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Citizenship and Civic Activity in Contemporary Bulgaria: (Non-) European Dimensions

Santrauka. *Straipsnyje nagrinėjamos pilietiškumo problemos ir formuluojami teiginiai, kurių paskirtis – analizuoti paskutiniųjų dešimtmečių Bulgarijos visuomenės raidą. Pateikiama euristinė pilietybės sąvoka, kuri apibrėžiama atsižvelgiant į dabartinės socialinės teorijos pokyčius. Glaustai svarstomi istoriniai šios sąvokos aspektai į pirmą vietą iškeliant dvi pagrindines problemas. Analizuojamas teisių diskursas – ir kaip šiuolaikinės pilietiškumo struktūros pagrindas, ir kaip vidinis pilietiškumo raidos suvaržymas. Bulgarijos visuomenė analizuojama ikidemokratinio paveldo aspektu, o taip pat atsižvelgiant į demokratinių pokyčių poveikį valstybės ir piliečių santykių raidai. Protesto veiksmai traktuojami kaip esminė pilietinio aktyvumo forma. Atsižvelgiant į šiuos kriterijus pateikiami du informatyvūs pavyzdžiai, kurie atskleidžia svarbiausius pokyčių elementus, jų pobūdį, kryptį, intensyvumą. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiamos išvados, sietinos su pilietiškumo plėtros galimybėmis.*

Keywords: *citizenship, citizens-state relationship, non-democratic citizenship, European integration, social passiveness, discourse of rights, protest activity.*

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *pilietiškumas, piliečių ir valstybės santykis, nedemokratinis pilietiškumas, Europos integracija, socialinis pasyvumas, teisių diskursas, protesto sąjūdis.*

1. Preliminary Note

This text deals with complex, ambiguous processes, trends and facts. They cannot be exhausted, analyzed and even listed through a single explanatory matrix. They represent a field of study belonging to different sciences and scientific disciplines. They keep the door open to multiple problems leaving the issue under consideration but staying in mutual connection with it. Moreover, in most cases the things we discuss do not appear in a final, closed form but remain in progress, as a part of a framework which is still incomplete and subject to further development. This should be mentioned to account for the thesis-like form of presentation and just the brief and conceptual argumentation on and discussion of the many examples and conclusions that surely deserve more detailed elaboration.

2. Working Notion of Citizenship

Citizenship in its classical understanding and modern usage is widely accepted to:

- constitute a *relationship between an individual and a political community/state*;

- be characterized by a *public nature* (it integrates the subjects of this relationship in common goals through the mechanisms of public state power) and *equality* (it treats individuals as equal in relation to the political community regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, wealth, social status, professional position, etc.);
- be expressed by the *system of rights and duties of individuals in relation to the political community* that are fixed and guaranteed by the corresponding normative texts and public institutions;
- build bonds of *political affiliation of individuals to the community*, thus forming a sense of identity and commitment to its development;
- bring forth *stereotypes and procedures of the individual's relating to the community*, its general perception and the variety of attitudes linked to it, hereby constructing and reproducing key elements of the dominant political culture (cf. Heater 2004; 2, New Keywords 2005; 29-31).

Taking this short scheme as a base, we may formulate an important set of questions: can the well-known notion of citizenship be preserved in the new conditions of globalization and intense social and political dynamics of the contemporary world? Which of its components should be abandoned, reassessed or will have a chance to be reaffirmed in the future? To what extent do the geographical and historical factors determine the unevenness of citizenship change? What are the valid explanations for Bulgaria and for the rest of Europe?

3. Modern Context of Citizenship and Contemporary Dilemmas

The modern notion of citizenship originates in the overcoming of Middle Ages idea of a subject, i.e. of the relationship between the subject and the feudal which is private in its essence. The democratic processes and revolutions in Western Europe gave the impetus of a totally new understanding of the individual's role in society and politics. The spectrum of human rights widened to impose new forms of duties on the political state and its institutions. *Citizenship began to reflect the achievements of Western democracy in all its varieties.*

The 20th century was a time of challenge to some notions which used to be taken for granted. We may outline *two major issues* that emerged in the historical practices of modern societies. The first one: can membership of individuals in totalitarian states be called citizenship in the light of the traditional usage of the term (*problem of non-democratic citizenship*)? And the second one: how does the opportunity of membership in different political communities (e.g. in the nation state and in the EU) change the notion of citizenship (*problem of different levels of citizenship*)?

These are – respectively, and *in a diachronic plan* – problems of (1) *transition to democratic political constitution* and its adoption in the individual's political consciousness and behaviour, and (2) *transition to a new type of political community* which raises the inevitable question of its ability to mediate building a common European public sphere, to construct identity and to control the way it

influences the state as a basic political unit of Modernity.

Formulated otherwise, *in relation to the elements of citizenship*, these are the problems of (1) how do the individuals change their position, their role in society, their political significance in passing from totalitarian to democratic political regime, and (2) how does the state change its character in the framework of the new double challenge: democratization and delegating sovereignty to the EU.

We may see that *the current political situation in Europe is linked to the issue of citizenship in the most profound way since it concerns the elements of the relationship and its specifics alike*.

4. Discourse of Rights in Developing Liberal Citizenship: Internal Limitations

The assumption of one-track development of democratic content of citizenship is superficial. The idea that strengthening of citizenship is just a function of getting over barriers to successive introduction of new civil rights and mechanisms that guarantee these rights meets counterexamples.

The so called *liberal citizenship* which has been the dominant interpretation of the concept in the last two centuries emphasizes the rights as the most essential component of citizens-state relationship. The origins of this preference can be traced back to the theory of natural rights and social contract that preceded the formation of the liberal narrative of modern Europe. This theory cannot be discussed here at length. One of its features is *ahistoricity*. It neglects the historical premises

of recognition of one or another human right. This way it has no adequate instruments to explain the specific situation in different countries and epochs.

One may have a look at the various attempts to systemize and generalize human rights in recent history in order to become conscious of dissimilarities and disparities. The General Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen during the French Revolution (1789), the Bill of Rights as the first ten amendments to the US Constitution (1791), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly (1948), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU as an annex to the Treaty of Nice (2000) – all of them being landmarks in the progress of the discourse of rights – do not seem to propose unified approaches.

Of course, much of the content remains unaltered. At the same time, a commonly accepted aggregate still fails to emerge. National legislations find it difficult to sanction coinciding schemes of interpretation of rights. Nation states react in a diverse manner to *the problem of reconciling formal equality* (of citizens in relation to the rights guaranteed by the state) *and real inequality* (that use of the same rights produces among free individuals). Dynamic changes in contemporary societies complicate the elaboration of common strategies. The necessity of theoretical rationalization of the problem gradually comes to the head of the agenda.

The most influential theoretical explanation we shall use here has been proposed by the Czech jurist *Karel Vasak* in 1977 (Vasak 1977). He divides human rights into *three*

generations following the three words in the slogan of the French Revolution: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. The principle of division is the historical development. The first-generation rights (*rights of liberty*) serve to protect the individual from the arbitrariness of the state in the wake of modern democracy. These are predominantly political rights including the freedom of speech, religion, expression, the right to vote, the right to a free trial, etc. They can be realized only through the existence of legal order and autonomous civic space. The second-generation rights (*rights of equality*) formed as a consequence of industrialization and social differentiations of capitalism and began to be recognized by governments after the World War I.

These are most of all social rights including rights to be employed and to have benefits in case of unemployment, rights to social security, to health care and education, etc. The third-generation rights (*rights of fraternity*) have started to form and seek codification in the latest decades as an expression of the consciousness that humanity needs a better and more dignified life in harmony with nature. These rights can hardly be classified in a uniform way. They include, among others, group rights, rights to self-determination, rights to a healthy environment, to natural resources, to participation in cultural heritage, to intergenerational equity and sustainability, etc.

Vasak's categorization helps us find our way to the historical peculiarity of the situation. The three generations of rights made their consecutive appearance. Nevertheless, one should not exaggerate the causal dependence. The pattern in which the first generation (1) leads to the second one (2) that leads to the third one (3) is tempting but not entirely correct. World's political landscape is versicoloured.

In some places (socialist Eastern Europe) (1) was virtually replaced by (2). There are many countries where social movements under the flag of (3) accuse (1) and (2) of being a display of hypocrisy and manipulation. Right-wing supporters, especially libertarians, consider (2) and (3) inappropriate intrusion into individual independence by attributing certain goals to people that otherwise should have the right to choose for themselves. The crisis of the welfare state in Western Europe and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe led to tangible reduction of (2). Social rights failed to go along with political rights. Economic development did not prove to be the only stimulus to the spread of (2) and (3). The US economy has been more powerful than the European ones for decades but nevertheless Europe went well ahead of the USA in introducing (2) and (3).

It may be concluded that *the sum of rights citizenship comprises has specific geographical and historical parameters*. The balance of distinct rights and of generations of rights as a whole is a problem of political traditions and local conditions. This balance imposes limitations on the expansion of rights that often are difficult to be realized. That is why a perception of a vacuum of justice follows. That is why a field of potential social conflicts is opened. Institutional framework is expected to provide the necessary solutions, but it of-

ten lacks the mechanisms, the resources and the overall vision to do it. Liberal citizenship nowadays operates in a highly complicated decision-making environment.

5. Bulgarian Case: Prism of Citizenship in Tracing Recent National Development

The general specifics of the situation are determined by several factors: Bulgaria is a former socialist state developing liberal democracy; it has a South-Eastern European tradition differing from the modes of culture in Central Europe; it is part of the processes of European integration; it is involved in globalization trends.

Chronologically, two key events (or set of events) marked the development of the Bulgarian case. Bulgarian citizenship should undoubtedly be considered in the light of:

- post-totalitarian change: 1989-1991;
- full membership in the EU: 2007.

The characteristics of citizenship should be studied briefly in the period before the transition to democracy, in the period of the transition, and through the perspectives of the period after entering the EU. This is the key to understand contemporary Bulgarian development as well an important tool for comparison with the political path of other post-totalitarian countries. The study requires historical context, knowledge of the constitutional arrangements, enlisting the main consequences of changes in the public sphere, outlining the leading forms of civic activity, elaborating explanatory models, and hypotheses on the options of further development.

6. Premises: Pre-Democratic Heritage and the Paradox of Change

Bulgaria belongs to the communities where *the state has not been developed to serve the needs of civil society*. Since liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, social activity has always been channelled in the direction of the functioning of the nation state. *Social activity has been manifested in support of or in opposition to the state policies, and not with the aim of expanding an autonomous space of civic interests*.

The state has been the leading factor of historical change. Regardless of the varieties in political regimes, it has always been highly centralized, with strong power capacities. This feature is common to most Balkan states. It corresponds to the predominantly rural population. The urban majority formed several decades ago, but it did not bring about the establishment of active urban groups. These trends reaffirmed *passiveness with respect to the civil rights*. The state maintained its stability by means of social interventions and social acquisitions guarantees. The socialist state turned to be the political form that achieved this to the highest degree.

The 1971 Constitution of People's Republic of Bulgaria fell under the model most famously represented by the 1977 USSR Constitution. The Bulgarian Constitution included a series of *first-generation rights* such as the rights to freedom of speech, press, assembly, religious belief, artistic work, the rights to inviolability of the person and home, rights to privacy, etc. All of these resemble the classic statements in democratic constitutions.

The difference here originates in the fact that these rights were promulgated only in the framework of the socialist choice of society. They had no binding force outside of or contrary to the official policies of the Communist party. Moreover, there were no constitutional mechanisms provided for their protection. This ambiguous situation made possible the practice of everyday violation of constitutional prescriptions in the case of civil rights.

The issue of *second-generation rights* found a far better expression in the Constitution. It is a result of both application of the Marxist-Leninist principles and a long-lasting political tradition of state's dealings with social processes. The rights to work, rest and leisure, free of charge health protection and education, care in the old age, sickness, pregnancy and child rearing, housing, and cultural benefits were duly proclaimed and by all means exceeded the corresponding rights even in the constitutional matrix of West European welfare states. They met their law guarantees and built a social model that served people's needs and encouraged their political passiveness.

Here we cannot enter the long argument about the character of the socialist state: premodern or modern. Our conclusion is that *the socialist state proposes specific non-democratic citizenship* differing from the feudal subject-type relationship. There was no private belonging of individuals to a person or group but a system of stimulating individual commitment to the public goals of the state. It cohabited with pre-modern stereotypes of social action and individual integration in society. Thus the Bulgarian path to 1989 appeared to be very complex and multi-levelled.

The post-totalitarian change adopted its initial normative base between the fall of Todor Zhivkov's regime in November 1989 and the adoption of the new Constitution in July 1991. Although in the beginning the political process was marked by the emergence of ecological movements defending some *third-generation rights*, its main direction was oriented towards the establishment of a model of protection of first-generation political rights written down in the Constitution but never introduced in practice.

The *main paradox of change* is revealed in its double-sided contradictory character:

- the state is the subject of change, and the key instrument of realizing civic interests remains the state political power;
- the change happened to be fulfilled through an uncontrolled state yielding from social spheres previously dominated by it.

The common civic interest of expanding rights can be carried out only by means of the state. At the same time, this supposes priority of a free private initiative requiring the weakening of the state.

7. Consequences of the Democratic Change

Democratic change is often perceived as a general process subjecting its different dimensions to a singular logic and direction of fulfilment. Nevertheless, these dimensions have to be considered as entities which sometimes impose their own logic on the overall dynamics of the societal transformations. Taking the realization of the civic dimension as a base, one may come to im-

portant explanations of the contemporary development.

The former socialist society was functioning through a hierarchy built on from above. Collective action was regarded appropriate and permissible only when organized. Spontaneity was not encouraged and even persecuted. The fall of barriers opened a way for another type of collective action, one that stems from the individual opportunities for participation. The newly created version of public space had to cope with a substantial risk that *forced superorganization* to be replaced by *anomic suborganization*.

The independent and multi-directional social activity that burst out of the shell of the previous restrictions could not be restrained only by some sense of democratic responsibility. In 1991 it received a constitutional framework prescribing the borders that civic freedom should not trespass. There was a radical reduction of social rights proclaimed in the 1971 Constitution and the respective legislation with no adequate substitutes or cushions provided. Political rights were obviously charged with the task of compensating decreasing social rights.

Anyway, the 1991 Constitution made the peaceful transition possible. But the emphasis on political rights was not originally entangled in the fulfilment of civil autonomy. The absence of adequate legal order and basis for political participation came to be the essence of all the uncertainties of people with regard to their privacy, property, personal security, and quality of life. Popular energy was directed elsewhere: to the process of dismantling socialism which was perceived as a necessary

and sufficient condition of building a free and flourishing society. Of course, this process was inherently connected to democratization. But it was carried out in a way that came very near to dismantling the state and its controlling mechanisms. This automatically led the citizens-state relationship to a crisis due to the instability of one of its elements.

The new public space began to lose substance. It did not correspond to state's capacities for providing of guarantees, on the one hand, and on the other, it did not correspond to society's great expectations. It is here that the notion of a democratic system as some kind of a representative theatre originates. Loyalty and the sense of belonging to the state, low as they were, tended to fall even further. Social expectations began to reorient towards the EU as a political community able to impose order and introduce rules and stability.

The political programme of the state in its turn did not go further than the EU accession. It was implemented by the political elite as a normative and business integration without sufficient dialogue with citizens. And it cannot be otherwise since the citizens did not enjoy a stable legal order that enables them to participate efficiently in the integration processes. The political instruments they acquired as a result of the democratic change appeared to be dull when confronted with a reality of weakly protected autonomous civic spaces.

January 1, 2007 (the date of the EU accession) found the Bulgarian state and Bulgarian citizens in a position of minimal dialogue. They had cross-purposes and different ways of assessing things, there were weak and

uneasy channels of communication and respective low institutional adaptability of the state, and people had little confidence in its democratic representativity.

8. Change in Civic Behaviour

The institutional dynamics of the democratic public space cannot be regarded independently of the changes in civic behaviour. These processes of transformation are parallel and often conditioned by each other.

At the beginning of the democratic transition there were numerous and multi-level manifestations of civic activation with the aim of getting into the mechanisms of political representation and realization of political rights. The discrepancy between civic expectations and state's capacities determined soon afterwards the most usual pattern of civic activity to be the *protest activity*.

The crisis tendencies and facts initially had their focus on the political sphere. Solutions to social and economic problems were most often sought in the personal change in political power. Civic action was thought to have its culmination and end in exercising the political right to vote.

In the long run the weakening of the state combined with the enlargement of private property and market mechanisms tend to create the basis for focusing society's expectations into the social and economic spheres. Corruption, the helplessness of judicial system and the ineffective legislation enter the role of regular generators of tension, thus diminishing the importance of political sphere in the public opinion.

It underlines the necessity of a stable legal order as a precondition of genuine political participation.

Liberalization and capitalism give rise to stratifications that find their expression in an entirely new structure of society. Citizens can no longer be considered as an aggregate of individuals mechanically united by the opportunity of political participation and appointing political leadership but rather as a multitude of social and professional communities with their specific, albeit not always conscious, structured and duly formulated interests.

European integration tends to raise Bulgarian citizens' self-confidence; they want to be treated as Europeans and feel the benefits of the membership. Reduction of social rights along with the new collective strategies of participation may be regarded as the key factors of transforming the protest potential into a social one. Therefore, the instability of the current situation can be traced back to (a) the imperfect realization of the constitutional framework of Bulgarian citizenship, and (b) the attractiveness of a new and powerful model of legally protected political participation such as the one represented by the European Union.

As a cautious conclusion of the latter statement one can say that the Bulgarian public sphere still fails to propose sufficient stimuli and channels for participation; at the same time, people wish to be a steady part of the European public sphere, but they do not feel themselves a part of it and are unsure how it can be defined and translated into everyday language.

9. Dynamics of Civic Action: Two Illustrating Examples

This briefly described dynamics of the civic activity in Bulgaria can be outlined and elucidated with the help of two examples: *the highest peaks of protest action since the beginning of democratic change*, which took place in 1996/1997 and in 2007, with the trend likely to continue in 2008. The mass participation and the importance of the demands show similarity. Nevertheless, it is by all means differences that predominate. They can be easily observed in the table below.

In 1996/97 there were symptoms of economic crisis that successively encompassed the different spheres of national economy: the bank system, the distribution of the grain crop, the currency policy, the foreign and internal debt payments, etc. Taken in their totality, they led to inter-elite struggles in the ruling Socialist party, to a governmental crisis and eventually to the fall of the government. The political confrontation did not make any further political interactions in the National Assembly possible, no matter how reasonable and acceptable may be the proposals. A parliamentary crisis followed that came very near to a constitutional crisis (popular discontent with the constitutional order of the political system in general) but fortunately did not turn into one.

Period	1996/97	2007/08
Type of crisis	economic crisis developing into a crisis of the political system	stratification crisis
Political content	inability of the state to manage social and economic processes effectively in an environment of liberal capitalism	lack of readiness on behalf of the state to propose acceptable complex strategy for the development of society and its different social and professional groups
Organizational bearers	mostly political parties, trade unions, NGOs with definitive political character	temporal associations (strike committees, etc.), civic movements, professional organizations, economic corporations
Type of participation	individual participation; citizens united by all-shared political agenda but not common social/group interest; ad hoc political solidarity with no strong internal cohesion	social and professional group participation; sustainable and long-term group solidarity with no general societal character
Character of action	entirely public action; one-track goals put forward as a clear plan for political change	mixed public/private action; private economic initiatives together with civic campaigns

Many explanations may be in use. Still one should remind that the government was trying to regulate the economy in a socialist-like manner. It is true that the greatest part of it was state's property but, anyway, it was functioning in the framework of a competing capitalist market. Alongside the objective premises for a crisis there was a well-organized opposition to the key government policies. Political parties acted together with trade unions (including the newly formed ones) to encourage national protests and strikes. Their public activities were backed by a multitude of NGOs most of which taking their funds from abroad.

This highly strained atmosphere of discontent made thousands of people crowd on big rallies. The citizens saw general elections as a necessary condition to overcome the deepening crisis. Regardless of their social and professional status they kept to a single and clear solution to the variety of problems: the change of the ruling party. They did not have confidence in the ability of the current state leadership to impose any of the important measures in the different sectors of economy. So in a unity of public action they considered the political transformation to be of a much higher significance than the realization of particular branch interests.

2007/08 presented an entirely different situation. The EU Accession of Bulgaria made a turning point in the democratic path of the country. Many of the unpopular measures introduced prior to 2007 were justified by the necessity to cover the EU membership criteria. The achievement of this membership found a highly polarized society in terms of social position. The successful economic development on macro-level contradicted the widely-spread notions that the current distribution of wealth is unjust and that the EU participation requires the EU standards of quality of life. Quite naturally, the Bulgarian citizens desired to live the way other European citizens do. Nevertheless, the state leadership did not show sufficient understanding.

A multitude of protests began to emerge. They had no single organizational centre or comparable demands. They have been prepared and carried out by different civic and economic structures limiting their activity in a particular social or professional sphere. In most cases, no political colour is to be observed. On the contrary, people have rejected a help from the opposition parties. Up to now they have wished to see their demands fulfilled by the present national government and have relied on the effective pressure from Brussels. The participation in protests has not been individual; it has been characterized by social and professional group divisions.

Societal positions have to a large extent determined solidarity and the will to act. Therefore, no single classification is possible. Quite different dimensions may be enlisted: private economic initiatives together with civic campaigns (such as the one in defence of the Bulgarian nurses sentenced to death in Libya); diversification of the protest activity together with its reversibility; emergence of protests against protests: groups in society refusing to accept what other groups demand (e.g. protests against introduction of protected territories under NATURA 2000 on behalf of land proprietors that led to ecological

protests; taxi drivers' protests that led to the initiatives "no-tip month" and "no-taxi day"; protests of school teachers with the demand of higher wages that led to protests of parents demanding their children went to school again), etc.

Citizens-state relationship changes both its components and its factors of influence. It cannot remain the same. New priorities, new resources, new guarantees, new strategies are more necessary than ever.

10. Social Dialogue and European Perspective

It can be concluded that reestablishment of a strong and effective citizens-state dialogue is one of the most important task on the agenda of society. The state cannot act successfully on the European stage unless it has the support of its citizens and translates their interests into the language of all-European political decisions.

The lack of partnership and the postponement of solutions to social problems marginalize citizens and throw them in the trap of marginal politicians and organizations.

The relationship citizens-state is not a zero-sum game. Both citizens and state may gain a lot if they help develop citizenship on both the national and the European level. It requires, most of all, establishing consciousness that the link *legal order-stable and cooperative political institutions* contains the key to effective citizenship in present conditions.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some theses on the development of citizenship issues in Bulgaria in recent decades. A working notion of citizenship is proposed in correspondence with the modern achievements of the theory. The historical context of the concept is briefly outlined bringing forth the formulation of two major problems. The discourse of rights is analyzed as both a basis of and an internal limitation on developing contemporary citizenship framework. The Bulgarian case is considered through the prism of the pre-democratic heritage and the consequences of the democratic change to the modification of state-citizens relationship. The protest activity is proved to be the key manifestation of civic activism. In the light of this, two illustrating examples are provided so that the character, the direction, the depth and the main elements of change can be traced. At the end, some conclusions on perspectives of citizenship are made.

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