

Bulgaria's protests and political crisis: a mixed blessing

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Several things come to mind about what happened in Bulgaria over the last weeks (the street protests and the eventual resignation of the government led by PM Boiko Borisov on 20 February):

1) To be clear, the protests did not begin in February 2013: they only intensified to a mass scale this month, triggered by unbearably high electricity bills many people across the country received in January and February. Before that, there were regular, though low-scale and segregated, civil expressions of disagreement in Sofia and other big cities on various issues such as environmental and development policies and unpaid salaries in big state-owned firms. But there is this particular characteristic of Bulgarian citizenry: it is only aroused to mass civil action when something hits directly, and massively, its pocket. Back in 1997, when the truest democratic revolution took place in Bulgaria (1989 was only a coup d'état within the Bulgarian Communist Party followed by a mimicry of reforms), it was hyper-inflation and collapse of the banking system, leading to loss of savings and mass poverty, that drove people on the streets. They were not much impressed by the failure of democratisation after 1989. Now, it was the electricity bills. Of course, these are quite legitimate causes of protest. They seem to be the most effective ones in awakening the Bulgarian public conscience.

2) The mass protest action was spurred by the absurdly high electricity bills, but subsequently other legitimate, more general claims were posed by the citizens. They were disappointed with the political system in general, and found a vent in this budding mass action. They wanted a thorough change towards true democracy and citizens' participation. These were not partisan protests: they were essentially against all political parties and the establishment as a whole. Also, they were not explicitly anti-austerity protests, as many Western media commented. Bulgaria has been implementing austerity ever since 1997. They were against the monopoly structures that command huge bits of the economy with the consent and collaboration of recurring governments – not only the current government – smothering small and medium-sized private initiative and ordinary earners with high end-prices. These monopolies are in the power sector, fuels, pharmaceutical industry, agriculture, even airport services.

3) The protests were not 100% authentic. A substantial portion of the people were provocateurs organised by interested parties: mostly the monopolies themselves which are not interested in stability and strong institutional culture in Bulgaria – or the same government getting a second mandate (this has never happened in Bulgaria's modern democratic history). Maybe that's the reason for the violence that occurred – it was the goal to create mass confusion and disorder. The provocateurs were football ultras and other young males with no clear profile. Yet the fact that a young man set himself on fire in Varna in a radical effusion of disgust at the system speaks a lot.

4) Now that the government is down, there is no consensus among the protesting people on what must be done. Protests keep happening every day, though on a lower

scale. Some ideas that have been floated from all sides are introduction of citizens' councils in all governing structures, Icelandic-style 'roundtable' rule, change of the constitution via a Great National Assembly of 400 rather than 240 MPs, nationalisation of power distributors (the ones asking the high power prices), etc. It is totally different from 1997, when consensus existed on the urgent measures which had to be taken to get the economy and the banking system to their feet and curb the hyper-inflation. And there was then a political party which was recognised as the carrier of the needed change – the Union of Democratic Forces. Right now, all parties are discredited in the eye of the public at large.

5) The government's resignation came to a large extent as a surprise to the protesters themselves. Yes, there were sporadic calls for resignation from the beginning, but the true dissatisfaction was with the monopolies and the unbearable cost of living which grew to dissent with the political system generally.

6) From political point of view, PM Borisov's move to resign may have mixed motives. On the one hand, it is an attempt to bring normality to the situation after the violence that occurred. Borisov tried originally to calm people down by announcing the state would move to revoke the licence of one of the power distributors and subsequently by firing his finance minister, Simeon Djankov. After these actions didn't bring about any results, he did the only thing a populace-oriented head of government can do. On the other hand, yes, Borisov is known for his ability to respond to popular sentiments and knack for getting himself liked in even difficult situations via down-to-earth attitude and use of understandable, mass language. That's why many regard him as the perfect populist. In this light, he may have resorted to resignation with a strategic thought of saving his GERB party's inevitable popular collapse in a situation of mass protests before the July regular elections. That is, gracefully go down now, showing how democratic GERB is and that it is not wedded to power, in order to come back triumphantly with a win in a snap poll later.

7) Institutionally, now the president Rosen Plevneliev will launch a procedure to offer the governing mandate to the first three parliamentary parties – GERB, the opposition Socialists and the ethnic Turkish party DPS. If all of them return the mandate (which they have announced they will do), he will appoint a caretaker PM and government which will prepare early elections. The dates discussed at this point, if all institutional procedures go smoothly, are end-April or the beginning of May. As Orthodox Easter falls this year on 5 May, the vote may be before or after the Easter weekend.

8) A very important aspect of the developments in Bulgaria over the last weeks is to me the maturity, or lack thereof, of the democratic, party and institutional system 23 years after the fall of communism. The political crisis caused by the government resignation is hardly the best thing for the country amidst the ongoing economic downturn in Europe. Bulgaria has been an island of stability in the region with very low debt-to-GDP ratio and minuscule budget deficit, making it one of the best performing countries in the EU and clearly not comparable to neighbours Greece, Romania, Serbia and Croatia. Certainly these rigorous policies have had their impact on the citizens' incomes: Bulgaria is the poorest EU member in terms of personal income. Surely this was one of the factors which precipitated the mass dissatisfaction and protests of February 2013. But the cabinet resignation also shows the lack of sober, responsible and statesman-type thinking in the Bulgarian political class in the middle of a crisis. Boiko Borisov decided to deploy ad hoc, short-term tactics at the

expense of pursuit of long-term, strategic priorities: Saving face and, maybe, preventing violence (we can't speculate whether the protests were about to turn into an Arab-world-like bloody revolutions) versus stability amidst economic troubles and constitutional transition in a very imminent, scheduled election in July. Once again, the protesters did not massively demand his resignation; they were indignant at the monopolies and the entire political class. Nobody expected the move. Even the opposition Socialists were astounded by it and didn't clap their hands in parliament when he announced the resignation. Now Bulgaria's bid to join Schengen is again put on hold, and, what is most important, it will be inadequately represented (by a caretaker, short-horizon government) in the ghastly process of the adoption of the 2014-20 EU budget. Indeed, interest rates on government securities jumped by 20% immediately after finance minister Djankov was fired. Confidence of international investors in the country will melt, at least until this domestic uncertainty reigns for the next half-year or so.

9) Whatever the mechanics and implications of the protests and the resignation, the civic will is crucial in any democratic process, and the civic will did prevail in Bulgaria. Civic will for a change rather than a change of government. Right now maturity is necessary, and elections and return to reforms should take place as soon as possible.