

#Occupy A New Language: How A Protest Can Be Seen As A Conversational Platform?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of the post-communist generation, known as the 'transition generation,' in the protest movement in Bulgaria during the period 2013 - 2014. For this purpose, my discussion will focus on the student occupation, as a radical form of protest, the different types of discourse within it, and, more specifically, what kind of social and political boundaries were crossed based on the relations created amongst the participants in the protest.

This paper will ask whether there is ground for asserting that the protesting students became an active and recognized social actor with a language and identity of their own, characteristic of a whole new generation.

Keywords: protest, post-communism, generational relations, language, identity

Introduction and Context

On 14th July a small public celebration in Sofia, Bulgaria was given. We celebrated the 2-year anniversary of the anti-government protests, which took began on June 14, 2013. You might ask why we are so focused on our past, since we have so many political problems in our present. But the 'past is never dead,' says William Faulkner, 'and it's not even past.' Let me show you how this is relevant to the context of Bulgaria. The protests still have a great impact on our civil society and its memory, especially on its youngest participants - the generation born after 1989, because for the first time in 2013, they were at the centre of the protest, significantly shaking up the status quo.

I want to focus my attention on the key role that the so-called generation of transition played in all those events. Who are they? What kind of language do they share? Did the protest change the political and cultural status quo for them? The importance of this event is loaded with special responsibility not only from the participants within it, but also those who have taken the initiative to describe it. As an active participant in this protest, I cannot help but rely on my personal impression, but I will also analyse the way the meaning and language of the protests were shaped within the public discourse.

Let's go back in time to June 2013. The capital of Bulgaria - Sofia is now the centre stage of a large-scale anti-government protest, which will go on to last for 404 consecutive days until the resignation of the left-wing coalition cabinet headed by Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski (a coalition between the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), supported by the ultra-nationalist party Ataka). For the first time in Bulgaria's modern history, a protest is organized almost exclusively on social media platforms. The global call for action comes under the hashtag #ДАНСwithme ('Dance with me') which is a play on the acronym of the State Agency for National Security (DANS), the Bulgarian secret services. The controversial appointment of businessman and MP Delyan Peevski as the new head of namely this state Agency is what triggered the protest on June 14th. The peak of the protest saw tens of thousands of people take to the streets, initially to protest the appointment, later to stand up to corruption, and after that spreading out to an array of demands.

In spite of the fact that the protest marches continued every day, by late summer it seems that energy started to gradually dissipate. The government stubbornly ignored the discontent and remained deaf to the demands of the protest. It seemed that the protest was about to die. Furthermore, it seemed that it is about to die without achieving its goals – resignation of the government and a call for new elections.

It was the students who revived the protest, taking it to the next level in the late autumn of 2013 (Junes, 2013). They took part in the anti-government demonstrations as a recognisable social subject, called Early Rising Students but they did so in a completely different and new way – by occupying the largest and oldest university in Sofia – St. Kliment Ohridski. They used the hashtag #occupySU, to both distinguish themselves from #ДАНСwithme and to have their own digital conversation, which rapidly rose in popularity on social media channels. The occupation of the main building of the Sofia University lasted for nearly two months. Meanwhile, 14 other universities in Sofia and Bulgaria were occupied for different durations and with different outcomes.

Who were the Early Rising Students?

Before I go into more detail about what the Early Rising Students represented, I would like to remind you of what the testament of the Enlightenment sounds like. It is December 1784, when in a local academic newspaper called *Berlin Monthly* a short essay was published answering the question: What is Enlightenment? The author of this short philosophical essay was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and his answer was as follows:

The human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to make use of your own understanding! Is thus the motto of Enlightenment.

It is beyond any doubt that this short essay has transformed the modern tradition and understanding of knowledge. The spirit of the epoch unambiguously perceives the human being as an active and autonomous figure, able to make decisions of his own. This act of the European philosophical school of thought was a move that crossed a new boundary in the field of knowledge.

Exactly two hundred years later, in 1984, French philosopher Michel Foucault published an essay on Kant's work entitled the same way (*Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*). Foucault's essay reflected on the contemporary status of the project of Enlightenment, inverting much of Kant's reasoning but concluding that enlightenment is not a goal that is to be achieved, but a kind of critical outlook on the limits places on us by ourselves and by external authorities, a critical ethos, which shows it "still requires work on our boundaries" (Foucault, 1984). What Foucault did was to buttress Kant's thesis and to make it more relevant to the world we live in.

"Dare to be wise!" It is indeed a strong message, but does it sound convincing today? Is it enough to have knowledge of things, when this knowledge would stay locked up between the walls of the Academy? Unfortunately we live in times when knowledge alone is not empowering. Moreover, it happens to be restrictive and elitist. It builds walls instead of destroying them. In our information society, academia no longer plays the role of mediator of the knowledge, nor books, nor media. Is it enough to publish, when the material would reach a limited number of people? Are we really contemporary with the times we live in? Do we see how today is so different from yesterday? If so, how are such cultural and social boundaries overstepped?

Over the past few years, we have witnessed many protests around the world, whose main actors were mostly young, well-educated, middle-class people who organized themselves through social networks. It is interesting to note that despite their different political demands, these protests have something in common and it is the use of social networks as a mediator for their messages, when direct political contact fails. In a word, it is the erosion of the actual public sphere, the place which enables and fosters public debate and dialogue, which has led to its substitution by digital channels. This was the case with the protests in Bulgaria, too.

They were important for several reasons. The first and most significant is that for the very first time, the post-communist generation raised its voice, taking an active and central role as social and political actor. This voice was represented through the act of occupation – a destructive and extreme action

on its own that reverses the established norms in society. These students called themselves the Early Rising Students. This name is very indicative because in Bulgarian it refers not only to someone who gets up early, but someone who has an awake and enlightened mind. It looks very similar to the idea of Kant. But there is more to the story than just this. These young people dared not only to know, but to speak up. For the very first time this generation stood up with a strong political message – their language became action; their discontent became protest. It was also the first time that the language of protest was not associated with the perils of the past – the consequences of the socialist regime, the role of Russia, corrupt elites, etc. The language was about the future: ‘We don’t want to live in a country that has only this to offer. We want to safeguard our future’ was the students’ message. It inverts the directionality of the public discourse by trying to take control over, who can speak the truth about what the future will be like. Instead of preparing for the worst, this discourse activates and empowers both the individual and society to participate in the shaping of this future.

The act of occupation has another, more physical significance. The choice of the place is not random. Sofia University is the largest and oldest university in Bulgaria – allegedly the symbol of education and prosperity. Values which, according to the students, no longer describe it accurately. Occupation of the building is ‘an example of the *practice* of transgression; of taking over an actual space, no longer a symbol of enlightenment or a path to a bright future, one that has become corrupted (Nikolov, 2013). The occupied University became the new centre of the protest with its inner everyday life composed of debates, round tables, lectures, workshops, meetings and concerts. We have two opposite worlds at a distance of less than 800 metres: ‘the barricaded National Assembly, reminiscent of the past, as an isolated and authoritarian form of power and the University which became a symbol of the future, or as one participant in the occupation put it ‘a fortress of freedom’ (Nikolov, 2013). To clarify, at the time of the occupation and until the resignation of the government, a high metal wall fully surrounded the National Assembly. It created a visually powerful juxtaposition between the ‘locked in’ Assembly and the occupied University. This changed not only the place of the political in the city, but also the tensions between understanding of past and future. While most of the messages in the summer protest were clearly referred to the communist past of Bulgaria, the language of the students’ protest is a language that has no physical memory of the years before the changes in 1989; a language with no memory, but with high sensitivity towards the threats to the democratic future of the country.

Most of the academics were sympathetic to the students’ actions. They were ‘trying to support the students in a number of ways, from organizing debates and lectures to writing open letters, critical articles and official declarations’ (Junes, 2013). Milena Yakimova, a sociologist, goes even further with her appraisal of the situation. According to her the student protest is a ‘lesson in democracy’ (ЯКИМОВА, 2013).

Undoubtedly, the students imparted a new dynamic on the anti-government protest, which began in the summer of 2013. Although it is difficult to give a one-way evaluation of the success of their actions, several conclusions could be drawn. Firstly, the occupation failed in its initial demands - the resignation of the government of Mr. Oresharski, the immediate dissolution of the National

Assembly, and the call for early elections, as stated in a public declaration by the students (Junès, 2013). The lack of social experience, the infighting among participants and the ever-decreasing public support, are only some of the reasons for the quick dissolution and inability to meet their short-term goals.

The situation could be assessed from a long-term angle. Many of the participants agree that the occupation was a life-changing experience. With their protest, the students gave a clear and unambiguous request to participate in the public life of the country thus addressing problems beyond educational ones, but including the way of democratic development of Bulgaria. ‘What truly brings students together is the rejection of the status quo’ (Bechev, 2013).

Today, two years later, I still wonder if we have a better institution for those critical boundaries, which define our actions in time and space. Where are we now? Did we manage to achieve more than just a fleeting discontent? Are those crises of our unknowable past capable of being recognized and pave the way for a brighter future? Can we speak, name, and think them as our own? Have we succeeded in crossing the boundaries of our culture of silence and amnesia? How do we care for that language now, when the energy of the protest has long receded?

In weathering the storm, one is never left the same. That is also its true purpose – instant metamorphosis. The same holds for those crises – we must overcome ourselves; produce ourselves as new autonomous subjects. The rest, I believe, is a question of aesthetics.

Endnotes

1 Original quote: ‘I do not know whether it must be said today that the critical task still entails faith in Enlightenment; I continue to think (however) that this task requires work on our limits.’

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Biography

Raya Raeva is currently a third-year student of philosophy at Sofia University and editor-in- chief at the online journal Banitza.