

Theoretical Analyses

Psychological Aspects of Civic Protests in Bulgaria

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Abstract

The article analyzes some aspects of the role of the political psychology in the sphere of civil society. Civic activism requires adequate psychological motivation and qualities of the participants and leaders of civic events. Their absence is a factor for ineffectiveness of different types of civic activities, including the protest activity.

Keywords: psychological motivation, psychological manipulation, protest

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Introduction

The article was written on the base of analysis of a lot of public protests in Bulgaria during the transition period since 1989. Dozens (76) of participants in them were interviewed with the method "unstandardized interview" (more information about these protests and the interviewed participants in them can be found in Pachkova, 2015). The author participated in more than 20 protests and conducted included surveillance during her participation. The comparative method was used – Bulgarian protests were compared with similar civic events worldwide. The comparison was made from the point of view of the goals of the protests, their participants and their influence on political decisions, using literature and information from the media on these issues.

Civic Protests – Psychological Characteristics and Tendencies

One of the mandatory qualities of any leader, of any great organizer is to be a good psychologist (regardless of their education). It is required in more democratic, as well as undemocratic political regimes. Although in both modes of regimes leader's workmanship of the psychological treatment is expressed differently. The history provides a lot of examples that many leaders did not have high education or aristocratic origins and upbringing, but with a thin psychological sense they had succeeded to occupy leadership positions in various forms of active citizenship

or to become state leaders and to manage their peoples for a long time. Typical examples of such kind of leaders are some leaders of the former "socialist" countries. Stalin, Todor Zhivkov and other leaders have low educational level (Baeva, 2006; Hristov, 2012; Yahiel, 1997), but this does not prevent them to come to forefront in their opposition movements, and after that to succeed to convince the "nomenclature" and their nations for decades that they are appropriate leaders for them.

The nature of contemporary election campaigns increased requirements to the political elite. Election campaigns requires from them development of their psychological abilities – to feel the mood of the electorate and to find adequate ways to react. The reduction of the hard electorate of parties, the increase of number of the fluctuating voters, also poses new challenges to the politicians. The need from greater flexibility and consideration with this increasing heterogeneity of the electorate and its psychological characteristic is growing up. The party rules and obligations are becoming less important to influence the masses. This is at least due to the decrease of the membership in the political parties. The importance of the psychological means of impact on fluctuating electorate is increasing because the voters are becoming more and more diverse as personal characteristics, and behaviour. The conquest of their mind and emotions require more and more knowledge and skills. It is no coincidence that in election campaigns the role of experts in psychology increases.

The number and types of civic activities that are not connected with the preliminary organization and hierarchical subordination of the citizens are increasing (Prodanov, 2012). The number of cases where protest activities gather citizens who do not know each other, who are not tied in any way to each other is increasing (Pachkova, 2015). At the same time, to be their protest effective, they have to be organized to some extent. Imposition of organizers, of leaders of civil increasingly requires by them to rely on informal influence, on psychological manipulation. There are more conditions for the influence of populist leaders who do not have behind them powerful parties with clear hierarchical rules, but are able to influence with psychological means to earn the sympathies of the audience. These leaders usually grow up from the protest movements charged with a lot of emotions. When there is pent-up energy among the masses, these leaders find ways to focus it on them and use it in an appropriate way for their own advancement and enforcement in the political sphere (Taggart, 2002).

There is high psychological stress experienced by leading figures of protests because of their impermanent status. The absence of any form of protection of these figures by clearer rights and obligations increases their uncertainty. They are not enough protected against claims for leadership positions by other people.

The trend towards increasing social inequality in the world including in developed countries (Oxfam International, 2016; Vitali, Glattfelder, & Battiston, 2011) leads to growing discontent around the world. Populations in turn, lead to increasing civic activity not only in countries like Bulgaria, but also in more developed Western countries (van Stekelenburg, 2015). Protest activities more often go beyond a country and leaders have to influence people from different countries with different interests, cultures, religions, etc. The regulation of the behaviour of protesting people from different countries requires increasing psychological skills and understanding. This, on the one hand, applies to the leaders of the protest, but on the other hand, refers to the representatives of the ruling elites in their reactions to the protests (Durrheim & Foster, 1999; Thomas & Louis, 2013).

The effective civic activity, including protest activity, is highly dependent on knowledge of the human psyche and the skills to use it by the best way in the fight for various causes. Along with the changes in the social environment under the influence of many dynamic factors, many changes in the development of social movements are observed (Somma, 2010). There are changes in ways of growing up and validation of the leaders of various forms of civic

activity, in their functioning as such. This applies with full force to those who hold leadership positions in civic events in Bulgaria.

The role of the hierarchy has been reduced. Still less the leader can direct the behaviour of protesters with orders and sanctions. Much more the leader has to rule them with persuasion, with specific incentives, manoeuvres of advertising, of psychological treatment (Dinev, 2014).

There are changing attitudes of the participants in the protest actions towards the leader and between themselves, especially when it is about to protests in large settlements. The degree of personal acquaintance and affection, mutual loyalty and trust between the participants in the protest, as well as between them and their leaders is lower. Often the protest gathers people with not quite the same interests and understandings, with not quite the same requests, from different parts of the settlement. This prevents mutual understanding and support. Participants in a lot of the protest activities are ready to disappointment and criticism, to sway between "Hosanna" and "Crucify him". Therefore this psychological pressure requires from the leaders of the protest more and more mental toughness, a combination of perseverance and flexibility.

The heterogeneity of most of protest groups increases the possibility of conflict situations within them and between them. The search for consensus and the ability of the leader to negotiate become more necessary. The situations often become complicated in terms of the use of violence in protest events. When there is a lower level of mutual acquaintance and mutual control between protesters, leaders are burdened with more responsibilities in this regard also. The groups of protesters who are prone to more or less violence, to destructive activities usually appear during the protests. Some of them are consciously deployed by external entities. Mastering them too often is a very difficult job and requires great endurance and craftsmanship by the leaders of the protest.

Discussion

In Bulgaria, during some protests some people intensify their activity and even some targeted groups of people with destructive, violent behaviour are implemented whose influence is not very big (Mizov, 2014). The smaller degree of destructive orientation of Bulgarian struggles is rather their advantage, not a disadvantage. In general, the destruction of material values is not the most promising behaviour, especially concerning public property or personal property of the relatively innocent civilians. Such behaviour leads to further financial burden usually on groups that are disadvantaged and are protesting against their handicap. The lack of unnecessary violence may be a sign of intelligence of most Bulgarians involved in the protests. Perhaps they realize that everything destroyed in the streets will be restored with their money, and that is not the only way to influence the government.

The quantity and diversity of civil society organizations that are involved in civil strivings are increasing. The organizers of the protests more often have to communicate with very different in composition, behaviour and leadership civic organizations. The more these organizations interested in participating in a protest are, the more complicated are the negotiations between them to coordinate their actions, slogans, demands, forms of protest. And then to the fore stand out those who have intellectual, but also the psychological readiness, to interact appropriately with others and to impose their positions. It is a big challenge to manage the competition between the different groups, between the leaders of these groups.

More civilian actors in Bulgaria acquire skills and awareness for achieving unity – based on their bitter experience or increasing theoretical training. But in many cases, such unity had not been achieved. The leaders had not known how to combine different classes of protesting people and the protest suffered from it. An example of such protest was a protest in the spring of 2013 against the high prices of some essential services imposed by foreign monopolies. In this protest, groups from across the country with a variety of features and ideas to solving problems participated, with big differences in their experience and different personal characteristics of the organizers of the civic activities. As a result, negotiations were extremely difficult. That was one of the reasons for inefficiency in the outcome of the protest.

Another field of application of psychological “craftsmanship” of leaders is the work with potential supporters of the protest, the work for formation of appropriate public opinion. One of the biggest problems of the civic participation of different actors in Bulgaria is their ability to attract attention and sympathy of public opinion in the name of the cause.

In this respect the need for knowledge and experience in working with the media needs to increase. There are a lot of media and they are with very different editorial policy and behaviour. This requires a specific approach for each of them. A trend in the development of Bulgarian struggles is that protesting people more skillfully communicate with the media, use them to attract the attention of the public and the authorities. They use the experience gained from numerous protests. More and more people realize that the falling of their struggle to the attention of the media is a chance to find assistance from other people with a similar problem, as well as by the authorities. Unravelling of protest events in the media is one way to minimize the risks to the protesters, for control of subjects who wish to blackmail them, to rape, to terrorize to withdraw their messages (Sandov, 2013).

The protesting people use central and local media. Increasingly, when local media organize information curtain for demands of the protesters, they navigate successfully to the central media. Against the psychological manipulation of the media more often the leaders use the same kind of psychological manipulation – by speaking with the help of digital technology and other means they exaggerate their strength, their unity, form the necessary feelings among their own supporters and among public. It is true that the experience and craftsmanship of many leaders of the protests in relationship with the media are growing, but there are also many errors and unsuccessful attempts to influence.

The need for proper psychological approach in communication with internal and external power structures, as well as domestic and foreign economic entities increases (Klandermans, 1997). In today's globalizing world there is a need to communicate during protests with representatives not only of Bulgarian ruling elite, but also with representatives of more and more international organizations, more and more foreign economic subjects, more and more representatives of foreign countries in Bulgaria. Their pressure and influence is growing, becomes more complicated, characterized by great diversity and these tendencies increase requirements to the leaders of the protest. These complications were pretty obvious during the protests against the proliferation of GMP products, during the protests in spring of 2013, during the protests against Plamen Oresharski's government in the same year, which had obvious external friends and foes. These escalating external influences complicate requirements toward leaders – on the one hand, to protect the interest of protesters, and on the other hand, to come not into unnecessary confrontation with external factors, to manoeuvre between the external and internal factors.

The contemporary civil activity requires ever greater wealth of methods to influence the minds and psyche of the participants in the protest. On the one hand, this is due to the growing heterogeneity of participants in the protest

actions. On the other hand, new technologies further increase the requirements towards the behaviour of the leaders (Prodanov, 2012). New technologies help to increase the opportunities for action and influence of provocateurs, forces who want to break up the protest, to weaken it. This further increases the requirements for leaders to know their methods of action, to can identify provocateurs and respond to their influences. Maxim Mizov (2014, p. 67) talks about "civil-protest hygiene", expressed in the fight against implemented people, against provocateurs, in preventive and other measures to isolate unwanted elements in protest.

One of the main problems of the protesters that rely less on organizations and more on the web in the global era, is their greater helplessness in the face of interested forces and their attempts to break, to split the protesters – for example by paid protesters to speak on their behalf in the web and to replace the messages of genuine protesters.

They are more helpless during some attempts their behaviour to be presented like incomprehensible and unacceptable and to minimize their supporters. More and more often the expressed solidarity from new people in the web at first glance looks like solidarity but it turns attempt to surreptitiously breaking and undoing the protest. All political elites are trying to use this technique more effectively. They are trying to put the controversies and distrust among the protesters, especially during more spontaneous and unorganized protests. The challenges facing the leaders of the protest grew. They have to recognize those who demonstrate a huge network readiness for activity, but do not have the courage to appear on the street. They have to recognize those who present themselves as supporters of the protest, and indeed their goals are quite different. They have to recognize and trust those who have real motives and feelings to participate in the protest.

The tendency of decreasing tolerance of general public reflects the attitudes towards the protests. The general high level of anxiety and aggressiveness too often leads to high levels of psychological intolerance of various categories of people toward the protests and their causes due to the fact that any protest complicates the situation and to some extent violates public order. To some extent each protest hinders the daily life of more or a few citizens. So many people, even though they know that the protesters have a right to protest, express disagreement with the protesters, offend them, threaten them, etc. Sometimes they participate in counter-protests, because of rational considerations, high level of anxiety and intolerance toward the problems among different groups.

The protests in Bulgaria during the transition period passed through various stages. They were coloured with different rational, but also emotional, and psychological characteristics (Pachkova, 2015). The first years of transition were a kind of intoxication of political freedom. People wanted to enjoy the right to participate in various forms of civic activity.

At the outset of transition, enthusiasm for citizen participation in political life was huge, the majority of people voted, participated in meetings and other forms of civic activity, enjoying political freedom. But these activities were usually associated with political infighting and less with solving specific cases, specific problems of their existence (Pachkova, 2015). At this time, optimism still dominated as a psychological accent.

After a stormy start under the new conditions of the transition, some reduction in the intensity of the struggles happened probably because much of the population still had not parted with hopes for a better future, with optimistic feelings. After the initial burst of activity, reassurance came that once democracy had come all will be fine. The activity of people seemed to concentrate on economic changes in their life – to return property, to fight for their new economic status (Koleva, 2011).

Gradually, with continuous deterioration in the economic well-being of vast sections of the people, the causes for civic activity increased. Under the new conditions, the being of large masses of people began to fulfil with more and more problems, some of them very thorny or unsolvable. More and more people came to a situation where there was nothing to lose and their only chance of any improvement was to fight. People saw that without their activity no one would solve their problems or at least they should remind the necessity of solving them. The struggles became less and less related to conflicts between the major parties and more and more with solving specific problems – national or local, collective or personal.

In other words, the mass public consciousness and psychology went through very sharp and quite distinct stages of development. At first it was faith in the politics of anti-communist political subjects, in their ability to overcome the legacy of the socialist regime, to contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation. Little by little faith was transformed into doubt. While today the majority of the Bulgarian population overflows of mistrust and pessimism. Rational and psychological intolerance has reached a high level of abstention and high level of protest activity that shows distrust in the willingness and ability of the elite to solve problems adequately. Psychological intolerance to political elite is expressed in unconventional ways – by suspicion and distrust to all leaders in political life, even to the leaders of the protests. Their imposing as leading figures was extremely hard up.

Strong anti-party sentiment impacted the behaviour of the leaders of the protests in the spring of 2013 (Pachkova, 2015). That was one of the reasons for the striking lack of a coordinated and subordinated centre, for the presence of various, poorly communicating and coordinating their actions protest headquarters. This, in turn, leads to less efficiency of protests.

The postmodern trend in the protests is characterized with favouritism of the spontaneity and the horizontality as an alternative to hierarchy and subordination, with manifestation of antipathy to the coordination and organization of protests, to their centralization. Individual overexposure of freedom and autonomy as a fundamental value leads to an increasing reluctance to obey any system and rules, any leaders. It is connected with the distrust of the leaders. Those things trouble protest activities, decrease protesters' main power resource (an organization of multitudes), reduce their effectiveness. They become victims of some aspects of postmodern ideology and suggestions.

Conclusion

The main features of the protest activity of the Bulgarians do not differ very much from those of other European nations. The importance of psychological communication and manipulation is growing up. Psychological relationships are becoming more sophisticated. The requirements to the leaders from psychological point of view are growing up.

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