

# THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY DURING BULGARIA'S POST-1989 "TRANSITION"

Its Road to Hegemony  
and Its Utopian Surplus

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*The following is a slightly revised selection from chapter 4 of Veronika Stoyanova's recent book Ideology and Social Protests in Eastern Europe: Beyond the Transition's Liberal Consensus (London: Routledge, 2018). Stoyanova traces discursive developments during the final years of Communist Party rule in Bulgaria and the radical transformations that followed, when the concept of civil society played a central role in emerging justifications of democracy, market reforms, and a certain kind of anti-populist elitism.*

“The Great Time of the Intelligentsia”: Intellectuals Leading “Civil Society” before 1989

[...] Civil society first appeared in the discourses of the “revisionists” within the Communist Party around 1987–1988 in the context of talks about “*preustroistvo*” (the Bulgarian version of the Soviet “perestroika”). Thus, it emerged as part of the wider discourse of “*glasnost*” and “*preustroistvo*” that was dominant at the time, and particularly key for this early stage of the development of the civil society discourse was the concept of *glasnost*. Behind it we find the newly emerging possibility for the intelligentsia to speak without the party censorship which had been previously imposed. A basic characteristic of the *perestroika* ideology was that Soviet countries were now entering a new era, whereby not the party but the intelligentsia would be those “who carry the truth and values,” and whereby the intelligentsia would be the principle leading agent of social changes.<sup>1</sup>

A major communicative event<sup>2</sup> that was both constitutive of and constituted by the changing discursive political-social practices of the time of *preustroistvo*, and which was later celebrated as marking the first openly voiced dissident claims, is the text “The Great Time of the Intelligentsia” (from now on, GTI), written by the dissident-philosopher Zhelyu Zhelev and published in *Narodna Kultura* (People’s culture) in July 1988. [...] Zhelev gained his dissident label when in the early 1980s he wrote *Fascism* – a book which purported to expose the crimes of Fascism but was rather intended as, and read as, an indictment of Communism – for which he was expelled from the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) and spent time in prison.<sup>3</sup> The term “dissident” was, by the 1980s, commonly used in the West to refer mostly to intellectuals’ positions in the context of a lack of freedom – they were very often designated as “anti-communist.” Yet, in the context of the more repressive regime in Bulgaria (relative to those in Central and Eastern Europe, hereafter CEE), since the mid-1950s the “dissidents” were mostly

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the discourse regarding the *preustroistvo* ideology in Bulgaria, see Vassil Prodanov, “Intelligentsiata i ideologicheskiyat diskurs na transformaciyata ot darzhaven sotsializum kum periferen i oligarhichen kapitalizum” [The intelligentsia and the ideological discourse of the transformation from state socialism to periphery and oligarchic capitalism], in *Izsledvania po istoria na sotsializma v Bulgariya: prehodut*, ed. E. Kandilarov (Sofia: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Centre for Historical and Political Research, 2011), pp. 485–522.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> During the regime, expulsion from the party constituted not simply a sanction, but rather a form of repression that ejected that personality out of the public sphere and deprived them of the opportunity to communicate with the public. At the same time, however, an intellectual’s expulsion from the party and criminalisation of their work used to increase their popularity and informally legitimise their public role. Nataliya Hristova, “Mit za vseobshtiat konformizym. Bulgarskite intelektualci prez vtorata polovina na XX vek” [The myth of wide conformity: The Bulgarian intellectuals in the second half of 20th century], *Monde diplomatique* (Bulgarian edition), February 2007.

intellectuals (whether members of the BKP or not) who did not verbally oppose the communist ideology but rather expressed "corrective" criticism whenever there was a serious mismatch between proclaimed values and their practical realisation.<sup>4</sup> In this context, Zhelev's (and later pre-1989 dissident-intellectuals') texts appear as "revisionist" rather than oppositional (and many of the intellectuals were genuine "revisionists" rather than covert "anti-communists"<sup>5</sup>). Similarly, concepts such as "democracy" and "civil society" were at the time positioned within, rather than outside of, the socialist project – hence they talked of "socialist democracy" and "socialist civil society." Inasmuch then as these concepts were used before 1989, they were offered as a means to achieving "socialism with a human face," and nobody yet questioned the latter's feasibility, as evidenced by many of the memoirs which appeared throughout the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, such a revisionist conception of dissidence – one that rested on the conviction that the system could be "humanized and democratized [...] from within"<sup>7</sup> – animated the political context of Central Europe only until the brutality of the suppression of the Hungarian and Polish uprisings of 1956 and of the Czechoslovakian reforms in 1968.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, dissidents in Bulgaria were almost always intellectuals – part of the so-called "intelligentsia." The intelligentsia assumed an almost autonomous class consciousness during the communist regime;<sup>9</sup> it was composed of authoritative writers, artists, actors, scientists, and others, whose popularity was publicly sanctioned, including through the mechanisms of power. During the regime, most of them were an important conduit for socialist propaganda (as in Gramsci's conception of "organic intellectuals"), but many of them became public speakers (and opinion makers) whose opinions were recognised as more authentic than those of official (party) power-holders.<sup>10</sup> Their main social function was to be society's moral and cultural vanguard (much like Antonio Gramsci's<sup>11</sup> "moral leadership"), which entailed a catalyst role in society's progress. In

<sup>4</sup> Naraliya Hristova, *Spetsifika na Bulgarskoto 'dissentstvo'. Vlast i intelligentsia 1956–1989* [The specifics of the Bulgarian "dissidence": power and intelligentsia 1956–1989] (Sofia: Letera, 2005); Hristova, "Mitut za vseobshtiat konformizym."

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of these memoirs see Evgeniya Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, *Sotsializmut v ogleдалoto na prehoda* [Socialism in the mirror of the transition] (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2011), especially pp. 419–420.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, "A Pleading for Revolution: A rejoinder to Z. Bauman," *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 12 (1971), no. 1, pp. 52–60.

<sup>9</sup> See Hristova, *Spetsifika na bulgarskoto 'dissentstvo.'*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

the last days of the regime, they acted both as a group exerting political pressure and as experts influencing political decision-making.<sup>12</sup> It is also worth noting that although the term itself is a Russian artefact (from Tsarist Russia), the genesis of the Bulgarian social group which was referred to as “intelligentsia” needs to be traced specifically to the post-independence period of Bulgaria (after 1878), and particularly in Western-, as well as Eastern- (Moscow) educated emigres’ attempts to become agents of cultural change and to bridge an imagined gap between what they saw as local, traditional, and “backward” habits on the one hand, and Western Europe on the other – that is, attempting to impose a new civilizational model.<sup>13</sup> In other words, this social group conceived of their role as a messianic duty to “enlighten the masses”<sup>14</sup> in line with Western cultural models.<sup>15</sup> The significance of such a conception, adopted by Bulgarian intellectuals, will transpire particularly strongly in the early years of the post-socialist transformation.

[...]

This in essence utopian vision of a new – civil – society partly accommodated the possibility for the reproduction of top-down power imbalances, which had demobilising effects for the popular classes – since they were not yet civil, they had to let themselves be led by the intelligentsia. Thus, the potentially powerful (mobilising) concept of an inclusionary civil society was unwittingly transformed into an insipid ideological construct hardly related to a collective mobilisational and participatory democratic agenda. In practice, then, Bulgarian dissident-intellectuals’ oppositional discourses could be seen as conducive to what Gramsci<sup>16</sup> called a “passive revolution” only<sup>17</sup> – an elite-led endeavour which failed to engage the popular classes.

### Civil Society Divided: The 1990 Utopian “City of Truth,” “Energetic Minorities” vs. “Docile Majorities”

The discourse of *preustroistvo*, within which Zhelev’s and other dissident-intellectuals’ texts before 1989 were embedded, generated anticipations for revolutionary change; and apart from a new – more significant – role for the intelligentsia (as the “authentic carriers of values and truths”), the concept of *glasnost* also articulated hopes that in this way people’s eyes will be opened for all the truths that were allegedly previously

<sup>12</sup> Hristova, “Mitut za vseobshtiat konformizym.”

<sup>13</sup> Hristova, *Spetsifika na bulgarskoto ‘dissentstvo.’*

<sup>14</sup> Boyan Penev, “Nashata Inteligentsiya” [Our intelligentsia] *Zlatorog* 5 (1924), no. 1, pp. 3–20.

<sup>15</sup> This idea of “catching up” with the West is to a different extent present in the entire CEE region. See, for example, Tomasz Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Although many later observers would conceptualise the entire postcommunist bloc’s changes as a “passive revolution” (e.g., Ash 1999; Shields 2006), the Bulgarian changes in 1989 might be considered a particularly striking case.

hidden from them.<sup>18</sup> Soon after the change of leadership on November 10, the discourse of *preustroistvo*, and with it the socialist frame of civil society, disappeared, but important conceptual meanings associated with it persisted and even intensified – for example, “revolutionary” in relation to the changes taking place,<sup>19</sup> as well as *glasnost* itself, which continued to be used for some time (particularly in slogans of the protests of 1989–1991). One of the most significant discursive events which contributed to the constitution and construal of “civil society” in the immediate period after November 1989 was the one arising out of the civil disobedience acts in the summer of 1990 in response to the (disappointing for the anti-communist opposition) results of the first democratic elections. In what follows, I discuss the discourses which appeared and circulated at the time; the articulation, disarticulation, and re-articulation of political identities and relationships; and the consequences of these shifts for the (re-)conceptualisation of the idea of “civil society.”

Since the executive power in Bulgaria after the first democratic elections stayed in the hands of the “reformers” from the ex-Communist Party (who carried out the change of leadership on November 10, 1989), with the opposition failing to secure a strong position within the new political configuration through the ballot box, the opposition and their supporters attempted instead to push “the changes” through “street pressure”<sup>20</sup> – a series of protest and civil disobedience acts in 1990 (occupations of public spaces, road blockades, hunger strikes, threats to self-immolate, demonstrations, and so on). The acts were initiated by students who occupied Sofia University and were supported by intellectuals – writers, artists, scientists, film directors, etc., who were later themselves followed by many ordinary “free citizens” (a key discursive frame). Since in essence these were attempts for a political change of power outside of parliamentary democracy’s procedures (attempts to overthrow the results of the first elections), they needed to be publicly legitimated. The key legitimating strategy utilised precisely the idea of civil society.

One of the central elements of these civil disobedience acts can be seen in the “City of Truth” occupation – the tent city, and the discourses that constituted and construed it, which appeared in central Sofia in the summer of 1990. Philip Dimitrov – then vice-chair of the opposition party United Democratic Forces (and later prime minister)<sup>21</sup> – narrated the event “as a natural reaction to the tearful results of the [first] elections” and “a spontaneous expression of the anger of the people.” Particularly important, and regularly utilised elsewhere, are the use of the adjectives “spontaneous” and “natural”

<sup>18</sup> Prodanov, “Inteligentsiata i ideologicheskiyat diskurs.”

<sup>19</sup> The “revolutionary” discourse, however, slowly dissolved in the following years. The events of 1989 were later remembered as “the change,” “the changes,” or “the big changes” in Bulgaria.

<sup>20</sup> Kalinova and Baeva, *Sotsializmut v ogledaloto na prehoda*.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by Mitko Rupov, “Gradut na Istinata” [The City of Truth], YouTube Video, 2011 (online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnKDIQg8kk4&t=368s> [accessed Sept. 12, 2019]).

to describe these and later protest events initiated by the liberal opposition. The latter adjective is also part of a new narrative around a “natural development” which emerged at the time: Bulgaria had been “diverted away” from a natural course of development that had created an “artificial society,” and it was now necessary to get back on the right track. In this “natural development,” it was claimed that some groups knew where history was heading and what the “right future” was (they carried progress); whereas others were bound to stay in the past. In a speech in 1990 Zhelyu Zhelev proclaimed that “the time is ours” and “the cycle of history spins inevitably to the full victory of democracy,” implicitly drawing on similar words pronounced by Georgi Dimitrov, but this time it was not “communism” that would win, but “democracy.”<sup>22</sup> As was shown earlier, this also implied that the place of the working class as the class-agent leading the changes would be now taken by the intelligentsia.

The other commonly used descriptive concept, that of “spontaneity,” was also part of a new discourse around authenticity, which marked the beginning of a typical fundamentalist conflict – between “authentic” (or “real”) and “inauthentic” (“parochial”) – to distinguish between an act of non-party organised protest (for which the term “civic” was used) as opposed to one inspired and organised by parochial (party) interests (which was discursively linked to the “party-political” rather than the civic). Of course, this discourse, for its part, is situated within the wider trend of depoliticization characteristic of the entire post-socialist region, and to some extent of global processes.<sup>23</sup> The depoliticization trends of the post-Cold War period are part of the global hegemonic (neo) liberal consensus. At this early stage of the development of the civil society discourse in Bulgaria and in CEE generally, however, it is difficult to talk of depoliticization. Instead, it is more appropriate to talk of “decommunisation.” Thus, the common rhetorical elevation of civic values and of “truth” and “authenticity” above the world of politics is mostly situated within the anti-regime mobilizational discursive frame established by Central European dissidents over the preceding years.<sup>24</sup>

The common denominator of these rhetorical tropes was “truth.” For instance, in the “City of Truth,” a central placard read: “When even the facts are silent, the communists continue to lie.”<sup>25</sup> References to “truth,” which exploited authentic human desires, were

<sup>22</sup> Cited by Prodanov, “Inteligentsiata i ideologicheskiyat diskurs,” p. 509.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the concept of “fake” civil society in Hungary see, for example, Márton Gerő and Ákos Kopper, “Fake and Dishonest: Pathologies of Differentiation of the Civil and the Political Sphere in Hungary,” *Journal of Civil Society* 9 (2013), no. 4, pp. 361-374.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Václav Havel’s “Anti-political Politics” and George Konrad’s *Antipolitics: Václav Havel, “Anti-political Politics,”* trans. Erazim Kohák, in *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, ed. John Keane (London: Verso Books, 1988); George Konrad, *Antipolitics* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> In Rupov, “Gradut na Istinata.”

appropriated for the purposes of the project of decommunisation which was being inaugurated in these demonstrations. Only from the position of a "civil" as opposed to a "politicised" (which equalled communist and indoctrinated) society could protesters claim the genuine capacity to see things as they are and to articulate claims to truth. Again, the centrality of the notion of "truth" here is closely linked to Central European dissidents' conceptualisation of political opposition as "life in truth,"<sup>26</sup> which denotes the practice of resistance against the regime's "panorama of lies."<sup>27</sup>

Such claims to "truth" and "authenticity" (and the discourses they were situated in) would continue to be utilised by the liberal democratic activists and political actors for the entire duration of the transition. These essentially formed part of the binary construction which characterised the period's political confrontation in CEE: (communist) control and administration versus (civic) spontaneity, and the (communist) artificial and inauthentic life versus the natural and true life of the (liberal and "civil") society. More generally, during this period we can talk of a new style of communication settling in the public sphere – that of bitter confrontation, characterised by stigmatisation, rejection, and demonization of everything related to the old system, marking a general polarisation and dichotomisation of thinking. The old ideological discourse was discredited; it was now perceived to belong to the past. For example, the new liberal worldview did not need the concept of *narod* (people) as a collective subject and attempted to substitute it with "citizen." This, however, did not prove an enduring discursive change because the concept of *narod* fully re-emerged in the public sphere when around 2001 a wave of "populist" rhetoric embraced it once again. Its revitalisation, however, transpired as a counter-hegemonic strategy, forging a conflict between the liberal concept of *citizens* and the communitarian *narod*. The significance of this rift would transpire in Bulgaria on many occasions during the transition and would be particularly central to the 2013 protests' contestations,<sup>28</sup> but its first markers can be found in the "City of Truth" discursive event.

The adjectives "spontaneous" and "natural," coupled with the numerous denotations to "truth" (including the name – "City of Truth") essentially now articulated a "civil society" frame of collective mobilisation<sup>29</sup> against the state. It captured the opposition's

<sup>26</sup> See Václav Havel, "The power of the powerless," trans. Paul Wilson, in *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp.23–95.

<sup>27</sup> Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> See Veronika Stoyanova, *Ideology and Social Protests in Eastern Europe: Beyond the Transition's Liberal Consensus* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018) [from which the present text is taken], particularly chapters 6 and 7, which focus on protest events which took place in Bulgaria in 2013.

<sup>29</sup> David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611–639, here 625–626.

general euphoric, optimistic, celebratory consciousness, existing in a “carnavalesque delirium,”<sup>30</sup> utopianly expecting that after the removal of obstacles coming from the state – the nomenclature, or the BKP – the “road to Europe” would be cleared, Bulgaria would reach the consumerist bliss of Western Europe, and “democracy” would give the intelligentsia the opportunity to take the more significant place that it saw itself as deserving without limitations imposed by the political sphere.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from a euphoric showdown between a celebratory “civil society” and a discredited state, there appeared other very important fault lines. The subjectivities that the 1990 “civil society” frame of collective mobilisation interpellated<sup>32</sup> included the “free” and “honest” citizens (these two adjectives appeared numerous times in the speeches given at the first demonstrations after November 10) who were now called upon to challenge the Communist Party nomenclature which “did not want to go away.” At the same time, however, the “free” and “honest” citizens who joined the protests, demonstrations, occupations, and the City of Truth were not only positioned against “the state,” but also pitted against what were increasingly framed as the “silent,” “docile,” and “passive” majority of Bulgarian citizens, who resided predominantly in rural areas (and often voted for the Bulgarian Socialist Party to stay in power). It did not help that the BSP organised a “counter-demonstration” calling for their supporters – and organising their transport to the capital – to counteract the opposition protests’ challenge of the ex-communists’ democratic legitimacy. The dominant interpretation thus posited not only a clash between “civil society” and the state, but also a clash between “civil society” (active, free and authentic) and “uncivil (passive, unfree and false) society.” Observers commonly referred to the groups of protesters collectively as an “energetic minority”<sup>33</sup> of “free citizens,” thus equating civil society to an enlightened and active minority pitted against a docile and passive majority. Thus, the elitist seeds of the Bulgarian protest discourses which, we shall later see, fully re-emerged in 2013, were sown back in 1990. (Although varying in degree, a similar phenomenon was observable in post-socialist Central Europe as well).<sup>34</sup>

What is more, key self-referential concepts, utilised by the participants themselves, were the words “*grazhdanski*” (civic) and “*grazhdani*” (citizens), both of which are derivative of the word “grad” (“city”). For example, one of the central placards of the

<sup>30</sup> Prodanov, “Inteligentsiata i ideologicheskiyat diskurs,” p. 508.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. G. Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976).

<sup>33</sup> Petya Kabakchieva, *Grazhdanskoto obshtestvo sreshtu durzhavata* [Civil society against the state] (Sofia: Lik, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Tessa Brannan, “From Antipolitics to Anti-politics: What Became of East European Civil Society” (Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, Working Paper No. 03–41, 2003) (online at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/pdf/WP/WP41.pdf> [accessed July 25, 2019]).

City of Truth encampment read: "*Grazhdanska initsiativa v imeto na istinata*" (Civic initiative in the name of truth).<sup>35</sup> The semantic link between the terms "civil society," "civic," and "city" in the local context is particularly important for understanding both the local conceptualisation of the idea of civil society and the latter's constitution and construal as part of the democratic transformation's socio-political developments. So I will focus on it next.

The term "civil society" in Bulgarian reads "*grazhdansko obshtestvo*" – translated as "civic (or "citizens") society," where "citizen" could relate both to the subject of a state and to the inhabitant of a city. What is significant here are the local cultural connotations of the words "civic," "citizen," and "city." These are rooted in the historical development not only of a cultural schism, but also a hostile relationship between the "city" and the "village" in Bulgaria and in Eastern Europe more generally. The two are identified as carriers of particular socio-cultural characteristics, which are subsequently played out in the conceptualisation of "civil society." The former is taken to epitomise a progressive, modern, liberal, pluralist, and individualist West; the latter embodies a traditional, retrograde, patriarchal, conservative, and collectivist East. According to Roth,<sup>36</sup> though the hostile relationship between the two can be traced back to the Ottoman period, it was exacerbated by the communist regime's modernisation and urbanisation policies, which were perceived by urban dwellers as annihilating the city's (civic, modern, bourgeois) cultural universe and as a "re-traditionalisation"<sup>37</sup> of a supposedly established (pre-1944) urban bourgeois culture. On encountering this (latent) cultural conflict between the "city" and the "village," the 1989 idea of civil society was re-articulated precisely along these fault lines. Thus, in some intellectuals' interpretations of the changes and of civil society, we read:

[I]t is namely the city that represents the space of the public structures which counter the tribal and communitarian structures; this is where the net of interdependencies, which the citizen should accept, is created. This civil society in Bulgaria is currently under construction. We need to first rediscover the forgotten and lost city spaces, to construct the system we want to abide by and the structures in which we want to incorporate our civic responsibilities.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Placard as seen on recordings of the protests, uploaded by Rupov (Rupov, "Gradut na Istinata").

<sup>36</sup> Klaus Roth, "Mezhdu modernizatsiya i tranditsionalizum. Vsekidnevna kultura na seloto v Iugoiztochna Evropa" [Between modernization and traditionalism: Everyday culture in the Southeast European village], *Bulgarski Folklor* 1997, no. 3/4, pp. 26–38.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Penka Angelova, "Shengen i bulgarskoto grazhdansko obshtestvo" [Schengen and Bulgarian civil society] *Kapital*, August 1, 1998 (online at [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/obshtestvo/1998/08/01/245901\\_shengen\\_i\\_bulgarskoto\\_grajdansko\\_obshtestvo/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/obshtestvo/1998/08/01/245901_shengen_i_bulgarskoto_grajdansko_obshtestvo/) [accessed Sept. 12, 2019]).

[B]ut how do you make citizens out of this [village] world; how do you make civil society out of this unmodernised mass of people – nobody knows. Today we are some very frightened, confused, quite demoralised and pessimistic people, who continue to survive, who continue to behave like crushed villagers rather than like citizens. And they hate, and [they] are envious.<sup>39</sup>

The concept of “civil society” was further pitted against the concept of *narod*. The latter, in the discourse of civil society’s advocates, typically denotes the majority of the people, those who are not elite, and also degradingly as those who are unenlightened, retrograde, and who perceive themselves as “subjects” of the state rather than citizens with “rights.” The collective concept of *narod* was/is thus often used in intellectuals’ narratives degradingly as synonymous to the collective image of the “villager” archetype. This bifurcating narrative forms the backbone of the descriptive grand-narrative of the absent or weak civil society that, according to this discourse, can be “found” or “strengthened” only within the city space:

[T]he democratic shift in 1989 marked a return to the urban culture (almost magically the figure of the village poet disappeared from literature and public life). With the mass demonstrations which accompanied the changes, a kind of rediscovery of the urban space – pluralist and dialogical – occurred [...]. However this shift occurred mostly in the limited intellectual circles. We have every reason to believe that the political immaturity, which our society showed in the first years of the transition, is a manifestation of the continuing tradition that has not been overcome.<sup>40</sup>

In this way, the early 1990s articulated two different, but linked, conceptualisations of the civil society idea: one prescriptive (related to a normative vision) and one empirical (descriptive). The normative, idealised conceptualisation was initiated by the revisionist socialist discourse and the dissident-intellectuals and was further taken up by politicians, journalists, academics, and ordinary people. It envisaged a new, modern, civilised society, or, in Bernik’s<sup>41</sup> words: an ideology of radical social utopianism that

<sup>39</sup> Haralan Aleksandrov, “Patriarhut, pokolenieto ‘nie’ i iuzarite” [The patriarch, the “we” generation, and the users], *Kapital*, September 1, 2001 (online at [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2001/09/01/210748\\_patriarhatut\\_pokolenieto\\_nie\\_i\\_juzarite/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2001/09/01/210748_patriarhatut_pokolenieto_nie_i_juzarite/) [accessed: Sept. 12, 2019]).

<sup>40</sup> Ivaylo Znepolski, “Selska kultura i grazhdansko obshtestvo” [Rural culture and civil society], *Kapital*, January 9, 1999 (online at [https://www.capital.bg/vestnikut/svobodno\\_vreme/1999/01/09/248308\\_selska\\_kultura\\_i\\_grajdansko\\_obshtestvo/](https://www.capital.bg/vestnikut/svobodno_vreme/1999/01/09/248308_selska_kultura_i_grajdansko_obshtestvo/) [accessed Sept. 12, 2019]).

<sup>41</sup> Ivan Bernik, “From Imagined to Actually Existing Democracy: Intellectuals in Slovenia,” in *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*, ed. András Bozóki (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), pp. 101–118.

generates myths about democracy. The second, empirical, conception – grounded in the cultural friction between the city and the village – distinguished (and set against each other) an active (energetic) “civil” society, and a passive “uncivil” mass society. What is more, such a bifurcated conceptualisation served as an interpretative frame, or an analytic tool, which legitimised an interpretative scheme that was employed by intellectuals and which saw social conflict not in terms of practically arising class antagonisms, but rather in terms of a comparison to a utopian imaginary of an ideal, perfect society. This, on its part, served to cover up and mask newly arising (economic) inequalities and issues of power and domination. Instead of viewing the new social antagonisms as arising from the sharp fall in living standards and widening inequalities that were rooted in economic decay during the transition, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians made use of the idea of civil society to legitimise the application of a cultural interpretative scheme – that is, that people went into poverty because they were passive, not because the neoliberalisation of post-socialist societies entailed the impoverishment of significant sections of the population.

Overall then, in the early stage of the transformation, the concept of civil society carried the notions of truth, morality, civilisation, and emancipation, which became integral to the popular understanding of the term, explaining its general appeal and motivational capacity. The constituting characteristics of “civil society” were “spontaneity” and “authenticity.” It carried the utopian message of the determination of the “free people,” who had been previously excluded from the political arena, to assert their agency and their capability to make autonomous decisions. At this early stage, the Western European focus on organisational aspects (in the Tocquevillian sense) of the functioning of civil society is not present in Bulgaria; and by the summer of 1990 the concept had acquired its constitutive “other(s).” First, this was in the figure of the state (which was still in the hands of the “communists” and thence was seen as “blocking” civil society’s emancipation). The state represented control and rigidity, whereas civil society represented spontaneity and self-organisation; the democratic transformation and the “coming civil society” which lie ahead (in time) could then only be effected by reviving society’s internal capacities and by rolling back the grip of the state to its “natural” limits.<sup>42</sup> And secondly, civil society’s second “constitutive other” was what was presented as the passive majority of *narod*, whose “civic immaturity” (seen in their lack of protest and in “imprudent” voting choices) was seen as a threat to the democratic changes that the supporters of the opposition imagined. The euphoric, utopian intellectual consciousness which characterised the 1989–1990 civil society discourses gradually changed in the years that followed – the anti-communist political identities

<sup>42</sup> As many have argued in relation to this tendency in all countries of CEE, such a conception has been particularly disabling, as it pushed to an extreme degree the tendency to elevate civil society above the state.

intensified further amid a gradual reshuffling of power relationships not only between political actors, but also among the intellectual elite. The restructuring of the power configuration in the latter's field – that of knowledge production, dissemination, and interpretation – was particularly crucial in the subsequent re-conceptualisation of the idea of civil society itself, and is discussed next.

### Intellectuals Divided: The Traditional Intellectual Elite Versus the New “Experts” in the 1990–1997 Decommunisation Project

Gramsci argued:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.<sup>43</sup>

As a politically and externally initiated process,<sup>44</sup> however, the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria lacked the visibility of a clear-cut economic or political stratum which was “coming into existence” and overthrowing the old system. It is therefore important that we take into account the relative chaos and vacuum occurring in numerous spheres of the political, economic,<sup>45</sup> and cultural life of the country. The lack of an organised dissident movement before 1989 also meant that there was no clear, already-formed cultural and political opposition – it was being born at the same time as the regime was collapsing, rather than before it.<sup>46</sup> If we can conclude with hindsight that there were social groups, albeit not visible and homogenous, which were economically on the rise, there was not yet a clearly identified political and cultural elite (and more

<sup>43</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Since there was no organised internal (to the Bulgarian Communist Party) or external dissident movement until the very last year before the formal collapse.

<sup>45</sup> Yet, some research (e.g., Ivan Chalukov, “Emantsipirneto na ikonomikata” [The emancipation of the economy], in *Mrezhite na prehoda: Kakvo vsushtnost se sluchi v Bulgaria sled 1989g*, ed. A. Bundzhulov, D. Deyanov, and I. Chalukov [Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2008], pp. 117–200; Ivo Hristov, “Pravoto na prehoda” [The law of the transition], in *Mrezhite na prehoda: Kakvo vsushtnost se sluchi v Bulgaria sled 1989g*, ed. A. Bundzhulov, D. Deyanov, and I. Chalukov [Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2008], pp. 63–116) shows that within the economic sphere there were social groups who had been preparing for a gradual transformation from a state-planned to a capitalist economy, albeit within the realms of the socialist project.

<sup>46</sup> Prodanov, “Inteligentsiata i ideologicheskiyat diskurs,” in Dostena Lavergne, *Ekspertite na prehoda: Bulgarskite think-tanks i globalnite mreji za vlianie* [The experts of the transition: Bulgarian think tanks and the global networks of influence] (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2010).

specifically, there were not yet organic intellectuals) who could mobilise the appeal of, and consent to, the changes – by organising the knowledge and imagination of and about the transition and thereby legitimise the specific direction of the changes. With the old political identities crumbling and new ones emerging, we could discern new fault lines surfacing.

[...]

The intellectuals' (and more broadly, the "energetic minority's") victorious, and at the same time bifurcating, discourse during 1990 described in the previous section set the stage for a conceptualisation of civil society in terms of 1) an active minority (as against a passive majority) who pursue 2) truth (authenticity) and freedom (emancipation), which could only be achieved once 3) the communist state had been removed. In the years that followed, this conceptualisation largely gained hegemonic dominance, but the process was uneven and not without (sometimes intense) contestation. In the pages that follow, I review the major fault lines which marked these contestations and the resulting shifts in the conceptualisation of the civil society concept by 1997.

With the 1989 breakdown of the official party control over the practices of public knowledge research, as well as over media, new discursive practices and orders of discourse – new practices (and agents) of production, dissemination, and consumption of public knowledge – emerged. Particularly interesting in terms of the conceptualisation of the idea of civil society are these shifts in relation to the intellectuals' place and role in the new practices of knowledge production – traditionally in scientific research spaces (universities, research institutes) as well as in the new practices of knowledge-dissemination (media).<sup>47</sup> A study carried out by Deyanova<sup>48</sup> (2000) identified two "levels of presence" of the intellectuals in the public sphere during the 1990s – a "romantico-ideological" level embodied by "the engaged intellectual," and an "expert talk" level embodied by the NGO (think-tank) expert. In 1999, Ivan Krastev, one of the most prolific Bulgarian liberal intellectuals, further described the newly-emerged think-tanks as hubs of principally engaged experts with strong media presence (and influence), which at the same time served as the "invisible hand of the transition" – skipping the assumed liberal (anti-Keynesian) direction of reforms.<sup>49</sup> Drawing on their research of intellectuals' public knowledge production/dissemination practices

<sup>47</sup> The distinction I draw here between research spaces as knowledge-producers, and media as knowledge-disseminators, is only analytical. In practice, of course, the two overlap.

<sup>48</sup> Liliana Deyanova, "The impossibility of a critical public space: Sociological and political science discourse in the media," in *Media and Transition*, eds. G. Lozanov, L. Deyanova, and O. Spassov (Sofia: Open Society, 2000), pp. 240-256.

<sup>49</sup> Ivan Krastev, "Think Tanks and The Invisible Hand of Transition," (National Institute for Research Advancement, 1999) (online at <http://www.nira.or.jp/past/publ/review/99summer/ivan.html> [accessed July 25, 2019]).

in media, and utilising Krastev's terminology, Deyanov<sup>50</sup> and Deyanova<sup>51</sup> further make a key analytical distinction between what they call "factories for data" (sociological agencies), "factories for arguments" (think-tanks) and "laboratories for knowledge" (academic research institutions, universities, and academies). Deyanov<sup>52</sup> showed that the former two technologies worked together, as part of the expert hegemonic apparatus, producing normalised public opinion. They generated interpretations of society's problems, formulated arguments, and designed agendas. With this, they ordered the public debate – setting priorities and selecting and interpreting the data on which public debates were to be based. That is, they were not just "factories" for the production of data and arguments but also "normalisation machines, technologies for the taming of public opinion."<sup>53</sup> From a Gramscian perspective, then, they worked as "organic intellectuals" – "permanent persuaders."<sup>54</sup>

Deyanova<sup>55</sup> further identified an "odd" polarisation (or schism) between the research carried out by the former two, particularly think-tanks and NGOs, on one hand, and the latter, universities and academic workers, on the other. Her examination of their work in the period showed that these two "communities" ignored each other – they did not cite each other's work and did not recognise each other's legitimacy. The schism reflected the previously identified distinction (within their media presence) between "expert" and "romantico-ideological" language, respectively. From a Gramscian perspective, then, we can roughly think of the former as representative of the "traditional intellectuals," who present themselves as "autonomous and independent of the dominant social group,"<sup>56</sup> but whose political identities and relationships crumbled and fragmented during the vacuum created by the precipitous changes. The new "expert" class, based in NGOs and think-tanks on the other hand, can be thought of as a much more homogenous and consistent group of "organic intellectuals" whose role was to organise the practical content of the new – liberal – hegemonic project of the democratic transformation, which they organised around neoliberal policy programmes and consistent emulation of the West

<sup>50</sup> Deyan Deyanov, "Legitimatsiya – tehnologii na opitomiyavane na obshtestvenoto mnenie" [Legitimation: technologies for taming public opinion], in *Mrezhite na prehoda: Kakvo vsushtnost se sluchi v Bulgaria sled 1989g*, ed. A. Bundzhulov, D. Deyanov, and I. Chalukov (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2008), pp. 366–374.

<sup>51</sup> Liliana Deyanova, "Poletoto na obshtestvenoto mnenie mezhdu "fabrikite za dannii" i "fabrikite za argumenti" [The field of public opinion between "the data factories" and "the argument factories"], in *Mrezhite na prehoda: Kakvo vsushtnost se sluchi v Bulgaria sled 1989g*, ed. A. Bundzhulov, D. Deyanov, and I. Chalukov (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2008), pp. 375–408.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 366–374.

<sup>54</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Deyanova, "Poletoto na obshtestvenoto mnenie."

<sup>56</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 7.

as the "common sense" trajectory for post-socialist "reform." As an oft-quoted remark (commonly attributed to Ferenc Misslivetz, a Hungarian academic and dissident<sup>57</sup>) goes, "What we dreamed of was civil society. What we got were NGOs."

Using Fairclough's terminology then, these two "languages" (romantico-ideological and expert) are constitutive of the two main discourse "styles" of the 1990–1997 civil society discourse. The former "lived its moment" during the euphoric 1989–1990 resistance to the state; the latter developed with the appearance of a network of externally-funded non-governmental organisations (foundations, charities, think-tanks) that flourished in the first six to seven years of the "transition," forming an entire "sector," often referred to as "the Third Sector." The emergence of the Third Sector marks a significant re-conceptualisation of the idea of civil society – from the early (in some ways Fergusonian<sup>58</sup>) diffuse utopian imaginary of an entirely new, civil, democratic, emancipated society, as embraced by the traditional intellectuals in 1989–90, to a (Tocquevillian<sup>59</sup>) self-organised, independent (from the state) and self-sufficient, expert-led (depoliticised) network of "associated citizens." In this respect, the development of civil society in Bulgaria is consistent with similar developments in Central Europe, where analogous "NGO-isation" of civil society has been observed.<sup>60</sup> Let us now turn to the contents of this new conception of civil society and the mechanisms through which it became hegemonic.

As Lavergne<sup>61</sup> notes, the new network of civil society organisations claimed the role of middle men in an "economy of expertise where they were the idea brokers and the importers/exporters of know-how." They claimed the role of neutral experts who applied objective-scientific political and analytic tools that were effective and who produced "rational" prognoses beyond any moral (emotional/cultural) considerations. They claimed the image of the "rational experts" at the same time as they formulated arguments rooted in a particular value system with which they identified – a (neo)liberal one. In an in-depth analysis of their discourses, Lavergne<sup>62</sup> showed that the think-tank experts asserted their "objective-independent" nature not through claims to a lack of a

<sup>57</sup> Barbara Einhorn, "Citizenship in an Enlarging Europe: Contested Priorities," *Czech Sociological Review* 41 (2005), no. 6, pp. 1023–1040, here 1032.

<sup>58</sup> The Scottish Enlightenment thinker Adam Ferguson conceptualised civil society as a civilised and polished society. See Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> The nineteenth-century French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville conceptualised a sphere of organised non-political civic and commercial associations that influenced the contemporary notion of civil society. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Washington, D.C.; Regnery Publishing, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Julie Hemment, "Colonization or Liberation: The Paradox of NGOs in Postsocialist States," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 16 (1998), no. 1, pp. 43–58.

<sup>61</sup> Lavergne, *Ekspertite na prehoda*, p. 531.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

value-laden approach, or to the consideration of multiple scientific interpretations, but rather by way of grounding their claims in liberal democratic values which were considered to be “objectively” superior. The rhetoric of the expert-intellectuals rested on the traditional-modern dichotomy, presenting themselves as an enlightened, modernising force in contrast to the shadows of the communist past. Yet, the expert-intellectuals presented themselves as defenders of the “rights” of (the whole of) society against the encroachments of the state (which, they insisted, continued to pose the biggest threat). They did not present their ideas and activities as political but as universal – in an attempt to make them hegemonic.

Once again, the overall legitimisation strategy of the new (third) sector utilised precisely the idea of “civil society.” And it was essentially a double legitimisation strategy. As Lavergne<sup>63</sup> also notes, the “NGO civil society” described previously presented themselves at the same time as both actors in and leaders of civil society. First, they were civil society leaders when they acted on behalf of the teleological paradigm of the transition, whereby civil society was to materialise in the form of a network of independent (from the state) and self-sufficient organisations (just like the transition was a ready-made package of economic and legal reforms<sup>64</sup>). The desired civil society here came with a concrete recipe for its development, and its *telos* was at the same time situated temporally in the future and geographically to the West. In this first legitimating strategy, the NGO experts claimed the roles of “democratisers,” “modernisers,” and “decommunisers,” modelled after the normative ideal of the capitalist modern and open society as developed by Henri Bergson and Karl Popper.<sup>65</sup>

[...]

Overall, then, in the period 1990–1997 we can talk of (radically) changed subjectivities, power relationships, and discourses. The changing context of social structures, practices, and events looked like this: shifting political and cultural identities (non-communist and anti-communist; and romantico-ideological and expert styles); shifting social relations of power and domination (in the political, but also in the intellectual field, where a new sector of NGOs and think-tanks replaced the more differentiated traditional intellectuals’ order of discourse); and of shifting constructions of systems of knowledge and meaning (from an “irrational” euphoric utopianism to the “rational” objectivity

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Attila Ágh, *The Social and Political Actors of Democratic Transition* (Hungarian Center for Democracy Studies Foundation, Department of Political Science, Budapest University of Economics, 1993).

<sup>65</sup> Henri Bergson, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. K. A. Pearson, K. A. and J. Mullarkey (London: Continuum Press, 2002); Karl S. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); see also Dostena Lavergne, “Obshtestvo pred ‘tsivilizatsionen izbor’” [Society faced with a “civilisational choice”], *Liberalen Pregled*, 2010 (online at [http://www.librev.com/index.php/discussion-bulgaria/1006-2010-09-06-13-34-25?joscclean=1&comment\\_id=6007](http://www.librev.com/index.php/discussion-bulgaria/1006-2010-09-06-13-34-25?joscclean=1&comment_id=6007) [accessed Sept. 12, 2019]).

of the transitional democratic agenda). In this context of new structures and orders of discourse, the idea of civil society got caught up in the contestation between the early traditional dissident-intellectuals' euphoric utopian anticipation of a radically new (and better) society, and the later intellectual-experts' highly rationalised and prefabricated conceptualisation of civil society as a network of NGOs powerful enough to confront the state. Both the earlier and the later dominant conceptualisations articulated "civil society" as the antonym of authoritarianism, and thus positioned it against the state. Civil society was to limit the power of the state over all areas of social life, and with this, the new – liberal – articulation of civil society uncoupled the historical pairing of state and civil society. But any earlier rhetorical attempts to depoliticise the concept (seeking to articulate it as civic rather than political) had to be postponed as the civil public had to transform itself in the run-up to the "1997 revolution" into the political public – concerned with the form and content of power. The "civil" in "civil society" could not practically signify the non-political, as it needed to articulate a right to engage in a direct confrontation with the state (which was perceived as still captured by communists). In this way, the popular CEE mantra of the "liberation of civil society" from the suffocating grip of the state<sup>66</sup> in Bulgaria came to refer to something more. It came to signify the need to liberate society from the grip of the ex-communists specifically, and to bring into power the opposition which by now had come to be identified as practically synonymous with civil society. In essence then, the struggle of the new intellectual-expert class to impose a "rational" democratic agenda involved first and foremost establishing the opposition – to them, the only legitimate social force to bring about genuine democratic changes<sup>67</sup> – in power.

It is also important to note that as much as the concept of civil society was politicised in practice (that is, it was used as a legitimating mechanism to induce political changes), rhetorically the attempts to articulate it as "outside of the left-right paradigm" persisted. In fact, the latter strategy was particularly helpful in articulating civil society as substituting the "outdated" left-right political confrontation, and establishing a consensual vision of itself as encompassing the "truth" (earlier discourses) and the "rationality, objective superiority, and inevitability" (experts' discourses) of the new liberal democratic project. If we think of 1989–1997 as the first major period of the conceptualisation of civil society in Bulgaria, then we can think of "civil society" during this period as a nodal discourse, which attempted an ideological articulation of several other discourses and narratives, including: 1) "communist" state versus "free and honest citizens," and 2) "free and honest citizens" (civil society) versus "unfree and passive popular subjects" (of the state); 3) "rational" experts promoting the democratic agenda versus irrational traditional intellectuals; and finally 4) a civil society space

<sup>66</sup> Björn Beckman, "The Liberation of Civil Society: Neo-liberal Ideology and Political Theory," *Review of African Political Economy* 20 (1993), no. 58, pp. 20–33.

<sup>67</sup> Georgi Fotev, *Grazhdanskoto obshtestvo* [Civil society] (Sofia: BAN, 1992).

whose positioning beyond any left-right political identities grants it the legitimacy to engage in political struggle. These dichotomies were of course fraught with particularistic and undemocratic assumptions and distortions, and they carved out a host of unequal power relationships that were to persist and aggravate.

These discourses and narratives taken together constituted the rising political and intellectual elites' attempts during 1989–1997 to manufacture consent for the new liberal-capitalist ideology while exploiting utopian longings for truth, emancipation, and democratic participation. The role of the intellectuals was to both construct and enact this form of the idea of civil society. In this way, the utopian longing for freedom and truth provided the “gold-bearing gravel”<sup>68</sup> of an ideological hegemonic apparatus that depoliticised the public sphere while pursuing a strictly political project, and demobilised vast sections of society by imposing a dominant language that masked and ignored their interests and problems by being completely indifferent to the notion of power. It was the urban middle class agenda – of the “active-energetic enlightened minority” – that was best secured by the invocation of such a notion of civil society; the agenda of the increasingly oppressed and marginalised small-town Bulgaria, what was degradingly renounced by expert-intellectuals as a “passive and docile majority of subjects,” was increasingly unrepresented by this notion.

### From the Utopian to the Pragmatic, or from Utopia to Ideology: The Neoliberalisation of Civil Society

[...]

We can thus recognise several ways in which utopian longings were exploited for ideological purposes during the period. These roughly correspond to three main tropes of the propagated version of civil society: civil society can provide an alternative to the state; the state constrains civil society's entrepreneurial potentials; and civil society is an alternative to the formal sphere of party politics (that is, it is located beyond any left/right paradigms). It is safe to assume that people struggling against an authoritarian regime longed for a sphere of voluntary and purposive collective action, as well as for emancipation and self-determination. The imposed form of civil society that came to be taken as common sense, however, constructed a “free” subject (rather, “citizen”) who makes rational life choices and carries responsibility for the consequences of these. In this way, as Lemke<sup>69</sup> argues, citizens' lives become a matter of entrepreneurship – they are wholly responsible for their wellbeing, which hinges on making the right choices and “investments” (of money, energy, and so on). The neoliberal form of civil society

<sup>68</sup> Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” trans. M. Ritter, *New German Critique*, no. 11 (1977), p. 22–38, here 38.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Lemke, “‘The Birth of Bio-politics’: Michel Foucault's Lecture at the College de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality,” *Economy and Society* 30 (2001), no. 2, pp. 190–207.

entailed the production of the moral subject as an entrepreneurial subject.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the person longing for self-determination and emancipation (from the repressive state of the old regime) was interpellated as an entrepreneurial actor who is a rational, calculating subject, whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for "self-care."<sup>71</sup> This ideal neoliberal citizen is also atomised and pragmatic in choosing among different social, political, and economic options rather than mobilising collectively with others to transform these.

The tendency to use the emotional appeal of civil society to promote neoliberal market policy prescriptions also resulted in the de-politicisation of the concept.<sup>72</sup> Conveniently ignored were the power relations underpinning civil society and the exclusions resulting from these. The new civil society organisations further pushed out other forms of political agency, such as social movements and collective mass mobilisations.<sup>73</sup> What is more, the regularly imposed division between "passive" and "active" ("*narod*" vs. "citizens") served to cover up and mask (economic) social inequalities and issues of power and domination. The people who increasingly possessed less political, symbolic, and material power were finding themselves left out. The imposed model of civil society appeared to advance an elite agenda that placed the urban middle classes (dubbed an "active minority") as its top priority instead.

As I have shown previously, key to not just the manufacture of consent but also to the mobilisation of appeal to neoliberal ideology was the emotional appeal to autonomy and self-determination inherent to the idea of civil society. The discourse of civil society was embedded in two main utopian discourses. The first was the discourse of "catching up," which involved a dream of modernisation (which in the case of Bulgaria dates back to the period of the country's national revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). In this context, calls to define the European West's model of civil society (which in the 1990s had assumed a neoliberal form) as a universal model, and to mimic the "enlightened Europeans," easily took root. The second ideologico-utopian discourse was the anti-communist discourse, which harboured dreams of retributive justice. One source of this fortunate fit between the neoliberal idea of civil society as an alternative to the state and as constitutive of the self-interested and self-sustaining individual was the delegitimisation of communist state ideology. The civil society paradigm claimed excellent congruency with the dispositions that characterised the changed ideological

<sup>70</sup> Brown, "Neo-liberalism."

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> John Harris, *Depoliticizing Development: The World Bank and Social Capital* (New Delhi: Leftword, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Neera Chandhoke, "Civil Society," *Development in Practice*, 17 (2007), no. 4–5, pp. 607–614; see also Petya Kabakchieva and Kurzydowski Dessislava, *Civil Society in Bulgaria: NGOs versus Spontaneous Civic Activism* (Sofia: Open Society Institute, 2012).

environment. Thus, the transition in Bulgaria was a project of modernisation, resting on the claim that Bulgarian society had to enter the era of modern (Western) bourgeois civilisation. As part of this, it constituted a “civilizational choice”<sup>74</sup> between tradition and modernity, past and future, Eastern and Western values. The depth of the transformation aimed for was profound – it particularly targeted people’s worldviews and their “common sense.” However, consent to hegemony is never absolute.<sup>75</sup> What the post-2001 “populist wave” began to unleash was another wave of hegemonic struggle, whereby the idea of civil society as established between 1990 and 2001 was challenged and new re-articulations began to take place.

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Phillips Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs*, 72, (1993), pp. 22–49.

<sup>75</sup> William Carroll, “Crisis, Movements, Counter-hegemony: In Search of the New,” *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements* 2 (2010), no. 2, pp. 168–198.