Kristen GHODSEE
Bulgaria: Manufacturing mass distraction and conspiracy theories

Interview by Anthony Georgieff; photography by Dennis Griggs

In more than one way, the collapse of world Communism in 1989 caught Bulgaria and the Bulgarians by surprise. No one saw enough imagined that the system devised by Stalin, Dimitrov, Brezhnev and Zhivkov – which had seemed so strong it would last forever – could just implode within a few days. Worse, no one had imagined what the “system” that came to replace it would look like. Soon, many Bulgarians discovered that there would be no system at all. So, they started seeking explanations.

There were no political scientists in the modern sense at that time. Even if there were, the language they spoke differed radically from the language ordinary Bulgarian were used to – to an extent that the abyss between what talking heads on TV were saying and what the actual world outside of the box looked like became as grand, if not grander, than the one that had existed under Todor Zhivkov. Many Bulgarians, consequently, started seeking their explanations elsewhere.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when it seemed that Communism had gone away for good, came the time of the clairvoyants. Hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians were glued to their television sets, mesmerised by what seers, mediums, channellers, telepaths and ordinary charlatans had to say about the situation Bulgaria had found itself in.

Their theories ranged from the cryptic historical to the extraterrestrial, and people gladly parted with their cash (there were no text messages at the time) to arrange meetings to be told what their own future would look like. Modernity in the industrial sense came to Bulgaria in the late 1990s when the clairvoyants were gradually replaced by the “positivists.” Just like in Western Europe in the early 19th Century, those believed in science – political science, opinion polls, meritocracy and all that – and thought science and rational thought would solve Bulgaria’s growing post-Communist woes.

They didn’t. Despite the economic growth and the ostensible irreversibility of democracy of the past decade, Bulgaria once again plunged into totalitarianism, at the end of the 2000s, this time disguised as crony capitalism. It was again ruled by people who resembled Latin America of the 1950s and 1960s and who unashamedly disbanded the organs of the state to favour their own chums.

Those people did come to power through elections. Where did the country go wrong? Are Bulgarians so different from Czechs, Poles, Hungarians and East Germans to be so inept in ruling themselves and putting their house in order?

So came the time of the psychiatrists. Switch on your TV in 2013 and you will see that the talking heads of the 1990s and 2000s had been replaced by qualified MDs who would gladly explain the predicament of their country in terms of mental conditions, just stopping short of offering prescription medicines that should collectively be taken by the population as a remedy.

Yes, Bulgaria is not a very funny place in 2013 but no, the whole of the Bulgarian nation has not gone insane. The answers to the questions should not be sought in the sort of explanations that corrupt politicians and crooked hacks offer, but in the lives of ordinary Bulgarians – the people who go to work every day in small towns and villages, who have to feed their families, and who eventually go or do not go to the ballot boxes.

What is their life like? How have the tumult of post-Communism and the disillusionment with democracy affected them?

Kristen Ghodsee, the noted US ethnologist who has visited Bulgaria and been involved with things Bulgarian since 1989, has some unusual but very interesting answers.

The current crisis in Bulgaria is part of a larger global political and economic crisis. It should not be considered in isolation. Bulgarians tend to see their problems as unique when in fact their problems are analogous to those in many other countries,
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especially on the periphery of Europe. The capacities of the state in Bulgaria in 2008 had massive effects on the global economy. International organizations and Western economic think tanks had a say in privatization deals. But they felt powerless in the face of privatization deals in Greece, but also in Spain and Italy, and it is precisely these countries where corruption leaders gave billions of dollars to bail out the banks while ordinary people lost their jobs and homes. What this crisis has highlighted is that many citizens in democratic countries is that their elected leaders are prioritizing the interests of the economic elites. The origins of the current crisis are a deep commitment of democratic elected leaders to represent the interests of their constituents. I marched with protest signs very often in 2013, and I also have local parties in the summer protests as much. Much has been made in the Western press about the demographics of these two protest groups, and I agree that there are significant class differences. But both sets of protesters are demonstrating against essentially the same things. For instance, one of the most pressing demands of the winter protests was for the liberalization of the electricity distribution monopolies. People felt they were the unfair victims of price gouging and considered state-owned electricity distribution monopolies a possible solution. There are many European countries where utilities are still state-owned, and the price of electricity in those countries is lower than in private monopolies. In Bulgaria, the privatization of the electricity distribution monopoly means that the government is making a profit on something that is a basic need. The energy crisis is just one example of the privatization of basic needs. The privatization of the public utilities in Bulgaria has helped to increase prices even more, corruption in privately owned utility companies, but there is just as much, if not more, corruption in state-owned monopolies.

In the current economic crisis, many European countries are facing a similar problem. The government covers up the problem of the nuclear power plants, which are expensive to operate, and people are being asked to pay more money for electricity. This crisis has highlighted the importance of the people’s right to energy independence. The government has been very reluctant to invest in new energy sources, and the Belene Nuclear Power Plant, which is still under construction, has been delayed by several years. People in Bulgaria are concerned about the safety of the nuclear power plants and the potential impact on the environment. The government has also been accused of favoring private companies over the public sector in its decision-making process.

Furthermore, the government has been criticized for its lack of transparency and accountability. The privatization of state-owned companies has led to increases in prices and the loss of control over essential services. The government has been accused of favoring foreign investors over the local population, and this has led to a lack of trust in the government.

In conclusion, the current crisis highlights the importance of the people’s right to energy independence and the need for greater transparency and accountability in the decision-making process. The government must prioritize the interests of its citizens, and it must be held accountable for its actions. The people of Bulgaria must have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.