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FROM THE POST-COMMUNIST CITIZEN TO THE E-CITIZEN

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RESUME
Citizen participation changes shape and context, especially in the post-Communist countries. After "festive", "mimetic" and "heroic" citizenships some new figures are highlighted by some authors, for example the "apathetic", the "interested" or the "observed". This typology can be applied to the chronology of changes in Bulgaria where appear some figures of "e-citizenships", a kind of promise for our future.

Key words: E-citizen, Post-Communism, Internet, Blog, Bulgaria

Introduction

   "*She is a university lecturer. She likes working with students, but refuses to submit to the academic corruption she often witnesses. She speaks. She does not succeed in eradicating corruption, but she makes her own conditions worse. The pressure arises. It comes from both leadership and her colleagues, who prefer the status quo. Alone against everyone is a weak position. Looking for a source of power, she finds it in Internet – a virtual agora is like a horn, the voice can be heard on broader grounds, further away. Only thus she succeeds to escape the closed circle of unfairness and pressure. She has been an active blogger since*". This is a part of an interview with an e-citizen. I have chosen to start with it in order to highlight two aspects of my topic: the Citizen and Internet.
   Analysing the etymology of the word, the famous linguist **Emile Benveniste** comes across an important distinction: in ancient Greece the citizen (*polites*) is the citizen in a polis, which has existed before him and created the conditions for his free activity. In Rome, the citizen (*civis*) is a citizen to the other citizen, a co-citizen. In Athens, the polis-state precedes the citizen,

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while in Rome the situation is reversed – the state (*civitas*) is derivative of the citizen. Post-Communism hesitates between the two poles. Internet seems to tip the balance in the latter direction reinforcing the citizen.

The goal of the analysis is to highlight the main figures of the citizen through differentiating two periods: the formation and development of the post-communist citizen and the appearance of the e-citizen. The study is a result of the author's research on civic participation (Krasteva, 2009; Krasteva et Todorov 2009; Krasteva, 2009a) and on its transformations in the age of Internet politics and digital democracy.

From mimetic to heroic citizenship

In his provocative calendar of the post-communist changes **Ralf Dahrendorf** assigns *six months* for the formation of a representative democracy, *six years* for the market economy and *six decades* for the civil society.

I will analyse the latter through the prism of four forms of citizenship and three figures of the citizen.

The first form of citizenship is *festive* – the change started with the excitement of the demonstrations of many thousands, with the tents in the city centre of the capital, with the students' barricades in front of University of Sofia. An intriguing fact – it was the pop and rock stars that embodied the transition – the first poster with all of them together representing the smiling face of change is quite emblematic.

"Nothing is sweeter than freedom", says **Cicero**. **Cioran** compares society's rise and fatigue: "Don Quixote embodies the youth of a civilization. He *invents* events. We are struggling to protect ourselves from those that come upon us." This is the reason why the West observed, intrigued, the enthusiasm of the East.

People are the source and primary reason for power. In a democracy, the society should dominate over the state; the *demos* should precede the *cracy* (**G. Sartori**). The state should be in service to the citizens, rather than the citizens serving the state. In 1863, Lincoln left us a brilliant formulation: "Government of the people, from the people, for the people". This is the story told by all the revolutions, as **Paul Magnette** ironically realistic comments in his brilliant book *Citizenship* (Magnette, 2001). Soon the new power, with all the institutionalised attributes of democracy, gave us a sobering picture of universally valid

obviousness – leadership for the people, but not by them, and the elites that are afraid of the masses.

Post-Communism went from the captivating collective excitement to the small-group confinement, from the "*citoyennete publique ascendante*" to the "*citoyennete privee descendante*" (Magnette, 2001).

The second type of citizenship I would qualify as *mimetic,* imitative. Its most comic, as well as representative, expression was the strike of 39 parliamentarians from the first freely elected Parliament. They chose to express their disagreement with the new democratic Constitution not from Parliament's high tribune, but in tents at the lawn outside it, not through words, but through hunger. (Politics knows cases of not only starvation for a cause, but people painfully dying in a hunger strike – in the 1980s IRA activists paid with their lives for wanting to be recognised as political prisoners. Our politicians use this form of protest in a specific manner – the leader of the teachers' syndicate was "starving", while eating biscuits in public. Similar, though slightly more discrete was the practice of the 39 "starving" deputies).

What made this process unique was the fact that everyone was satisfied: its initiators for inventing how to simultaneously take advantage of the power of the discourse of power, and the opposition's prestige; their supporters appreciated their leaders could starve without getting any thinner; their critics gladly found arguments for the irresponsibility of the elites - instead of consolidating the rules and institutions of democracy, they were undermining it from the inside. (In a parliamentary Republic by definition there is no discourse more important than that of the deputies).

For the political analysis this example is indicative of the inability to separate representative democracy from the civic participation.

The third form of citizenship is *imported.*

Let us remind ourselves what **Alexis de Tocqueville** sees when he 'discovers' America and describes its democracy – the local and regional institutions. It is precisely these institutions, according to the famous French scholar, that are the background of American civil spirit, since they are to freedom what the school is to science – they make institutions comprehensible to people and help people utilize those institutions. Decentralization is the functional equivalent of widely unfold aristocracy of the old regime – a dense institutional web between the citizens and power.

What was it in the post-Communist countries that drew new sponsors, whose financial injections were supposed to speed and consolidate the civil society? It was not the local democracy, but the nongovernmental organizations.

In their functioning we can identify two paradoxes. The first is that they display the discourse on the civil society – protection of minority rights; struggle against corruption, etc., while in fact the main reason for their blossoming and proliferation is the assimilation of foreign funds.

The second paradox is between the declared left ideas for the civil society and the realised right version. The first vision lies on solidarity, on civil duties to help the poor and underprivileged. The second presupposes the idea that a stable civil society is built on economically powerful individuals autonomous from the state. Good financing undoubtedly helps the formation of middle class representatives. As has been humorously noticed by an activist in the beginning of the changes, "The highest-grossing business is the one of the NGOs".

The last years created a new, *heroic* form of citizenship, which revived the classical understanding of citizenship as nationality. An archetypal example of this is ancient Sparta: all citizens - men are soldiers, no subject is either a citizen or a soldier (Women can be citizens, but without taking part in political life). This definition of citizenship includes devotion, even sacrifice for the country

Nowadays the citizenship understood as nationality functions as an antipode to liberalism. If the latter desacralized the nation, the nationalistic mobilization was the 'battery' that supplied energy to the modern state and assisted the individuals to unite around common goals.

A loud-voiced spokesman of that conception entered loudly the Bulgarian political scene. "Attack" united that electoral potential, wanted and sought by the transition from national nihilism to respect of national identity, from the 'cold' ideology of liberalism to the 'cosy' connection to nationalism, from the apathy to participation.

Could the apathetic be a citizen? (Jaffre & Muxelle, 2000)

In his remarkable book *The Lonely Crowd* **David Reizman** (2001) describes three figures of an individual with different attitudes towards politics.

The first is *apathetic*. Politics are too far from his world, he is too small for the big world of politics. Why should he be included in an article about the citizen? Because it is precisely here that we find one of the paradoxes of

participation: democracies tend to accept and adapt to apathy easier, totalitarian power is the one imposing participation.

The second figure is the *interested*. He has two subcategories: one is constantly criticising, often indignant; nothing can satisfy him – not the elite, neither the economy, certainly not the healthcare system or education. The second one is an optimist, acknowledges the difficulties, but is facing forward, where he sees European integration, new business perspectives, and better opportunities for his children. Despite their quite opposite pathos, both the *indignant* and the *enthusiast* share a common idea – politics should protect their interests.

The third figure is that of the *observer*. His attitude towards politics is the one of a collector of information. He understands how complicated politics are, researches, compares, analyses the different points of view. He is much more tolerant than the interested, but for an ambiguous reason – he does not believe politics could really protect peoples' interests. He is not particularly active, but when he decides to participate, he is close to **R. Dahrendorf's** understanding, that the citizen is not the one waiting for the State and the others to act, but the one acting himself.

If I try to use this typology to the chronology of the democratic changes in Bulgaria, it would look like this:

The interested emerged at the real beginning of the transition and became the main figure of its 'romantic' period. The enthusiasm and the indignation were interconnected in a way that would and was separating friends and spouses for political reasons. Today, divorces and what causes them are back to normal; optimists are decreasing, apathetic are multiplying. 'The observer' is expressing an informed inaction. He stays away from politics not because politics are too complicated to be grasped. Rather, by understanding it well, he sees its boundaries and limitations. He is the figure of the citizen of the democracy after the transition.

The problematic appearance of the e-citizen

Dominic Schnapper (2000) distinguishes three categories to represent citizenship: law, political legitimacy, and social connection. Post-Communism focuses on the last two: the strength and vitality of the civil society are thought of as a more reliable indicator of the consolidation of democracy than its institutional norms, while their lack as a worrying symptom of democracy's

fragility; the anti-discriminatory pathos of the non-governmental sector in regard to gender, ethnic, religious etc. differences creates the foundation of the living together.

The political promise of the digital society and Internet politics is the development of a third notion: social connection. It is no coincidence the metaphor for the e-society is 'social network'.

The larger topic for e-citizenship I will analyse in relation to the "political community of the citizens" (Schnapper, 2003). I will articulate three forms of the e-citizen: the hater, the simulator, and the empowered.

The first is very active, significantly more so online than in more classical political spaces. Those are more controlled, more 'guarded' from the politically correct: the critique, the opposition, the contrast were made banal, but 'tamed' in more acceptable and moderate forms. The *hater* does not want to be moderate, he is proclaiming loudly and clearly his intolerance, his anger is released spontaneously and quite easily: it is directed towards the corruption of elites, the 'invasion' of others – the Roma, the Turks, the immigrants, the gay.

The virtual is the area of the hater due to the lack of control, due to the freedom and to the anonymity.

The hater is active and engaged. Few topics leave him indifferent. He likes the Net and loves to hate in the Net.

The simulator rarely enters the Net as such. He starts as an ordinary e-citizen and turns into a simulator in a certain moment. Like the hater, he is active, takes part in many forums, chats, comments posts. Like the hater, he prefers a nickname. Unlike the hater though, he has many rather than just one. Thus he can possess many virtual identities, more opportunities to be present, without being omnipresent.

It is precisely the latter that can catalyse his transformation from e-citizen to e-simulator. The specific temporality of the transformation can have many manifestations: some usual ones are elections, but also some hot topics such as political scandals. In an environment in which the political and economic actors need to 'heat up' or alter the public opinion, active and familiar nicknames are an indispensable resource. Some Internet users accept to be paid for writing what they used to write before for free.

Of course, not all e-citizens with active nicknames become simulators. Most e-citizens consider simulators for manipulators, for opposite to the authentic, spontaneous participation.

Internet simulators are a paradoxical analogue to a professional politician. Party activists who transform their party commitment and public activity into work activity are the prototype of the active e-citizens, who at a certain moment accept reward for what they had previously done for free. Just like the politician, whose public discourse is highly dependent on the party programme and command, the paid e-activist starts to spread e-discourse that is more simulated that spontaneous.

The third figure is that of *the empowered e-citizen.* The interview in the beginning of the text introduces this specific characteristic of this type. This figure is more complex and polyphonic than previous ones, there are two subcategories. The first is more widespread, the second is more developed. One figure is the *e-activist*. He signs or initialises petitions, gathers 'friends' for public events through the social networks, writes comments in the electronic media. More engaged is the figure of the *blogger*. He is the bearer of a certain problematic and/or cause. The serious bloggers do not write on all topics, but want to be bearers of a brightly defined idea or cause – antidiscrimination, internet freedom, green ideas, critical political analysis… They write under their own names. Cause and Internet are mutually interfering. Bloggers are often active offline. But Internet is a stimulus to identify more precisely an idea, a cause, to identify and elaborate his blogger's identity. The common between the two varieties is that the e-citizens feel empowered, their voice reaches wider audience, their ideas captivate others, and the recognition produces influence.

It is precisely the empowered citizen that makes the links between Internet and the e-democracy.

Conclusion

In one of the most frequently quoted works "Theory of Democracy", **Giovanni Sartori** notes: in the 40s of the 20th Century, people knew what democracy is and either liked it or not. Forty years later it became the "politically correct", but people do not know anymore (or cannot agree on) what democracy actually is.

This diagnosis could be used for the e-democracy as well. Since **Obama** politics is the politically correct, but many of its manifestations such as the haterism and the e-manipulation produce puzzledness and doubt.

The empowerment of the e-citizens is one of the ways to reconcile what e-politics is with what e-democracy should be.

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