Bio-politics of Protest: Student Protests in Serbia and Bulgaria as a Mechanism of Security for a Social System

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Abstract

The research-based ethnographic study presented in the paper aims at explaining why the extensive student protests of the last decades in Serbia and Bulgaria do not facilitate the post-socialist transformation. Along with a high occurrence of political upheavals that commonly evoke images of mass unrest and swift social reconfigurations of power, no significant change in politics towards more democratic regime has taken place. Despite the presence of multiple liberal semantics in the public debate, the Balkan discourse on democracy seems fairly remote from the political and social practice. All the well-established theories of protest and social movements remain inconclusive in answering this query. In search of an explanation, the concept of security and the bio-political paradigm of Michel Foucault have been adopted. The distinctive conceptual framework helps to explain how protests became a kind of security mechanism preventing an unstable social system from radical changes. Based on that concept the anthropological investigation allowed to identify some systemic milestones, or structural dimensions, bringing some counterintuitive results when it comes to the assessment of key social functions of protest, and a rather expected disclosure of deep authoritarian settings of governing institutions. Finally, the article discusses some similarities between the contentious events in Serbia and Bulgaria, and how the private stories recorded during in-depth interviews conducted between 2014 and 2017 in Belgrade and Sofia combine into one legitimate public narration on the Balkan political issues.

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Introduction

The paradigms of social change and social movements appear peculiarly unsatisfactory when applied to the recent political processes in some CEE European countries, such as Serbia, Bulgaria, or Belarus, and more generally to what has been going on in the region since 1989. There is a general consensus that large social protests in the region do not bring about significant change in terms of democratic development (Bunce, 1990; Džihić et al., 2018). Hence, concurrent to the mainstream perspectives (Castells, 2013; della Porta and Diani 2006; Brancati, 2016) on protests' subjection to the political systems of Eastern Europe have, in recent years, become the focus of extensive debates and verification in social science. This major shift puts emphasis on the issue's high complexity that is embedded in the societies' cultural qualities, individual historical trajectories and institutional reproduction, as well as various ideological divisions existing within. Those post-communist countries struggle to achieve equality of rights and privileges among all citizens. The existing political partitions are supported by multiple ambivalent narratives built around protests at various historical stages of a state existence, e. g. labelled as pro- or anti systemic. This essay addresses a few broad social and political issues that stem from that subjection, and of which the interplay between protests and protracted processes of post-socialist transformation of last decades in the eastern and southern parts of Europe are focused on.

There is no established anthropology of protest or social movements. The subject often appears on the margins of debate on political or social sciences (see Gibb, 2001; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2013), yet, there is a growing agreement that anthropology with its various techniques of sampling and deeply engaging research ceremonials can be in a fairly good position to take an expository role where the mainstream theories are unsuccessful. However, more studies that dovetail the mundane with the structural, and link personal agency with systemic processes are needed.

Obviously, the anthropological disputes on protests and mechanisms of social change in post-communist societies can take major account of the dominant political discourses and macro-theories that consider such phenomena a factor that significantly contributes to the expansion of democratic culture in the region. Yet, mass demonstrations in Serbia and Bulgaria have been striving against the authoritarian regimes for decades with no significant progress, whether calculated by the measures of human rights, freedom of speech, economy (Subotić, 2015), or recaptured in layers of personal experience, structuring the initial research question here. Thus, another perspective on the protests' subjection to the political systems needs to be offered on this ground.

Firstly, the article advocates for a new and a slightly more hybrid outlook in the relationship between student protests in Serbia and Bulgaria and the post-socialist transformation process in both countries at points at which established scholars and classic theories of protest and revolution remain inconclusive (Greenberg, 2014; Giugni, 2004; Andrain and Apter, 1995; Petrović, 2007). The mainstream theories of protest and social

movements (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Castells, 2013) dwell only on those cases that fit the scenario in which large street protests trigger a social change, leading to a form of accomplishing the key institutional modifications expected by the protesters, society and academics. This contributes to underestimating the impact of protracted transformation processes on European politics in general. The paper challenges the traditional approach.

Secondly, the paper offers a new conceptual model of protest built on a concept of security mechanism (*dispositif de sécurité*) proposed by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 2009; Genel, 2006; Dillon and Lobbo-Guerrero, 2008). The major theoretical framework adopted here emphasizes the extent to which protests are a part of structural processes of governing populations, securing social balance and preventing collective radical and violent disorders. Nonetheless, as a result of the specific position, the essay does not expatiate much on the issue of agency. This approach, I argue, resolves the fundamental problem that the discourse of the post-communist transition has generated, namely the question of what protests do if they do not facilitate democratic development. In this way, the paper is also an attempt to show a significant explanatory power of one of the Michel Foucault's late theoretical concepts, which is taken as a starting point for developing a new bio-political perspective on social protests.

Thirdly, the paper is a kind of research report from a fieldwork conducted in Serbia and Bulgaria between 2014 and 2017, and allows for an in-depth insight into the contemporary Balkan political landscape, showing that the two cases of protest cycles observed in Serbia and Bulgaria share some parallel features in the way they deal with student protests as a mechanism of security for the social system. In its contemporary form, the mechanism of security was established in the 1950s, and the rise of Yugoslavia marks a threshold for this particular mechanism of security as an apparatus of adaptation to unstable structural conditions, which nowadays seems to be limited to the Balkan region and is transmitted to every new political set-up. Yugoslavia as a political construct has contributed to establishing a *status quo* between internal and external (international) political influences in the region, as well as the dominance of authoritarian forms of governing. History is being used by the Serbian and Bulgarian governments in order to adapt the contemporary autocratic policies to the changing European political ambience (see Subotić, 2013; Čolović, 2014; Todorova, 1997). These early, from the point of view of modern Serbia and Bulgaria, transformative years in the Balkan contemporary politics have shaped the passive policy response to numerous national affairs, including a complex situation within academia. To show how some of the political circumstances impact the courses of student demonstrations, in the second part of the paper, qualitative data and ethnographic description are presented in the context of Foucault's security concept.

Finally, the essay gives a brief account of how anthropology and ethnographic methods can be successfully adopted for researching broad systemic issues. This research deals with some serious local concerns and individual experience, and in this way proves security mechanisms a profoundly local matter that can be investigated by the means of fieldwork and narrative methods. However, those procedures correspond with the macro level and

intertwine with numerous aspects of Serbian and Bulgarian national and international politics. High-level applicability of qualitative methods for investigating wide-range macro-social political issues, systemic dynamics and structural functions of local political upheavals modifies the way the qualitative research methods can be perceived. The paper takes up a more nuanced, anthropological perspective from the outset, showing how easily stories challenge boundaries of political spaces.

Social protests and systemic issues: state of research

Only a brief and selective discussion on what has been achieved in the realm of protest in Social Sciences can be carried out. Apparently, beside all the up-mentioned studies, representations of social protests in the sociological scholarship depicts those phenomena in multiple other ways. For instance, moral and emotional dimension are major measurements of commitment to public actions such as protests (Jasper, 1997) and social movements (Jasper, 2011; Sabucedo and Vilas, 2014). A masterpiece by Charles Tilly "Speaking your mind without elections, surveys or social movements" (1983) combines evocative historical descriptions with analytical argumentation on the evolution of collective contentious behaviour. Multiplex ties between structural and historical conditions of the student protests in 1960s make an important case here (Mercer, 2019). There are also those studies that explore the core issues, conflicts, and visions of Europe or setting new political agendas and areas of further exploration (Fominaya and Feenstra, 2019).

The recent scholarship more specifically focused on protests and social movements in the Balkan societies is also vast and takes different conceptual standpoints (see for instance Greenberg, 2014; Milić and Čičkarić, 1998; Petrović, 2007; Koycheva, 2016). A very interesting Dawson's ethnographic approach in his book *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria* (2014) takes an anthropological and comparative perspective. That makes it particularly informative in the regard of the political culture, both in Bulgaria and Serbia. The author argues that democratic development is not always mirrored or legitimized in public policies, but can be traced by applying more informal measures e. g. by focusing on tracing various dimensions of civil society of the Balkan countries. According to Dawson, Serbia and Bulgaria share some common political, cultural and demographic features which makes them good comparative cases. According to Hallberg and Ossewaarde (2016), Bulgarian protests have distinctive traits and significant historical roots; however, they are also inspired by a global social movement.

A paper "Comparing Street Demonstrations" by Klandermans, van Stekelenburg and Walgrave (2014) argues that local and cultural determinants are significant for a proper analysis of street protest, and there are plenty local modalities of political relations between protests and their environments and cultures that determine their outcome. On the other hand, Brancati (2016), in his book *Democracy Protests: Origins, Feature and Significance* proves that in many cases, connections between democracy are inseparable units of analysis.

Student protests instantiate an exceptionally important sort of protest, as a lot of research shows that higher education – and all the processes within – greatly supports the attainment of democratic regimes, and this impact has been documented as a major factor of improving the general life conditions for people in poor and developing countries (Sanborn and Thyne, 2013). The educational and social results of tertiary education usually exert a positive influence, although they take place under a few conditions that are not an object of this study (Alemán and Kim, 2015).

Authoritarian regimes are considered as typically marked by severe economic crises and, whether classified as developing or not, struggle with comparable political, social and structural hindrances on their way towards any form of system stability. Authoritarian regimes are among the most expensive to maintain in terms of all the possible costs (financial, social, etc.), so transformation is usually equivalent to making the system less expensive to reproduce, sustain and develop, but the process itself is both costly and risky. The support provided by universities impacts autocratic societies in multiple direct and indirect ways, and although tracing the way this happens is not the focus of this paper, it is crucial to mention such aspects as: selection of facts and certain narrations over others, the acceptance of different interpretations of historical facts and opinions, and, most important here, the forms of cultural legitimization of a particular political order. Hence, the high level of occurrence of student demonstrations aiming to impact national politics directly confronts and influences any regime, but the authoritarian ones seem to be particularly prone to challenging such initiatives but lingering protests barely ever cause severe political crisis. The student protests and demonstrations, altogether with the occupation of academic buildings in Belgrade and Sofia, serve as an example of movements that did not push democratic development ahead in terms of all the significant democratic measures, however, cannot be ignored as well-organized structures and resource-rich political actors.

In some of the European countries the post-socialist transition has been triggered by mass street protests and these images still occupy the imagination of many CEE societies. Yet, a high frequency of violent demonstrations is not enough to ascertain that a social transformation is always going to happen by means of protest. Certainly, such an outline of successful transition enhanced by grassroots mass demonstrations was registered during the 1960s to some extent, and more so with the unrests in Western and Central Europe of 1989. The project of transforming Central and Eastern Europe into young democracies, free from impoverishment and destitution considered parts of obsolete social machinery of authoritarian governments. But after a few decades not only have the project proved extremely difficult, but it also uncovered multiple homologies between the Eastern European countries on the institutional level, re-orienting research to other patterns.

Post-socialist transformation is a colloquial as well as political concept that, since it was established by the fall of the communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe, has undergone significant changes. Since it became extremely popular soon after the protests of 1989, it turned out to be the key explanatory concept of major political processes in

Europe for three decades. The artless yet determined birth of the Solidarity movement in Gdansk and the fall of the Berlin Wall somehow occupy the popular imagination as symbols of something bigger than economic stalemate, the promise of an instant break-away from an ideological situation influenced by political interest. The dogmatic belief in the domino effect prevailed long enough to cause the emergence of the entire discourse of the 1989 post-communist transformation. The mainstream portrayal of the "transformation" is a simplistic one that does not fully acknowledge the complexities evident beneath the surface. Perhaps the most substantial revision to that discourse is that the pattern of the turnover of 1989 is no longer considered a historical necessity in the political struggle of all the socialist states of Europe. The previous idea resulted in a rather odd expectation that all the post-communist countries of the Eastern Bloc would follow the same political scenario: overthrowing the authoritarian regime and dysfunctional social institutions through massive street protests, then proclaiming the advent of a new, more liberal and democratic order. Another version of this theory assumes that some countries are expecting that something, possibly a game-changing event, will happen and finish the transformation. This expectation has been lingering for decades.

The outburst of revolt had not yet reached the critical point after which there could be no return to the previous status quo. Although hundreds of thousands of people were engaged in the protest, probably more than in all previous demonstrations taken together, it was still confined to but one segment of society – the urban middle class. In all protests in the former Eastern and Central European Communists countries that were successful in overturning the government and initiating change, workers had played a decisive role. In Serbia, however, workers burdened by extremely unfavorable economic conditions, pressured and manipulated by the regime, and fragmented into several opposing unions, were still not ready to show solidarity and call a general strike (Prosic-Dvornic, 1998: 140).

For many scholars, Serbia and Bulgaria are just a step away from achieving their full transformative potential, somehow preserving the "revolutionary" discourse (Greenberg, 2014; Prosic-Dvornic, 1998), being short of any other explanations. Nevertheless, there are quite a few serious exceptions from the scenario of political "evolution" from communism to democracy, and many countries do not follow one setup. These cases call for a conceptual revision of the transformative paradigm.

Foucault's concept of security and the bio-political paradigm in ethnographic research

The change in thinking about humanity, which Foucault's intellectual heritage gives, is justifiably considered by many critics as a serious paradigmatic shift, and his reflections on the modern state and strategies of governing are particularly important. For Foucault narratives are inscribed in those strategies and their political functions are grounded in a specific theoretical position focused on mechanisms of power and procedures of governing in the modern societies. Since modern societies are within the scope of interest

of anthropology, this thought deserves some attention, however, the concept of security allows for imposing some order on the ethnographic experience and enables series of deconstruction of the political functions of student protests and their political reality.

Foucault's concept of security has received little attention in political and social thought in comparison to its sister idea of discipline. The two concepts of discipline and security make up the major frames or simply the two aspects of his theory of bio-politics: the one concentrated on individual biological lives, and the other focusing on human populations or groups separated according to various biological (e.g. sex), quasi-biological (e.g. race) and social criteria (e.g. gender, social class). He dedicated a separate volume to both. *Discipline and Punish* (1975) investigates the changes in penitentiary discourse, and in large parts of his study *Security. Territory. Population* (2009) Foucault discusses the key aspects of security understood as social balance, stability or a genre of equilibrium – a situation in which political processes do not require any special interference. The efficiency of student protests is then limited to triggering another cycle of demonstrations and carrying through without infringement to the general order. Interestingly enough, the liminal aspect of social upheavals seems to be overlooked at many points.

Mechanisms of security are structural procedures that, according to Foucault, have been developing intensively from the eighteenth century onward and have evolved as a product of the new forms of governing and political constructs – modern nation states. Yet, security procedures are not statecraft: this contemporary style of political control is partly a side effect (or simply a byproduct) of the processes of emerging new forms of nation-state policy. The security procedures are also dependent on economy development processes, capital accumulation, and knowledge management, as well as on migration processes and the very nature of political borders.

The geopolitical approach is important as it lays the foundation for the new way of thinking on relations between population, territorial aspects and politics, makes governing those populations possible in terms of influencing their features or answering the needs they create, and allows for very precise estimations on the future shape of societal projects. According to this, bio-politics operates at the macro level and security is focused on the micro level, yet the two levels correlate. Considered together with the disciplinary procedures, security procedures – that is, the control and management of social and political processes – are for Foucault the bio-political technique for equipping a modern nation state in power. The bio-political approach emphasizes the relative political stability of the state as the absolute priority, and the management of structural conflicts precedes systemic change that brings potential destabilization.

The concept of bio-politics in social sciences has a significant explanatory potential, especially when applied to governing processes. A lot of political approaches have adapted to this shift regarding the bio-political view in a way, yet when thinking about the impact protests make on societies, the romantic approach of revolutionary thinking lingers.

The mechanism of security *(dispositif de sécurité)* derives from the bio-political paradigm. It is a product and a by-product and is not a natural method, yet it takes natural

phenomena and imposes social "brackets" on them for the sake of a state and its society. This essay shows also how the classic thought of Foucault can be successfully adopted for the purpose of interrogation of the contemporary and modern political processes.

The four-dimensional concept of security in Michel Foucault's bio-politics was one of the later concepts elaborated by him, and one which was never finished. The idea presented here is solely an interpretation of the concept, which in Foucault's writings took only a few chapters (Foucault, 2009). Yet, the author identified four dimensions of the security mechanisms which allow for the description of a social event as such a procedure in the next part of the paper.

The first dimension discussed here concerns the spaces of security. The aleatoric dimension on how uncertain events are treated by society is the second dimension of description. The processes of normalization that refer to a particular event follow the aleatoric aspect thus constituting the third dimension, and the population dimension analyzes relationships between a mechanism of security and an involved population (or similar social category) is the fourth one.

The first of the features says that social events that are classified as security procedures belong to a particular space (be it a city). But the question of space, for Foucault, reflects also the nature of borders and territorial divisions at the micro and macro level which in the Balkan cultural context is quite an issue. In the following empirical part, I dwell more on the local level, which displays some local concerns. Accordingly to Foucault, the importance of studying space and spatial entities from the Balkan cultural perspective is highlighted by Todorova: "(...) the excessive focus on borders imposed an unhealthy obsession with distinction and difference. Recently, there has been a powerful shift away from border studies toward the now-fashionable category of space, which allots due attention to the cohesive processes and structures within the entity. This approach, developed by geographers and anthropologists, stresses the links between knowledge, power, and spatiality and focuses on the metaphorical and material resonance of space" (Todorova, 2009: 197-198).

The second dimension – the aleatoric dimension, or "treating of the uncertain", explains how a system is prepared to encounter unwanted events that will probably emerge but at an uncertain time: "the system is basically focused on a possible event, an event that could take place, and which one tries to prevent before it becomes a reality" (Foucault, 2009: 54).

Normalization – the third dimension – shall, in its contemporary and most modern incarnation, be understood in terms of discursive practices and negotiating social norms and labels that are being put on "suspicious" or disturbing events, and norms that emerge within. Foucault writes: "I think it really is necessary to show that the relationship of the law to the norm does in fact indicate that there is something that we could call a normativity intrinsic to any legal imperative, but this normativity intrinsic to the law, perhaps founding the law, cannot be confused with what we are trying to pinpoint here under the name of procedures, processes, and techniques of normalization. I would even say instead that, if it is true that the law refers to a norm, and that the role and function of the law therefore – the

very operational law – is to codify a norm, to carry out a codification in the relation to the norm, the problem that I am trying to mark out is how techniques of normalization develop from and below a system of law, in its margins and maybe even against it" (Foucault, 2009: 84).

And, finally, the populational aspect, to which Foucault has dedicated a lot of space where he refers many times to history of population studies. The population as a political subject, as a new collective subject absolutely foreign to the juridical and political thought of earlier centuries, is appearing here in its complexity, with its caesuras. You can already see it appearing as an object, that is to say as that on which and towards which mechanisms are directed in order to have a particular effect on it, as well as a subject, since it is called upon to conduct itself in such and such fashion (Foucault, 2009: 65).

Since Foucault presented his idea, a serious progress has been made within the bio-power paradigm drawing attention to the fact that the analytical concept of population can be easily replaced with any other social category constructed with regard to multiple other criteria, not just the territorial one. It is not only the biological factors, but social and quasi-biological aspects, and mostly social constructs such as gender, race, age, nation and social class, or citizenship, which are the subject of governing processes. That "population," which was the empirical referent of early biopolitics, is being superseded by "heterogenesis." This serves as the empirical referent for the recombinant biopolitics of security in the molecular age. (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008: 265).

Moreover, when "populational" (so also those concerned with social groups other than populations) processes of modernity start to be combined with other factors such as the environment, particular forms of economics, knowledge modalities, other available cultural recourses, forms of regime, and many more – new social and political qualities emerge.

Narratives appear important for the Foucauldian concept of truth, but the author himself has not addressed the issue directly, nor in the way that anthropology does that.

What is at stake here is the way the power intervenes in creating possibility for specific narratives to emerge as dominant and for others to be marginalized. What has to be remembered here, however, is that power should not be seen in its negative dimension – as a force imposing and sustaining domination – but rather in its Foucauldian reconfiguration as producing truth, knowledge and ultimately the subject (Tamboukou, 2008: 104).

As the central question of Foucault's reflection, power, especially in modernity, becomes a phenomenon with highly complex features and includes sets of mechanisms, procedures and general strategies of power that take human beings as biological organisms into account. Age, sex, gender, citizenship, sexual orientation, health conditions and many more became – to a previously unknown extent – the major objects of planning. Particular strategies are being invented to control populations and their features, to form societies and power itself – an impersonal setup of structural and historical conditions. This way, the concept of security can be positioned among other political ideas. Hence, narrative is understood through the structures and forces of discourse as legitimization of a particular political order, centers of power and authority, and dominant versions history. According

to Tamboukou, Foucault understands the function of narratives as twofold: first, as technologies of power, (…) and second as *technologies of the self*, active practices of self-formation (Ibid.: 107). Tamboukou further writes: "What is particularly interesting however is what I have called a focus on narrative modalities in the construction of the *dispositif*, in other words an exploration how narratives – both public and private and personal – become the medium through which connections are made and regimes of truth established" (Ibid.: 110).

What anthropologists write on differences between "private" and "public" narrations also echoes Foucault's beliefs. According to Jackson (2002), stories are being re-written and re-constructed but also culturally legitimized each time they are re-told. This way they became bridges between particular experience and universal knowledge. As Jackson says "(…) such antinomies as the "personal" and the "social" or the "private" and the "public" do not define distinct genres of narrative, but only moments in a drawn-out dialectic in which individual life stories become interleaved with the narratives of nations, and shared stories assume new meanings in the uses to which each individual puts them according to his or her particular experiences and predilections" (Jackson, 2002: 227).

This brings the study to the point where individual narrations start uncovering their constructivist aspects and some legitimizing functions.

Private stories as public narratives

Serbia is a society with a legacy of severe political and ethnic conflict, and a very strong national identity accompanied by a very old narration on the Serbian nation's genesis. The mythological strength was enhanced by the early twentieth century eugenics. With its population of roughly 6.9 million (Statistical Yearbook, 2019) and a capital city in Belgrade, Serbia remains one of the most influential countries in the Balkan political landscape. As a result of the past hegemony, the expansive Serbian nationalism prevails and dominates among all the nationalistic narrations in the Balkan region.

A rich tradition of uprising and student protests since the 1950s seems to roughly correspond to the contemporary authoritarian government's state project, making the major political processes in the country contradictory. Moreover, serious issues with human rights applicability raise the question on Vučić's government commitment to equality. "Human rights issues included government corruption, including by some high-level officials; violence against journalists; and crimes including violence targeting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) individuals" (HRR Serbia, 2018).

As a result of high rate of unemployment and poverty corruption indicators are maintained high. Informal economy remains the most effective alternative to the official institutions. Similarly, Bulgaria is to a significant extent marked by the phenomenon of corruption, however the contemporary policies focus more on struggling to achieve some of the EU democratic standards by institutional means, so the contemporary political atmosphere in Bulgaria seems to be a sedate one. Yet, this sedation in the public political

debate, largely responsible for ignoring the last mass student demonstrations and its large infra-political dimension discussed below, seems to be indicative of a broader social malaise and lack of necessary political reforms.

Furthermore, the entire region is marked by a set of double social standards, those which are formal (e. g. law) and informal (clientelism and nepotism): formal as a result of adopting the Western pattern of education and educational content itself, and informal due to the only effectively working informal networks having direct influence on the social status of an individual. A great consignment of political, cultural and historical identities was wiped out from the Bulgarian society by decades of communist censorship. Thus, the issue of duality still exists in Bulgaria. Even after joining the EU structures the past division between what was allowed and what was not mirrors the old regimes' attitudes.

The Bulgarian nation has its own, separate foundational myth too. It depicts Bulgarians as proto-Slavs being a cluster of very old ethnic groups preceding the detachment from Bulgaria. Bulgarian population is some 6.9 million people (Statista, 2022) and this fact also makes the countries comparable from the population perspective.

In the words of two Bulgarian analysts "Modern history has not given democratic institutions a chance to become effective social regulators. Nor has it given the Constitution a chance to effectively safeguard public civic interest. That is why the legal culture of present-day Bulgarians is giving a greater chance to social regulators other than Law (…) The Modern Bulgarian State was constituted on the pattern of West European constitutionalism, but in opposition to West European interest in the Balkans" (Dimitrov and Krasteva, 1998: 127).

It is also worth mentioning that in those societies that are struggling with transition, the key concept of democracy is more complex than in the monoethnic ones. If democracy is considered as the rule of a dominant ethnic group, then in the Balkans – as Vojislav Stanovčić has discerned – the concept of democratic governing becomes contradictory when adopted into the practice of promoting one groups' interest over others. Thus, one model of the democratic order may entail a serious danger of simplification in conceptualizing democracy as all the European states are of different ethnic or multi-religious setups. Finally, in most of those countries, political differences mark divisions that do not allow for an open debate. Those divisions in post-conflict societies are defined as hotspots for hate crimes. As this author, who is from the region, puts it, "In Eastern Europe and the space of the former Soviet Union we have to deal with ethnic nations and not with nations in the Western sense, which is closer to a nation based on citizenship. We have to take into account that there, as with all human affairs, perceptions or misperceptions play a very important role, regardless of what the real facts are. Stereotypes are widely present and cause effects in inter-ethnic relations. Political differences can, of course, also play an important role" (Stanovčić, 2011: 329).

Nonetheless, what is the most important is the shared social and political horizon making comparisons among Balkan countries justified.

Student protests in Serbia were recorded in 1954, 1966, 1968, 1971, 1989, 1991, and 1991–2 (Milić and Čičkarić, 1998). All of them were against the political regime. Obviously,

students need to organize within alternatives to academic structures and organizations, firstly, because they need to oppose the major, albeit dysfunctional academic institutions (e. g. the student parliament), and, secondly, because any kind of social action requires some form of structured, intentional and coordinated actions. And that is exactly how new forms of organizations appear – sometimes transforming themselves into professional political organizations or even political parties.

I was informed that only in the first half of the last decade were student protests in Sofia registered almost every year (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014). However, respondents fail to acknowledge that there were demonstrations in Bulgaria before 1989, not only in the 1990s, and although those that appeared immediately after the launch of post-socialist transformation are best recognized by the related literature. Obviously society did not change overnight.

The fieldwork was conducted between 2014 and 2017 in Belgrade (this part of the fieldwork took seven months) and Sofia (this part took only three weeks). The Bulgarian case is not fully comprehensive as a result of a lack of further funding. As a basic research technique, in-depth interviews were conducted. The main language for the interviews was English. The research sample of the registered interviews was: Belgrade (B) 15 + Sofia (S) 13. I was using Serbian language only in the case of a few informal interviews. All respondents were participants of the last or the previous waves of student demonstrations in Belgrade and Sofia and often shared major leadership functions. Moreover, desk research and participatory observation means were commonly used in Belgrade where I have visited the occupied building. While in Sofia the fieldwork was limited solely to interviews and desk research, I have also visited some of the University's buildings occupied in 2013.

The respondents were mostly recruited among participants in the occupation of the Belgrade University in 2014, and the protests in Bulgaria of 2013. Most of them were aged 21 to 29, however, some participants in the events in the 1990s were also among the interviewed. All of them were leaders, activists, or experts, so they possessed extensive knowledge in the history and theory of protests. They were mostly workers of academia in Belgrade and Sofia.

I realize how lucky I was during my first short visit to Serbia in early summer 2014 being able to start working on the project immediately after arrival. I managed to conduct few interviews with participants in the student protests that took place before 2014, of which one soon appeared to be prophetic. That was exactly a few months before student protest in Belgrade were staged. There follows an excerpt from the interview with one of the Institute of Sociology's professors:

"My experience has taught me that this kind of apathy very easily can be transformed into a vigorous activity. And I wouldn't be surprised at all if we witness very soon some strong protests. It doesn't mean it will happen, but I wouldn't be surprised, because during 1992 everyone was talking about the apathy and was completely desperate, and I sat down and drew some ideas about what Slobodan Milosevic should do and such things, and then I met my colleagues and noticed that everybody thought pretty much the same. And

spontaneously we went out with our suggestions to the government, our demands to the government, and it was a protest that lasted all summer. Well, it was unsuccessful, as I told you the tactic was really wrong, but I still remember very well that the apathy was huge and suddenly the protest was staged" (B1).

The occupation of the Philosophical Faculty's building, a major part of the University in Belgrade, was launched on Thursday, the 9th October 2014 and took 55 days. Preceded by a huge street protest on 7th of October that gathered students form other universities in Belgrade, the occupation was seen by the participants as too long, extremely costly in personal and social terms, and not quite effective. The students raised objections against increasing fees, nontransparent rules for passing the bar exams, and other similar issues.

The University in Sofia began informally with occupying just a single room, so the starting point was not that precise. One-room occupation was not officially recognized an occupation. In this case, and after a few months of intermittent struggle for a political revival in the country, the occupation was summed up by one of the leaders as follows: "I don't know what we were thinking at that time". The critical voices of disappointment were accompanied by reflections on what could be improved and often by declarations of overcoming severe personal crisis. On the whole, this made the narratives extremely conscious and powerful. Violative conditions under which the stories were told often increased the protester's sense of isolation. Yet, narratives built around familiar and commonly recognized places had the power to travel beyond the academia.

Spaces of security

The question referring to the description of the space within which the mechanisms of security appear is a complex one. In general, the scope of any security mechanism is delimited by a particular nation-state jurisdiction, namely its political – eventually administrative – borders. As per demonstrations, one can see that the space is seriously limited by urban architecture, law, and social customs and tradition:

"Well, there are some typical places for protests like … if you like, some make sense, and some don't. Some are purely traditional, some are for the cause because sometimes you do the protest in front of the government because you're talking to the government and you're protesting against the government, while sometimes protests are held at some points in the city since people are used to protest in those places" (B3).

It is a situation when protestors hijack the space for the purpose of protest as a way to achieve dominance over the authorities or other social and political institutions involved in the process: *"something that someone needs to use, your professors and the state, because you want something from them and that's how you fight with them"* (B3).

This is just an example of many similar explanations given when the question of choosing space has emerged. The use of the words "obvious," "natural" and "well known" to describe the space of protests, and labeling them as "given" with no attempt to challenge or modify them, is very symptomatic. Yet, for Foucault, and from the perspective of the security concept, this is an indication of a reversed transformation process.

What was happening with the available space during the protests was very telling, and all of it was visible in both countries, the space partition being intensified. What used to be divided by social norms became divided by physical borders – the starkest of social demarcation one can imagine. The space of protests was separated from other regions, whether by numerous items, police cordons, or security officers recruited from different groups. In Bulgaria, there was a high level of awareness that if the protest was to be successful, the space had to expand:

"I appeared with some students of mine. There were like ten or fifteen of them – I remember. And we sat there and had a class because it was an open space at the beginning. It was an open space for discussion (…) and an assembly started. But it didn't work like an occupation (…) I told them we cannot stay here because physically, spatially, it shows who the boss is" (S6).

Space divisions became detectable, but also new functions within this room appeared: a lot of empty informal places were transformed into highly functional regions, provisional beds marked sleeping spaces, floor covered with linoleum, and tents put up in central halls suggested new living areas, with small kitchens arranged in buildings' corners. However, early on, the Bulgarian students decided to go outside: *"They made actions outside in the streets because they realized that they cannot keep hold of the building, the site as they called it, because they have no resources and there is no point because they stay closed and nobody sees what they are doing. They were marginalised by themselves."* (S6)

The treatment of uncertainty

The dimension of the circulation of social phenomena, which can be distinguished within the framework of the safety management strategy, can be described after Foucault as "sanitary." This aspect of a demonstration – regardless of whether it takes place at a university or in a city center – is always personified by the presence of officers and a large number of peacekeepers (mostly passive) at the borders of the security territory and the limited space of the demonstration itself. From this point of view, looking at this relationship a little closer would be recommended as a part of separate studies.

However, what can be said with certainty is that the cordons of officers disappear along with the assemblies, but as long as a demonstration passes across the city, it is tightly surrounded by them. Rooted in medieval strategies, brought to life for constructing sewage systems and technologies for maintaining relative hygiene in the city (Foucault, 2009), this dimension tells us a lot about how important preventing incidents of social mixing and "ideological contagion" is from the bio-political point of view. Demonstrations and occupations must take place in urban areas for political reasons, but they must also be sufficiently isolated from public space in order not to pose a threat to social security. And just as the spread of diseases and other unwanted phenomena was once avoided by extracting space for them and closing access to other parts of the city, now you can isolate areas of protest and analyze their geopolitical closure.

The cyclical and circular nature of the events is very visible in both the Bulgarian and Serbian cases. Of course, this is not a literal type of cyclicality. The regularity with which student protests appear is very flexible. However, student protests have been returning regularly for several decades every few years (approximately three to six years). This fact has been noted in the related literature (Milić and Čičkarić, 1998). Patterns of activity and certain ideologies are repeated, and they are sometimes also the same people – in these aspects, it is also difficult to see significant changes.

The next issue is that some rules change temporarily, so the space of security that is mentioned above becomes highly exclusive, "security" groups (people responsible for keeping order) appear everywhere and something similar to a martial state is being introduced: "it's almost like a new law, a new government," as I was told once. Some examples of "security" groups in Sofia were the people who were delegated the right to take care of the youngest participants. One of the respondents described this in the following way:

"I called some friends to go and see what has happened there, at the crossroads. Some kids joined. They were aged between fourteen and sixteen and we went totally crazy because of it. Because if something happens it would be my fault, our fault, and it will be written on my bill, on our bill. So, we organized a group of four or five people to go to the crossroads and take the control. Especially in case of provocations, it could be really dangerous" (S4).

Normalization specific to security – the discursive practices

Although protests are legal in terms of law, in that the academic space is a self-governing one, so occupations cannot be managed by the same legal means as street protests. Yet, two systemic narrations labeling the student initiatives are present. The very function of those narrations is to convince society that nothing serious is really happening and the protests do not require any public attention. In Serbia, the demonstrations were organized by the "students who have problems with passing their exams." Those people took the sole responsibility for the occupation and their main intention was to remove those students who wanted to pass their exams, while some of the people arranging the occupation, were not students of the faculty.

In Bulgaria, it was the "anti-communist" label given to all the demonstrations – no component of the critique of the contemporary political system was mentioned in the public media discourse. This lack or ignorance was symptomatic and is a systemic reaction, a kind of preventive reaction against the possible severe critique and an attempt to modify the political system which is extremely prone to destabilization, but not at all prone to change.

Also, problems with communication are normalized at different phases, and on the local level of the entire process were stark. This is an example of micro-level difficulties that are the very result of systemic problems:

"Firstly, we were not planning the blockade. We were talking about a blockade but it was not in the plan. And we tried to communicate with the faculty and the university, but they

they didn't want to communicate with us (…) we tried in many different ways: we sent them some letters, via the Student Parliament, and stuff like that and they somewhat ignored us and rejected every offer we gave to them. And so, after three weeks of attempts to establish a line of communication with them, because we didn't even have that line of communication, we had to admit that the blockade was the only option" (B8).

In the interviews, students generally refer to the lack of good will or an intentionally made chaos. Bad attitudes in negotiations (in Serbia), or no meaningful communication (the Bulgarian case) with government was reported: *"When you see those people making decisions are not making any rational decisions, people's morale started to decline (…) they saw there is no way to communicate properly. Just like: no, it's   not going to happen (…) In that time we had the negotiations and the ministry was like a middleman between us and the faculty. We voted for our representatives, then our four representatives went to the ministry and claimed that we had that one demand, that is the crucial demand, and the ministry said: it's ok, it's by the law."* (B6)

During another meeting with one of the vice deans a kind of preliminary agreement was achieved, but then, again *"the student representatives who communicated with her and the dean came and said: 'no, no, no, the dean said she has misinterpreted his proposition and he wouldn't sign this proposition and it's not like that (…) and then she said what we're looking for is breaking the law, definitely breaking the law, it's not something she can sign because she would be breaking the law…'"* (B6).

In Bulgaria the normalization mechanism for student protests was to politicize their emerging discourse along the lines represented by the already existing political parties: *"I saw that you cannot change anything spontaneously (…) I decided to start the protest because some of my friends started talking about privatization, about economy (…) but I understood that if you are outside the political groups, you don't have any chances to change anything, because our media work with political parties, and the media would change our discourse (…) and they use this discourse for the elections"* (S1).

Security and "population"[2]

There is no particular state policy that deals with student issues; thus, it was difficult to extract some hints on how the group is "governed" in Foucauldian terms. At this point it would be rather appropriate to say that those policies are random and accidentally introduced. Obviously, the group of students is not homogenic, yet a large majority of those who did not participate in the protests supported students' demands and, overall, showed unity and solidarity. The same was the case in Bulgaria, but with a tremendous support from the Bulgarian society as even parents of protesting students were providing food or joining the occupation along with their children.

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[2] The word „population" is in brackets as in this case it refers a social category other than the general population.

The resignation from active participation in the protest of some students, which I was able to determine thanks to informal and unregistered interviews, resulted from a lack of faith in the effectiveness of protests and occupation, and was justified by the existence of other political tools, perhaps more effective ones (for example, various forms of mediation or negotiations without protests or occupation). Just a few students refused to take part due to various ideological reasons or did not support the case.

Some voices were apolitical, other were critical and immersed in the spirit of political determinism: *"when I see their Facebook, I see a lot of comments like 'we don't belong to any ideology,' and I think the students of the faculty of philosophy have better chance to find books where they find what we do is to reveal an ideology of capitalism, that you don't have to have Tito to have ideology, and the system has to find some way to reproduce itself. So, I'm not sure where they think they live since they refuse see that this protest is also a political act…"* (B4).

The interviews reveal a double set of social standards and expectations where no particular strategies created to manage the duality of a social system: on the one hand it is the formal set of standards (the requirement of a university degree as the path to satisfying employment rewarding fairness, knowledge, competences and following the rule of the law) and the informal (career-oriented through nepotism and tolerance of corruption that rewards cunning ones). The accompanying high rate of unemployment implicates that this area of governing and related acceptable standards of behavior are still underdeveloped and need particular policies to manage the potential and social resources. The protests of Bulgaria had a sound moral message: "We wanted to change the country. That was our slogan, but no one knows what that means. We said only 'we are the people against the mafia' and we occupied the university's building. But that was not a public event; we started the protest as three students" (S1).

However, soon the protest turned into a mass event with barely any demands articulated at that stage. The lack of any clear political programme or visions of political transformation in Bulgaria caused the loss of the momentum for change.

Results and discussion

According to Foucault, a mechanism of security is identified when an event can be described within all the four dimensions discussed above. So, if it has its own physical space, it needs to be discursively normalized by some social techniques, there already exist some social mechanisms of dealing with it, finally, there must be a particular social category of citizens involved in the mechanism's force.

Despite a relatively broad social network built on informal, often international, contacts and specialist knowledge that is typical of modern societies, student protests in the Balkans are limited to specific urban areas and social spaces, such as streets, squares near academic buildings and academic buildings themselves, which are isolated. Serbia and Bulgaria can be described as network societies having multiple grassroots organizations that emerged

from the academic community, all the required political knowledge, and access to all the communication technologies. However, it seems that the network – in the case of Foucault's security mechanism and the bio-political horizon – does not allow the transfer of the effects of structural tensions to other geopolitical areas. The processes described and analyzed in this essay work closely within national and urban borders. The demonstrations are properly isolated by numerous physical and cultural factors and particular strategies have emerged to normalize the radical aspect of those events. Because of that they could not succeed in triggering deeper transformation processes. With regard to the space of security, the latter can be characterized as: "closed," "obvious," or "given," as having a lot of "natural" features of the space available for protestors. Space can be analyzed in terms of its exclusion/inclusion properties, but that is something that can be deliberately challenged and re-designed by various actions or policies.

The most interesting issue that appears is about challenging this traditional space. No attempts were made to broaden, change or overcome the boundaries to get a new one, and the students themselves carefully guarded the boundaries, sticking to them blatantly. But such inertial tendencies signify how important security of the entire project is.

This treatment of the uncertain dimension, the control/"sanitary" aspect, was also very visible – social and geopolitical boundaries were seriously strengthened for the time of demonstrations, which was something that was evident for both the protesting students and other social groups involved, and the police and lecturers.

Normalization works as a strategy to deteriorate danger and undermine the actions taken by students – a kind of notification, that nothing worth social attention is taking place. Two strategies were visible: one Serbian and another Bulgarian, as they are characterized above. In Serbia, the dominant social discourse was characterised in terms of the lack of communication between deans and students and as such constituted the very local reflections of the general, systemic "misunderstandings". In Bulgaria, the students' voice tends to be garnered as evidence of support by the existing political parties.

The question of "population" and politics of the social category of students seems to be the most complex one. There is an unspecific but visible double set of expectations, from one hand, as the result of the authoritarian style in the functioning of state institutions and, from the other, as promoting Western models of education and proficiency within European values and sensibilities transferred by the educational sector and its deliberate policies. But, at the end of the day, the best students can find a highly satisfying position only within governmental structures and thus cannot, with their moralizing mission, become a genuine driving force against the old regime and its reductionist ideologies that are much about cultivation of the old-time cultural competences.

The question of democratic development put in the Balkan context reorients the scrutiny on post-communist transition to another pattern describing countries that do not develop into full democracies. The reframing and the reconceptualization of traditional approaches shall provide a more comprehensive concept of a post-modern Europe that has democratic institutions and democratic traditions, but is systemically autocratic.

The structural aspect of Serbian and Bulgarian protests considered as a security mechanism exposes but one side of the problem. The other side is that the narratives presented above prove that a particular and meaningful political order has been established, and considering alternative scenarios for the events (such as changing the occupied space or he involved social norms) is not very likely. Yet, universities in Serbia and Bulgaria remain major democratic institutions in the region and allow their students to set up new political initiatives that, at some stage, can successfully challenge the old regime. However, the relationship between the student protests and post-socialist transformation is by no means linear and cannot be explained solely in terms of political power that mass mobilization uncovers, and a push for systemic change may come from other sectors of the societies and be transferred elsewhere thanks to the existing networks. It is also difficult to talk about separate models of transition in Serbia and Bulgaria since the transition is not accomplished yet, and may hence take various directions, and it is not obvious what would define this accomplishment. If the transition does not happen, no model will be reliable, but yet, the process in both cases is rather scattered.

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