yourself and your relatives! That’s the most important!
- 2) Participate only in the prearranged route The Largo – The National Assembly – The Eagles Bridge.
- 3) Wear colorful clothes and posters with positive messages. Do not wear hoodies or similar clothing. Smile!
- 4) Take care of the police officers and cooperate with them (they also aren’t part of the oligarchy).
- 5) If there are provocation attempts, stay at least 5 meters away from the provocateurs, make a “sanitary zone” around them. It must be made clear who they are and how many they are. The squares are big, there is space to protest indeed without provocateurs.²¹

The guidebook is interesting because it shows clearly how *Dnevnik* not only reported from the protests, but also scripted them and incited them. By selectively publishing particular tweets, photos, and blog posts, the

20 “GERB organized a protest in front of the Ministers’ Council.” www.monitor.bg/article?id=388428/.

21 “It is time to go to the square again: peculiarities of the protest tonight.” www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/06/18/2084831_pak_e_vreme_za_izlizane_na_ploshtada_osobenosti_na/.

newspaper created a story of the protests and an image of the protesters in which the participants could recognize themselves. But it was also a story that instructed participants about how to behave and locked them into particular roles.²²

Many protesters commented under articles in *Dnevnik*, defending their image against accusations that they were dangerous and criminal figures:

Petar Nikolov, 23:15, 14th of June, 2013, #430

Congratulations for all who protested today! My impressions from the protesters (with only a few exceptions) are also very good. There were kids, bikers (and one protesting dog). I am glad that in Sofia there are enough people who, despite the rain and it being a Friday night, expressed an active civic position on an important question without using violence. I am also surprised by the meagre coverage of the protest on the television (And maybe I shouldn't be surprised considering the new owners of one of the television [networks] and the dependence of the national television on those in power).²³

Participants insisted that theirs was a protest of “normality,” of the “beautiful, real, intelligent people.”²⁴ The emphasis on the beauty and intelligence of the protesters was highly problematized and discussed in both print and television media. In a critical commentary, “With regard to the protest: a comment by the Ugly,” Georgi Medarov and Lea Vajsova (2013) insisted that simplistic oppositions between the ugly and the beautiful, the poor and the rich put the cause of the protest at risk, and that democracy and morality were not luxuries destined for particular classes. In a similar vein, the writer Zahari Karabashliev (2013) expressed his fear of “snobization” of the protests.

I would claim that the “cheerfulness” and “beauty” of the summer protests were not only a product of the lifestyle-oriented self-entrepreneurial twist characteristic of many of *Dnevnik* publications, but also a conscious response to the false accusations and highly negative identity frames advanced by the government and Peevski's media. The “positive” framing of the protest was present both on the discursive level – on the pages of *Dnevnik*, *Capital*, and so on – and on the performative level, as it influenced the very way the

22 “Alan Shor: What is the Music of #ДАHCwithme?” www.segabg.com/replies.php?id=225131&p=2.

23 “The Protest Against Delyan Peevski Live.” www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/06/14/2081879_nad_10_000_izliazoha_na_protesta_sreshtu_delian/.

24 “#ДАHCwithme на Красивите и Умните.” www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BzHuOaGVtY.

protests were organized and conducted: they included dancing, cultural performances, and had a notably peaceful, almost festival-like atmosphere. #ДАHCwithme was perceived as an event where one goes with friends and family to have a good time.

After Peevski's media and other media supporting the government (for example the left-wing *Duma*) failed to convince society that the protesters were hooligans and criminal elements, they came up with new accusations: the protesters were local elites paid by the political opposition and evil international organizations. To illustrate, a columnist in the *Duma* claimed that the protesters were "Sorosoids": intellectuals paid by George Soros to defend the cause of radical capitalism and change the values of the society.²⁵ The notion of "sorosoids" became an important trope in the political life of the country that has often been invoked since by nationalists in all kinds of conspiracy theories discrediting the more liberal section of Bulgarian intellectuals.

It was in reply to such allegations that protesters started framing themselves as rich enough not to need to be paid. Their financial status became a guarantee for their purely moral engagement with the cause. An eloquent synthesis of how protesters presented themselves can be found in a letter sent by a protester to the newspaper *Dnevnik*. In the letter he writes:

I rarely skip going to the protest. [...] I see myself reflected in the others thousands of times. Fathers (and mothers) in their 30s with small children who are obviously well-off. Managers and entrepreneurs, people from the same breed as me who simply won't give up! Self-assured because they have achieved something. Despite our rulers in their pig house.

I see my parents' generation. Some realize how much they have achieved and how easily they can lose it. Others know what they haven't done and come to make up for their past passivity. All of them are well-acquainted with the treacherousness of the Communist Party better than us and are here to protect us. Us and our kids. Because they love us. [...]

We are not paid, we pay.

We come up with ideas, create, produce, provide. The whole state and everyone who gets something from it, moves thanks to us. We have the right to veto and we should use it. Every month I pay over 10,000 worth of taxes. What will happen if I stop paying them until our request is taken into account? (Rashev, 2013)

25 "The Sorosoids," <http://mail.duma.bg/node/60881/>.

Rashev's letter gives a succinct portrait of the Sofia bourgeoisie who took the lead in the #ДАHCwithme protests. It is also indicative of how participating in #ДАHCwithme was often compared to participating in the anti-communist protests in the early 1990s. Paradoxically, there was almost no connection drawn between #ДАHCwithme and the temporally much closer protests from February 2013. One possible explanation could be the fact that both in the 1990s and in the summer of 2013, the protests were directed against a left-wing government (even though, as mentioned in the first section of the chapter, in the 2000s the BSP often pursued right-wing policies when they were in power). As the authors of the blog *Hystericalparrhesia* note in their article, "The tragedy of the Self Immolations became the Farce of the Middle Class," the right-wing media tried to create an imaginary heritage and biographical coherence between the #ДАHCwithme protests and the anti-communist protests from 1989 and 1997. The winter protests against the center-right party GERB remained a strange moment difficult to assimilate in the narrative; they were framed by the summer protesters as mobilizations for survival, for electricity bills, protests of the ugly and uneducated. The summer protests, on the contrary, could be positioned more easily in the already known opposition between the left and the right (*Hystericalparrhesia*, 2013).

Of course, not everyone who participated in the summer protests was right-wing. As emphasized by one of the key participants in #ДАHCwithme, Lea Vajsova, there were considerable differences among protesters (Interview BG4). There were many leftists who participated in the first days of the protests before slowly withdrawing their support and adopting a more critical stance (Tsoneva and Medarov, 2013), as well as others who stuck to the end of the protests, providing an internal pluralism in the discourses produced by the protesters. Yet, the multitude of dissenting voices and the diversity of the first days of the protests, when thousands of people spontaneously took to the streets of Sofia, were difficult to maintain (Gueorgieva, 2016). The supporters of BSP and the new left who had taken part in the protests distanced themselves from what was increasingly becoming an anti-communist protest. It was more and more difficult to contain the inherent tension in the demands of the protesters between radical system change and the change of this particular cabinet with a right-wing one. For most of the participants it was clear that a resignation of the government led by BSP would have brought about a the return of the center-right GERB in power, with a possible restructuring of the small fragmented parties that had converged into the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). Thus, more and more people felt that the demands for radical system change were instead a cover for overthrowing a legitimately elected government and replacing it with another.

As the protests continued, the formulation of the protagonist identity field (the right-wing bourgeoisie) became strongly dependent on the formulation of the antagonist identity field: the “bad” communists who have morphed but not changed at all since 1989. In addition, the enemies were also the Turks, represented by DPS in coalition with the left-wing party. I will quote only a few comments in order to give a general idea how the protesters framed their antagonists:

bo44ko, 21:32, 14th of June, 2013, #210

There is one salvation: on every tree in the central park we should hang one communist and one member of DPS.²⁶

edin drug, 17:39, 15th of June, 2013, #114

Protests will take place not only until this government falls but also until there is a full lustration of the ruling parties and the passing of a law for confiscation of all national treasures appropriated by 500 communist families, now one should not lose courage and things should be completed, the people should jump and destroy this stinking bunch, the whole of Europe is watching us and was shocked by the arrogant way in which the communists took over and tried to manipulate our whole society, we are in Europe and the communists do not belong there. Considering that we are in Europe and not in the USSR, we'll fight against the crawling communism, the choice of Peevski was a step precisely in the direction of communizing the State Agency for National Security and creating a new National Security ruled by DPS, they have never left the old National Security Agency.²⁷

The source of all evil in the state is attributed to the ongoing possession of power by the former communist elite and the oligarchs of the transition period. Instead of capitalism being seen as the enemy, the strange non-death of communism is presented to be at the root of all social evils.

BSP welcomed the self-positioning of the protesters as the successful right-wing bourgeoisie and used it subversively against the protesters' own cause. Thus, the leader of BSP underlined that a distinction should be

26 “The Protest Against Delyan Peevski Live.” www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/06/14/2081879_nad_10_000_izliazoha_na_protesta_sreshtu_delian/.

27 “There will be protests tonight as well despite the letter of Delyan Peevski” www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2013/06/15/2082424_protesti_shte_ima_i_tazi_vecher_vupreki_pis-moto_na/?ref=miniurl#comment-114.

made between Sofia and the provincial cities where the situation was calm. Members of BSP invoked the February protests that had led to Borisov's resignation and claimed that they wanted to solve the social and economic problems that had been pointed out then.²⁸ Accepting the identity that the protesters forged for themselves, the left-wing journalist Velislava Dureva wrote one of the most widely commented analyses of the protests: "The Rebellion of the Sith."²⁹ Here is a short excerpt from the article:

"February is not June," said a young lady, "accidentally" invited on television. "Because – the lady said (until recently she was the PR of the care-taker government) – this is a protest of the normality, of the young, beautiful, truthful, intelligent, inspired." From which it follows that those from February are ignorant losers, a mob, abnormal, ugly, and even fake! Thus, a demarcation line was drawn between June and February, the ones who had enough to eat and the hungry ones, the super successful ones and the ones destroyed by life, the elite and the masses. A narcissistic and snobbish demarcation. They are successful, the others are losers. [...] The good ones are 10,000. The others around 7,272,041 (according to the last counting of the nation) are bad material, they just don't do the job. They despise everyone who cannot pay their electricity and heating, who out of desperation sets himself on fire, hangs himself, judges himself harshly, who works from morning till dawn, who can't buy his kid shoes, or textbooks, nor can buy his mother medicines. [...] They are shiny, wonderful, moral and cheerful. And cheerfully chant "Trash," "Whores!," "Fags," "Dirty Commies," and "You are Turks." That's how they educate their children. Teach them civil society. That's how you become a citizen, they say (Dureva, 2013).

Oresharski's cabinet and its supporters readily accepted the narrative of the "smiley protests of the middle class" promoted by the right-wing newspapers *Capital* and *Dnevnik*, but claimed that young, beautiful, and well-off people from the capital were not representative of the whole nation: the government was chosen with the votes of many others who were not in such a privileged position and who counted on the social policies that the state

28 "What does Stanishev think about the protests?" *Deutsche Welle*. www.dw.de/какво-мисли-станишев-за-протестите/a-16902538/.

29 The title that refers to Star Wars is a clever wordplay between Bulgarian and English. The word "sith" when pronounced in Bulgarian is a homonym with "сит" which means: "one who has had enough to eat, one who is satisfied."

was planning to implement. Thus, those in power offered an alternative story whose protagonists were those Bulgarians who could not identify with the Sofia bourgeoisie. In order to support this framing they used as evidence the “counter-protests” that started on June 26 in defense of the government. However, the actors who mobilized for the counter-protests were not numerous. Between 50 and 100 people participated in the first counter-protest on June 26, and there were serious suspicions that people had subsequently been driven in buses to Sofia to participate.³⁰ Thus, ultimately, the government did not receive the widespread support it claimed it had to oppose the “elitist” protest in Sofia. In this situation, the protests demanding its resignation and a restoration of morality in Bulgarian politics continued for months.

The government did not resign, and morality was not restored; but what was restored was the unity of the right-wing parties. After more than a decade spent in disarray, the parties that formed after the split of Ivan Kostov’s SDS (Union of Democratic Forces) consolidated in the Reformist Block, which became an important political player a year later, in 2014. Another important political subject born out of the summer protests was *Protestna Mrezha* (Protest Network), established on August 7, 2013 as a space for interaction and networking, with a major goal: the resignation of the Oresharski government, and with a main perspective: maintaining the energy of the protest (*Protestna Mrezha*, 2013).

Summing up the developments of the summer protests, the most common diagnostic frames were “mafia,” “corruption,” “oligarchy” (similarly to the winter protests), “lack of morality,” and, as the protests went on, frames referring to “communist heritage.” The most common prognostic frames were “resignation,” “reform of the system,” “more morality in politics,” and with time increasingly “lustration of former communist agents.” Protesters called each other to action by calling themselves “responsible citizens,” “young and beautiful,” “non-affiliated to political parties,” and increasingly over time, “anti-communist.” They framed their opponents as “mafia,” “the oligarchy,” “privileged minorities” (again similarly to the winter protesters), and as “communists.”

The framing of protesters’ identity was not static but dynamic, part of a highly contested relational process of transforming frames in response to the opponents’ reactions. Both the protesters and the government framed the protesters as the well-off Sofia bourgeoisie and non-participants in

30 “Around 50 people gathered at a counter-protest in support of the cabinet,” http://news.ibox.bg/material/id_850360070.

the protest as poor, socially excluded observers. But while the protesters used this framing in order to present themselves as the modern bearers of democracy and morality, the government used it to claim that instead of representing the interests of the nation, the protesters represented only their narrow class interest. In fact, the initial diversity of the protesters gradually diminished as a more coherent right-wing core was formed around *Protestna Mrezha* and the Reformers' Block. By the time autumn came, the protests had faded away in scale and were no longer a primary topic of discussion in society. That changed with the start of the student occupation that I discuss in the next section.

The university occupation

On October 23, a group of students occupied the 272 seminar room of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" to protest against a problematic decision of the Constitutional Court regarding Delyan Peevski's status as a member of parliament. The students organizing the occupation called themselves the "Early-Rising Students" (literally "The Students who Wake up Early," referring to the nineteenth-century process of "awakening" the nation through education). Most of the students were not members of the official student councils but had previous experience in citizen actions and protests. On October 25, the students declared a state of full and effective occupation of Sofia University with the following goals:

- 1 The immediate dismissal of the XLII National Assembly.
- 2 Early elections for a new parliament.
- 3 Intolerance of the social body towards the criminal lawlessness in the highest spheres of the state government.
- 4 The transformation of Bulgaria into a civilized, lawful state.
- 5 The endorsement of justice and knowledge as high public values.³¹

Ivaylo Dinev, a leading figure in the student occupation, explains that the goal of the occupiers was not only to attract attention from the outside but also to provoke internal discussions among the students (Interview BG5). The occupation was a good example of prefigurative politics (della Porta, 2013a). Different groups were formed with responsibility for public relations, the artistic expression of the protest, formulation of policy proposals, and so on. The occupation spread to other universities as well. One of the most

31 "Full occupation of Sofia University. The students present their demands in a declaration," www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=2394016.

crucial characteristics of the student occupation was the students' refusal to negotiate with any members of political parties or to allow them to influence their decisions. They largely succeeded in protecting their independence, but at the cost of self-encapsulation. The main diagnostic frames put forward by the students were again "mafia," "corruption," "oligarchy," "lack of morality." Unlike the summer protests, they did not put forward strong anti-communist messages. The most common among the prognostic frames were "resignation" and "more morality in politics." The students urged each other for action by reminding that they were "the future of the country," "those who don't want to emigrate." They self-identified as young, educated Bulgarians who were tired of corruption and criminality. Their antagonists were the corrupt oligarchs and the state servants who allowed lawlessness to flourish. Their audience were all those Bulgarians who preferred to close their eyes instead of rebelling against widespread corruption.

As can be expected, the government made sporadic attempts to accuse the students of being paid but, as with the summer protests, these alternative framings did not gain traction. Again similarly to the summer protests, the student occupation failed to gain widespread social support and did not lead to a radical change. Once the occupation finished in early January 2014, a period of decreasing protest activity followed. In May 2014, the results of the European elections showed clearly that there was little support for the Bulgarian Socialist Party that led the government. But more importantly, the first months of 2014 saw the "divorce" of Delyan Peevski and Tsvetan Vasilev, the two main oligarchs in the country. A major rupture between the two of them was pointed out as one of the reasons for increased tension in the Oresharski cabinet, which led to its eventual resignation³² one year after the #ДАHCwithme protests had started. But the resignation came neither when the protesters demanded it nor because they were demanding it. Another, more hidden, logic led to the change in power. In November 2014, a new cabinet was formed with Prime Minister Boiko Borisov, who had resigned a year before. The protest circle closed.

In conclusion, there were three waves of protest in Bulgaria in 2013. The winter protests targeted a center-right government, while the summer ones and the student occupation addressed a center-left government. However, they still had many common demands. In essence, protesters in all three waves defined as a main problem the oligarchic capture of the state and

32 "BSP pays the political price, Vasilev – the economic one," [http://www.novini.bg/news/217563-първанов-бсп-плаща-политическата-цена-а-цветан-василев-икономическата-\(видео\).html](http://www.novini.bg/news/217563-първанов-бсп-плаща-политическата-цена-а-цветан-василев-икономическата-(видео).html).

demanded more transparency and morality in politics. Another common feature of all three waves is that they failed to address austerity policies and questions of social redistribution. Focusing extensively on corruption and criminality prevented the protesters from acknowledging that even if governments had pursued their economic and social policies without any criminal redirection of resources and merging different spheres of influence, they still had no promising long-term strategy for stimulating economic growth in the country and fighting rising inequality. In the last part of this chapter, I explore why austerity did not appear in the framings offered by any of the three waves of protest.

6.4 Left in translation. Why was leftist critique left out?

Frames do not exist in some isolated ethereal reality. On the contrary, they are elaborated and shared by political subjects. The question I explore in the final section of this chapter is: why did left-wing political subjects not interfere successfully in any of the three waves of protest and put forward frames that focused on austerity and social distribution? The first, obvious answer is that the nominally left-wing party in the country, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, as already emphasized several times, had long been implementing right-wing policies that alienated its own constituency. The members of the party could not problematize austerity policies and raise their saliency as this would have meant criticizing their own policy line. But why didn't other actors on the left bring up the frame and popularize it? I claim that these actors were not many and they were not strong enough.

One of the reasons for the state of the left is, first of all, the deep implication of the descendants of the Bulgarian Communist Party in oligarchic networks of power that delegitimized it publicly. This delegitimation was further extended by a widespread narrative of the failure of the socialist project promulgated by right-wing neoliberal think tanks that monopolized public discourse and promoted a logic of unrestrained marketization. Marx became a dirty name. Textbooks in historical Marxism were often sent to the country houses together with books on (Marxist) political economy: a discipline decisively belonging to the past. The process of accession to the EU prolonged the hegemony of this *pensée unique*. Paradoxically, it was the financial crisis that, after almost 20 years, reopened the possibility of talking critically in the public sphere about capitalism and questioning the connection between capitalism and democracy.

In January 2012, the collective project “New Left Perspectives,” supported by the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, published its manifesto. “New Left Perspectives” states that its aim is to liberate the Bulgarian left from the logic of political parties and to overcome the nostalgia of state socialism while fighting for equality in legal but also in socio-economic terms. Two months later, in March 2012, the discussion network “Solidarna Bulgaria” established its online presence with the mission to provide citizens with a space to discuss and coordinate in order to overcome the democratic deficits in the country. Throughout 2013, these two projects provided valuable insights into the dynamics of social mobilization and focused on poverty, disenfranchisement, and the general failure of the economic model that had led to the crisis, thus becoming in a sense an internal corrective for a left that had lost its voice and identity. In the beginning of 2014, the political magazine *A-specto* was founded, providing a critique of capitalism and an in-depth political analysis of both domestic and international events. Both “New Left Perspectives” and “Solidarna Bulgaria” have organized multiple events and public discussions; yet, they do not have wide social support but remain enclosed within the circles of Sofia intellectuals. If we take *Facebook* popularity as a proxy, the “New Left Perspectives” page has 71 “likes,” “Solidarna Bulgaria” 1,540; while the right-wing Reformers’ Block has 27,252 likes and the unofficial fan page of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov more than 176,000. *A-specto* magazine is more popular than the other two left-wing projects, with 8,368 likes online. One has to also bear in mind the often emphasized tension between *A-specto* and “New Left Perspectives,” since *A-specto* promotes a pro-Russian political stance, while “New Left Perspectives” takes a stance against Putin and does not equate anti-capitalism with anti-United States and pro-Russia sentiment.

“New Left Perspectives” is ultimately a radical left project that embraces experiments with new types of democracy and identity politics and questions the micro and macro foundations of power. At the same time, it is also the political project most detached from local reality and strongly devoted to academic research and political theory. The anti-party sentiment of “New Left Perspectives” of course prevents them from evolving into a political subject of the more traditional type; but the real problem is that they have not attempted to reach out to local communities and build a bottom-up collective with potential for political action of a non-traditional type. Thus, they have remained rather self-enclosed: providing valid and highly insightful critique of social mobilizations but failing to inspire mobilizations themselves. “Solidarna Bulgaria” tackles issues of education, ecology, healthcare, labor policies, international trade agreements, and other topics

from a critical perspective, aiming to provide both alternative information and a space for discussion. However, it has not yet managed to achieve wide social influence. Finally, *A-specto* is a media and not a political project, and despite its importance in a media environment completely dominated by Peevski's media, it has neither the pretension nor the legitimacy to organize people.

None of the rising stars on the left side of the Bulgarian political spectrum that I have described so far has managed to take advantage of the slow disintegration of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and attract some of its supporters or gather new supporters. The Socialist Party had already lost its identity by implementing a series of right-wing policies in the 2000s. But after 2013's protests and the rearrangement of oligarchic circles in 2014, it also started losing its local support and entered a process of calm chaos and splintering into smaller parties (such as "ABV", or "Movement 21"). The collapse of the traditional left opened opportunities that have still not been grasped by formations of the new left.

The quick disintegration of the old left, completely unable to reinvent itself, and the arrested development of the new left are among the main reasons why austerity framing could not gain prominence during any of the three waves of protest and people remained enclosed in discourses inherited from the past.

6.5 Conclusion

What I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter is that it is not enough to study the ways in which protesters frame their grievances and identities; it is also necessary to explore the absence of frames that had every reason to gain popularity but did not. Working at the intersection between political economy and social movement research, I have tried to illuminate the curious absence of an austerity frame in the 2013 Bulgarian protests. My research is exploratory and aims to provide information on both the political and the economic contexts of the protests, as well as the ways in which grievances and identities were framed. In the first section of the chapter, I have shown how pursuing neoliberal policies combined with more and more centralization of the state after the financial crisis and a diminished ability of the EU to sanction local politicians after the Bulgarian accession led to rising inequality and a pervasive merging of business, media, and politics. In the second section, I have shown how the three consecutive waves of protest all focused on the development of local oligarchic structures and

corruption, but none of them problematized austerity as such. Nationalist, civil society-oriented, and anti-communist identifications prevailed in the three waves of protest that searched for neoliberal solutions to the problems triggered by neoliberalism itself. Multiple reasons can be pointed out for the absence of a strong left critique in the protests: the involvement of former leftist elites in preying on the state that compromised them politically, the dominance of neoliberal thought and think tanks, the unprecedented concentration of media ownership which makes it difficult for new voices to emerge.

My claim is that only a political economy analysis that focuses not only on oligarchic structures and state weakness but also on the general logic of neoliberalism and the way Bulgaria has suffered from austerity within the EU can provide a common narrative for the winter protests, the summer protests, and the subsequent student occupation. What is more, only such an analysis can explain the common features of the Bulgarian protests and protests in countries as diverse as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey, and Brazil. The strength of the current book lies precisely in juxtaposing these different country cases and exploring the protest cascades across different countries in the world system, paying attention to the particular protest dynamics but not losing sight of the general transformation of capitalism that ultimately led to a crisis that shook the whole system.

Last but not least, this chapter has shown clearly that framing is a relational agentic process. If exploring austerity policies and the logic of neoliberalism is to be more than a theoretical exercise, political subjects have to work on the ground and actively put forward diagnostic frames that focus on austerity and prognostic frames for a more just and equal society. New political subjectivities on the left should be built. They can be achieved not by emigrating but on the contrary, by working closely with local communities. The way out of the dead end paradoxically starts with staying, not with leaving.

List of interviews

- BG1 Doncho Dudev, manager, organizer of the Sunday protests in the winter of 2013. Sofia, July 2014
- BG2 Yanaki Ganchev, head of the Association of Users of Telecommunications and Internet Services, organizer of the weekday evening protests in the winter of 2013. Sofia, July 2014

- BG3 Konstantin Pavlov, blogger, member of Protest Network and active participant in the summer #ДAHCwithme Protests. Sofia, August 2014
- BG4 Lea Vajsova, PhD in sociology, member of Protest Network and active participant in the summer #ДAHCwithme Protests. Sofia, April 2014
- BG5 Ivaylo Dinev, student, MA in Cultural Anthropology, one of the leaders of the Student Occupation of Sofia University. Sofia, May 2014
- BG6 Ivaylo Achev, journalist, editor of the news site Actualno.com. Sofia, July 2014
- BG7 Gueorgui Zhechev, analyst and consultant on energy politics. Sofia, April 2015
- BG8 Martin Vladimirov, analyst on energy politics at the Centre for the Study of Democracy. Sofia, April 2015
- BG9 Ivo Hristov, sociologist, one of the authors of the books *The Black Hole of Bulgarian Power Industry* and *The Networks of Transition: What Actually Happened in Bulgaria after 1989*. Sofia, April 2015

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