

Osce presentation**Nation under siege: dynamics of nationalist/populist politics in Bulgaria**

For some moments in the last days of September, it almost looked like Bulgaria was having its Olaszliszka moment. The reported rising wave of anti-Roma attitudes in the country, and images showing vehement nationalists ardently waving flags in protests organized in towns across the country following the local Katounitsa events-- all placed Bulgaria on the first pages of European media outlets. Unfortunately, with all the focus on the racist slogans, attacks on ethnicity and dangers of nationalism, there was less focus on what both the events in Katounitsa and the explosive protests are really about—and I have to highlight that at the basis of it are a series of deep actual and pressing problems in Bulgaria including—widespread corruption and organized crime, ineffective justice system and public administration, the acute sense of lack of social justice and broad political legitimacy, and finally the unsuccessful integration of ethnic minorities to date—all of these were revealed in the incident which led to the family of a local Roma baron running over a 19-year old Bulgarian boy—so this lacked the spontaneity of Olaszliszka.

That said, the crucial question is about how we can explain the spontaneous expressions of public anger and cynicism directed at the Gypsy and Gypsiness, the way in which what was in nature a non-ethnic conflict but rather one determined by local economic stakes generated/provoked a wave of public solidarity and outrage against state which ultimately took the form and frame of anti-minority protests – this spontaneity is beyond some of the more clear politically oriented/organized set-ups directing the nationalist radical performances which unfolded.

The analysis I prepared for our meeting today traces some of this. It looks at what facilitated this sliding of frames (protesters borrowing the frame of the Gypsy issue from the existing political vocabulary to give a name to their own discontent). I think that in order to understand what determined the availability of the anti-minority frame in Bulgaria which was so easily slipped upon the more general concerns and grievances of disorder and insecurity, we need to place the recent events in the broader context of the dynamics of nationalist politics and the production of anti-Gypsyism in Bulgaria.

Two interesting facts about nationalist/radical dynamics in Bulgaria:

1) Emergence of nationalism was delayed -- organized political nationalism really emerged only in the middle of the previous decade (most remember the surprising victory of the party Ataka which entered the parliament in 2005, and has since then had consolidated its political position of prominence). Ataka emerged in a context where the so-called 'liberal consensus' had opened the space, created a situation conducive to strong nationalist articulations, which later also came in the face of Bulgarian NG, and more recently other formations like VMRO and RZS, who were among main political actors in riding the wave of public discontent in the last 2 weeks.

2) the other interesting fact about radical nationalist politics in Bulgaria is that they appeared only once there was a certain stabilization, and at least the geo-political conditions for national security/ crisis were satisfied (with membership of the country in NATO and the EU)—this contradicts the common assumption that nationalist parties rise in times of crisis.

Since 2005, all of the remaining parties, which had up to then regularly but more casually played with the proverbial 'national interests', have to various degrees incorporated strands of nationalist rhetoric in the formulation of their political programs, I would say in large part influenced by Ataka's success.

Within this more general nationalist turn, in the last few years we have seen an important process whereby parties and organizations have produced/ articulated/ reframed the Roma issue and infused it with a redemptive quality, centering on Roma lifestyle and privilege (which is quite different from the negative rhetoric targeting the Turkish minority, where there is a more distinct separation between people and elite, and attacks are directed at the latter). But in the case of Roma, a powerful narrative combines social and cultural aversion to the Roma with issues of national identity (salvation depends on the final resolution of the Gypsy issue);

The existing and deeply embedded generally negative (but *not* racist) attitudes towards Roma across large sections of society have been reworked, accentuated, and actualized -- through various protests, marches, and the weaving of integralist narratives. Again, these articulations have been loudly spoken out (particularly through the shows of Ataka and the National guard, both of which ran nationalist television programs for years, and became the kitchen faces for many)—this speaking out has more generally gone unsanctioned in Bulgaria, precisely because it coincided with the political atmosphere of a more general nationalist turn/ a genuine shift in public culture in which NG or Ataka demonstrations, if not supported, may have been considered funny, but not dangerous.

The heightening and actualization of anti-Gypsy frames and narratives has been so powerful that they have produced the notion of Gypyness and Gypsyfication, as a process- and this has pervaded public space. We see people walking on the streets, massively in the past two weeks, wearing t-shirts with the message: 'I don't want to live in a Gypsy country'; they are young, old, middle class, unemployed suburbia—everyone. And so we have a context today where this frame is ready, to be deployed in different situations, and in the context of events which are in their character not about ethnicity, but where disenchanted publics can reach out for the ethnic frame. And so my last argument, is that, if we want to understand this (how these more loosely dispersed and inhabited sentiments can be mobilized), we need to give special attention on the way emotions play into politics, the way symbols emerge as potent, and icons of identification are mobilized to provide emotional glue to forge social alliances and to stand for a redefined 'nation under siege'- to relate to my originally submitted title.

I am doing my anthropological work in a small corner of deindustrialized northeast Hungary in the moment, and these are some of the very issues I am looking at for over a year. My intent for tonight was to contextualize some of the Bulgarian case with material from Hungary, but due to lack of time and the recent Bulgarian developments I decided to abstain.

But my final point is that we need to study these phenomena locally, in their local manifestations—in order to understand how the Roma issue gets incorporated into nationalist rhetoric, and comes to make sense to an expanding community of voters; we can look at national politics and talk about single- issue parties, protest votes, etc; and we can have analyses of the presence of Roma frame in the nationalist/ radical rhetoric etc But we need to understand how these issues start to make sense on the ground', how it relates and is embedded in local histories and before it then it enters specific political campaigns and nationalist projects.