



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 sane 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 Bulgarians 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 inefficient 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,

especially on the periphery of Europe.

The market crash in the United States in 2008 had massive effects on the global economy. International organizations prioritized the stability of the financial system over the sufferings of ordinary people, and local governments have been powerless to stop them. We can see this most clearly in Greece, but also in Spain and Italy, and it is certainly true of the United States. American leaders gave billions of dollars to bail out the banks while ordinary people lost their jobs and homes. What this crisis has highlighted for many citizens in democratic countries is that their elected leaders are prioritizing the interests of the economic elites.

The origins of the current crisis arise from a deep distrust and frustration with the failure of democratically elected leaders to represent the interests of their constituencies. I marched with protestors in Sofia back in the winter of 2013, and I was also here to participate in the summer protests as well. Much has been made in the Bulgarian media about the unique demographics of these two protest groups, and I agree that there are significant class differences. But both sets of protestors are demonstrating against essentially the same things.

For instance, one of the most pressing demands of the winter protests was for the nationalization of the three foreign-owned electricity distribution monopolies. People felt they were the unfair victims of price gouging and considered state ownership a possible solution. There are many European countries where utilities are still state owned, and there is good evidence that electricity prices are lower in these countries. But Bulgaria's political elites blindly follow the market model for electricity distribution because anything state-owned is too much like Communism. Of course there is government corruption in state-owned utility monopolies, but there is just as much, if not more, corruption in privately owned utility monopolies.

The winter protests came after the 27 January referendum on the restarting of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant, which many people believed might help Bulgaria achieve energy independence. Although the referendum was approved in all 31 electoral regions, the results were invalidated because the statutes require a 60 percent electoral turnout for the results of a referendum to be binding. I was at the protest against the privatization of the freight unit of the Bulgarian State Railways. The Bulgarians that I spoke to were clear that for them a real democracy meant that the electorate should have a say in privatization deals. But they

felt that the rules of democracy were written so as to disproportionately protect the interests of business people who profit off of the misery of ordinary Bulgarians. They felt powerless.

The summer protesters were equally frustrated with the inability of the democratic process to bring any real change. Some have asked for revisions to the Constitution and the electoral code in order to make the National Assembly more representative of Bulgarian society. Some Bulgarians believe that the current 4 percent threshold to gain any seats in parliament distorts the democratic process. On the other hand, many Bulgarians want to institute the first-past-the-post system, which allows for parties to win with simple pluralities.

I think first-past-the-post system would be a disaster in a small country like Bulgaria. It would have the effect of disenfranchising the political supporters of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, Ataka and the other smaller parties, and produce a terrible two party system that would probably result in more political gridlock and elite level corruption. There are civic organizations in the United States and in the UK that are stridently opposed to the first-past-the-post system because they believe it undermines real democracy. As someone who lives in a first-past-the-post country, I can tell you that this system is largely responsible for the waning faith that Americans have in the democratic process.

Indeed, it seems everywhere you look political elites are trying to prevent democracy from being a system that truly represents the voice of the people. For instance, the Supreme Court in the United States recently made a ruling that treats corporations as individuals for the purposes of campaign contributions, thereby increasing the power of money in elections. Even former US President Jimmy Carter has spoken out against this decision, saying that "financial corruption" is destroying the foundations of American democracy. It is important to remember that the current Bulgarian crisis is part of a wider crisis in people's faith in the democratic process.

Does Bulgaria have an ethnic problem?

It depends who you ask. I lived in the city of Madan in the Rhodope for about a year back in 2005-2006. This is a predominantly Pomak region. I was deeply impressed by the spirit of tolerance and multiculturalism that permeated the community. Bulgaria has been a multiethnic and multiconfessional society for centuries. A friend in Madan once told me that societies were like flower gardens,

they were more beautiful if you had lots of different types of flowers planted side by side. To the extent that Bulgaria today has any kind of ethnic "problem," I believe that politicians are manufacturing it in order to distract people from the real problems in society: "weapons of mass distraction."

Of course, members of the Gypsy and Turkish minorities in Bulgaria are subject to discrimination. The more mono-ethnic the village or town, the more likely Bulgarians are to be hostile to Turks and Roma. In these areas, Gypsies are all imagined to be beggars, prostitutes and thieves, and the Turks apparently represent the Fifth Column of Turkish irredentism.

I think what is truly frightening is the way the current political crisis in Bulgaria has given rise to these new "civic patrols." People are striking out against immigrants and refugees, because they feel that their government as well as the EU have betrayed them. These poorer Bulgarians believe that political refugees are being treated better than Bulgarians who are citizens. This is a potentially very dangerous situation.

Is fascism on the rise in Bulgaria?

I have been doing research on Bulgaria since 1997, and have spent a lot of time living in and traveling around the country. I was here for the 2005 parliamentary elections, and I remember those little, black and white, Xerox posters for Ataka around Sofia. I have watched as the influence of the far right has grown around the country, especially in the small cities and regions, which were de-industrialized after 1989.

I think that the ultranationalists are tapping into the anger and frustration that Bulgarians feel toward the democratic process. It is important to pay attention to what Ataka offers to people with its political platform. In December 2012, Volen Siderov announced that he would cancel the concessions to the foreign owned electricity distribution companies, and would distribute their annual "three billion euros" in profits to the Bulgarian people through social welfare programs. He also promised to build another nuclear power plant. These are things that many Bulgarians say they want. Sometimes it seems that Ataka is the only party listening.

In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, I believe that Ataka is more of a leftwing party than a true rightwing party. They embrace an ultranationalist identity because, ironically, it is easier in Bulgaria to be a fascist than it is to be a communist. Politically, there is no true left in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Socialist Party, or BSP, is a center-left party that will do the EU's bidding like all other established

political parties in the country. If there were a real leftwing party that threatened to nationalize foreign-owned industries, the EU would make a concerted effort to prevent their election (as they did with SYRIZA in Greece). I believe that the "fascist" parties in Bulgaria are ideological stand-ins for this absent left; that is where their power comes from. If their political platform was only filled with nationalist, anti-immigrant vitriol, they would have far less influence in society.

Why are Bulgarians so nostalgic about Communism?

I have written extensively on this topic. Starting with an article on "Red nostalgia" that I published in 2004, my research for the last decade has explored this phenomenon by focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary people who went to school, made friends, fell in love, had children and grew old together under the old system.

The political freedoms that came with democracy in 1989 were packaged with the worst type of unregulated, free market capitalism, which completely destabilized the rhythms of everyday life. I remember the 1990s and the crime, corruption and chaos that replaced what many people remember as comfortable predictability. One of the biggest critiques of Communism was that it was not democratic, that is the people had no say in how their country was run, there were travel restrictions, people had no freedom of speech or association, and the press was censored. The coming of democracy was supposed to rectify these deficiencies.

Today many Bulgarians still feel like they have no say in how their country is run (as the frustration of both the winter and summer protestors shows). People are allowed to travel outside Bulgaria, but most do not have the money to do so. When they do travel, it is permanently. The country has been decimated by the outmigration of the young and skilled. Yes, there are new political rights – freedom of speech, religion and association – but they have come at the cost of an erosion of social rights.

The press is no longer censored by the state, but it is censored by the demands of the market. Journalists are free to write what they want, but they are not free to publish it all because newspapers and magazines must be profitable. The quality of journalism has suffered.

Finally, I'll come back to electricity. I have a colleague who studies postcommunist nostalgia in Lithuania. In the villages where she works, people cannot afford electricity or heat or water, all basic things that they had had access to before 1991. The villagers

use candles to light their homes, burn wood in their stoves, and shower and flush their toilets less frequently to make do on their small salaries and pensions. In the winter months, the candles produce thick smoke that blackens their walls and ceilings, and the smell of the unflushed toilets permeates the air. For them postcommunism is dark, cold and foul smelling. By contrast, they remember the Communist era was a time of light, warmth and cleanliness. Is it a wonder that they are nostalgic?

Are Bulgarians conspiracy theorists?

Yes. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster has made an indelible imprint on the postsocialist psyche of many East Europeans. The government coverups of the nuclear fallout were conspiracies to keep vital information from the people. I don't know how anyone could live through something like that and not be distrustful of those in power, whether democratically elected or not.

Recently, psychologists have done studies on the brains of people who believe in conspiracy theories. What they find is that that conspiracy theorists are more likely to be cynical about the world, and particularly cynical about politics. Theories of hidden power are more appealing to people who feel like they have no agency in the world, no ability to change the course of their lives. Studies show that conspiracy theories are a psychological tool that people use to deal with uncertainty and a general feeling of helplessness in their lives. The past two and a half decades have not been easy for most Bulgarians. The so-called transition has filled people's lives with chaos and uncertainty. These are the exact conditions that produce this kind of paranoia.

Has Western-type democracy failed in Bulgaria?

I am tired of hearing that "Bulgaria never truly broke with its Communist past" or that Bulgaria isn't "democratic" enough, or that the country has no real civil society. "Western-type Democracy" is working here as well as it is working anywhere else right now. The corruption of the democratic process by mafia-business interests or economic elites is not a problem limited to Bulgaria. I believe that ordinary people around the world (including in the West) are beginning to question whether what you call Western-type democracy is truly the most democratic form of governance. It is therefore wrong to blame Bulgarians, or something about their national character, for the current crisis.

Looking ahead to the future is hard. Perhaps nothing will happen or perhaps the ongoing protests will precipitate major civil

unrest. But Bulgaria has a long history. It has been allied with or subsumed under many empires that have come and gone: the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the greater German *Lebensraum*, the Soviet-controlled East bloc, and now NATO and the EU. What is remarkable is that Bulgaria has always survived the total collapse of these imperial formations. After all these centuries, Bulgaria still exists. Bulgarians are survivors, and perhaps it is their deep cynicism that saves them.

Yet, whatever happens in Bulgaria in the near future, there will probably still be conspiracy theorists. ■

Kristen Ghodsee, a native of San Diego, California, is the Director and John S. Osterweis Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at Bowdoin College. She is the author of *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (Duke University Press, 2005), *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* (Princeton University Press 2009), *Lost In Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Socialism* (Duke University Press 2011), and numerous articles on gender, civil society and Eastern Europe. She is the recipient of fellowships from NSF, Fulbright, NCEEER, IREX and ACLS as well as the winner of internationally competitive residential research fellowships at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC; the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey; the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, Germany, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. In 2012, she was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Anthropology and Cultural Studies.