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## POLICING CIVIL DISORDER IN PANDEMIC-DRIVEN BULGARIA

*The coronavirus pandemic and numerous restrictions introduced have fostered numerous gatherings and protest actions. Citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the restriction of their rights and freedoms, while at the same time demanding a solution to the problems that took place before the pandemic occurred. In Bulgaria, the problems included corruption, dissatisfaction with the government, and the failure to respect the independence of the judiciary. For this reason, from July 9, 2020 to April 16, 2021 there were protests of citizens who demanded, among others, changes and resignation of the government. The analysis will provide answers to two research questions: what actions did the protesters take between July 2020 and April 2021? How did the security services deal with civil disorder during the protests? The main research problem relates to the impact of repression on mobilization or demobilization and the use of violent actions by protesters. By delving into actions, the study will differentiate between violent and peaceful actions. In turn, by evaluating the security services' actions, the study will differentiate between repressive and non-repressive protest policing. The method used in this study is the qualitative source analysis. It draws on the technique of content analysis of specifically media coverage of the activities of the police and protest participants during the indicated period. The analysis rests on the reports that appeared on the most important websites and Internet portals reporting on the course of the protests. Based on the analysis, it was found that the main demands and goals remained unchanged, the actions taken by the protesters included many types of violent and peaceful activities. On the side of the security services, a division was also made into repressive and non-repressive activities. The protests ended naturally with the end of the government's term. Repressions had no impact on mobilisation and fuelled violent protests.*

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, police, pandemic, civil disorder, protests

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### Introduction

The emergence of the pandemic and the introduction of numerous restrictions have been conducive to limit the rights and freedoms of citizens. It has also contributed to accelerating the process of erosion of the rule of law and the application of a militant democracy rule [1], which began to be very visible after the 2008 financial crisis in all European Union (EU) Member States [2]. The category militant democracy had already been used by Karl Loewenstein, who sought the reasons for the defeat of the Weimar Republic in the clash with Nazism [3]. The current crises have only confirmed that there is still a process in which parliament [4] and the judiciary are equipped with legal means to restrict individual democratic freedoms in order to defend democracy, and thus their survival, against those who are considered its internal but also external enemies [5]. However, nowadays there is more talk of neo-militant democracy or quasi-militant democracy. Many works discussed this topic in the context of contentious politics i.e. M. Skrzypek [6], R. Bäcker [7], J. Rak [8], K. Rezmer-Plotka [9] and others. Importantly, as a result of the introduced restrictions peculiar to quasi-militant democracy, there were a huge number of protests and gatherings of citizens opposing the restrictions imposed by governments. Assemblies often took place during a period when they were temporarily banned or could only be held to a very limited extent [10, 11]. The outbreak of the pandemic has caused public attention to focus primarily on health and safety issues. Over time, when the restrictions were loosened and introduced periodically, problems that were previously described as the most important recurred.

In Bulgaria, corruption was one of the key problems immediately before the outbreak the pandemic afterwards. In indexes relating to the level of corruption, it ranks very high and exceeds the average indicators for Europe [12]. In 2019, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the average for the world was 43 points out of 100. In used scale of 100 points means a state that is practically free from corruption

and 0 is the highest corruption rate. Bulgaria scored 74 points, ahead of Hungary and Romania, among others [13]. The judicial system is also not free from corruption, as indicated by EU reports [14]. This means that Bulgaria will remain high in the rankings on corruption as long as it does not deal with the restoration of the independence of the judiciary. Restoring the transparency and independence of the courts is very important because it guarantees respect for the democratic rights and freedoms of citizens. In the case where both the political elites and the most important democratic institutions are corrupt in Bulgaria, can talk about the process of democracy backsliding.

Researchers point to a high level of corruption in Bulgaria but the scale of the corruption is difficult to estimate, which is why O'Brennan uses the term 'shadow power' for determining the power of oligarchs [15]. Ana Krasteva for example claims that Bulgarian populism is a typical example of post-communist East European populism, to a very large extent imitates it, while "extremism is not a spontaneous internal attitude but is a learned political game" [16]. This might confirm that the populist political discourse is used for the purpose, as is pursuing the interests of the governing and oligarchic groups.

John O' Brennan claims that the mechanisms by which oligarchs exercise power over the state have never been fully discovered. By contrast, the media, which usually allows the disclosure of what it described as 'shadow power', are also heavily subordinated to the oligarchic class [17]. This article takes the definition of distinction between corrupt forms of governance for Stefan Antonov who points out that „One main distinction between corrupt forms of governance and the <<rule of oligarchy>> is that only organizations considered being a part of the coalition between the oligarchy and the political elite are able to arrange tailored legislation" [18]. Here, as an example, we can recall the reluctance of the media, and the unification of oligarchy against Boiko Borisov (who has been Prime Minister of Bulgaria since May 2017), at a time when he and his political party began to aspire to play a greater role in the economy, as Antonov also mentioned in his paper [19]. Despite the lack of clear evidence of manipulation by oligarchs and incitement to anti-government protests at that time, it is difficult not to see that the actions of the then government were not in the interest of oligarchic groups.

The main research problem relates to the impact of repression on mobilization or demobilization and the use of violent actions by protesters. For this reason, the purpose of the study is to analyze the activity of protesters and the actions taken by the security services during protests in Bulgaria from July 9, 2020 to April 16, 2021.

### **Background and Methodology**

According to Jennifer Earl „The repression of social movements refers to attempts by individuals, groups, or state actors (e.g., militaries, national police, and local police) to control, constrain, or prevent protest" [20]. When these attempts are made in an unjustified way, with high frequency they can lead to an intensification of the activity of these movements. Numerous studies on repression indicate that the escalation of repression of protest can trigger radicalization and impact negatively on civil liberties [21]. As a result, observations of the processes of repression and radicalization reveal the existing interactions between contentious politics and the erosion of the rule of law mentioned in the introduction [22].

However, it is possible to maintain peace and order during protests thanks to proper identification of de-escalating interactions. According to Anne Nassauer, it consists of:

- focusing on communication and on effective police management;
- respecting territorial boundaries;
- avoiding escalation signs;
- recognizing the emotional dynamics for violent outbreaks [23].

In this way, instead of excessive repression, the peaceful nature of the assemblies can be maintained. The security services prevent instead of reacting and additionally lead to an escalation of moods. This is important because, as the researchers show, the use of repression is an ineffective deterrent for protesters. In addition, it often leads to the use of violent actions by protesters who have to use other means to make their concerns heard [24]. Christian Göbel also noted from the example of China that repression is closely correlated both with the cost of concessions for local governments and protest intensity [25].

In Code of Ethics for Officials of the Ministry of the Interior with Police Functions was created in Bulgaria in connection with the Co-operation programme to strengthen the rule of law. Part V stipulates that the police may use of force:

„84. The police shall not abuse the rights given to it by the law to use physical power, auxiliary devices and weapons. The police shall use physical power, auxiliary devices or weapons only in cases, provided by the law, in case of unavoidable necessity, proportionate to the risk, and to a degree, which is necessary in order to achieve a lawful goal.

85. The police on a crime scene is in the position to make an assessment whether to use physical power, auxiliary devices or weapons, and to what extent.

86. The police uses physical power, auxiliary devices and weapons only as a last chance and stops using them immediately after the necessity to use them has ceased to exist.

87. The police offers help immediately to persons, against whom physical power, auxiliary devices or weapons were used, after the reasons for their use has ceased to exist and the purposes of their use were achieved.

88. Threatening with weapons, beyond the methods determined by professional rules of intervention, is an example of irresponsible behavior by the police, which contradicts the principles of professional ethics” [26].

The cited passage from the Code of Ethics for Officials of the Ministry of the Interior with Police Functions indicates that the use of repression must be justified and proportionate to the offenses. Mainly because the abuse of force or coercive measures can lead to a weakening of the rule of law in the state and the legitimacy of the government and security services.

Paul A. Passavant, referring to the example of protests referred to as #BlackLivesMatter, stated that they revealed that the policing of protest is becoming increasingly militarized and increasingly using control technologies. In this way, police actions can become an institutional practice that treats protesters as more than criminals [27]. For this reason, it is important to undertake research on policing protest and assess the legitimacy of the actions taken. Especially that in a democratic state the costs of repression are higher and it is necessary to legitimize these actions [28].

The purpose of this article is to analyze the activity of protesters and the actions taken by the security services during protests in Bulgaria from July 9, 2020 to April 16, 2021. The method used in this study is the qualitative source analysis. It draws on the technique of content analysis of specifically media coverage of the activities of the police and protest participants during the indicated period. The analysis rests on the reports that appeared on websites and Internet portals: U.S.News, BNR Radio Bulgaria, The Sofia Globe, absNEWS, Euroactiv, Balkan Insight, DW, VESTI, Reuters, Dnevnik, Novini, Novinite, Dnes.dir, Nova, 24chasa and others popular websites. On the indicated pages, the most important information about daily protests and key events were searched. However, in order to accurately follow the course of the daily protests and to get to the details, reports appearing on local news websites and other European news agencies were also used.

The analysis will provide answers to two research questions: what actions did the protesters take between July 2020 and April 2021? How did the security services deal with civil disorder during the protests? The main research problem relates to the impact of repression on mobilization or demobilization and the use of violent actions by protesters. By delving into actions, the study will differentiate between violent and peaceful actions. In turn, by evaluating the security services' actions, the study will differentiate between repressive and non-repressive protest policing.

#### **Civil disorder during protests in Bulgaria**

The protests in Bulgaria began on July 9, 2020 and lasted until April 16, 2021. The protests finished with the end of Borisov's 4-year term of office and his formal resignation. This confirms the observations made by Sidney Tarrow. He claimed that protest waves are not sufficient to produce significant reforms, because equally important is the presence and entrepreneurship of well-placed reformists who can turn the impetus for change [29]. In the case of Bulgaria, these key reformists were missing, which is why the protesters' demands were not implemented.

Based on media reports, it can be noted that contentious performances were held practically every day in different cities, but the largest of them took place in the capital of Bulgaria. Throughout the period, the postulates of the protesters, who demanded the resignation of the Borisov's government and the prosecutor general, and the fight against corruption, have not changed.

During the period considered, civil disorder included a wide variety of activities. For this reason, a division has been made that will allow a better illustration of the protesters' activity:

**Blockades of key points, buildings, streets, etc.:** blocking the center in the capital and blocking buses with GERB supporters (counter-protests were held); blocking streets; blocking the National Assembly building and for a short time the metro system; blockades of boulevards, bus and tram lines; trenches of barricades, beach protests and a call for Ahmed Demir Dogan to withdraw his support for members of the government; blocking the bridge between Bulgaria and Romania on the Danube; On 16 September, they entered the parliament building and barricaded themselves with a disabled person; organizing a car parade, during which the trumpet was honked, a low speed was maintained; blockades combined with the setting up of tents and camps at intersections

**Protests in front of important institutions:** protests in front of Bulgarian embassies, e.g. in London

**Acts of vandalism:** attempts to break into parliament, throw fireworks, bottles, stones and red paint at police officers, throw tomatoes; attack on the building of the Ministry of Justice; throwing tomatoes, toilet paper and eggs at the building of the Ministry of the Interior

**Verbal calls for protest:** On July 18, a call by protest leaders to show civil disobedience and besiege all government-owned buildings

**Support for citizens in exile:** migrant protests in various European cities

**Preventing the free movement of key politicians:** protesters attempting to detain Borisov at Sofia airport in order to prevent his departure; during a conference of the ruling parties on 5 August, protesters tried to block representatives of the government coalition from leaving their headquarter

**Turning to external institutions:** march to the European Commission and demanding attention to the protests

**Cooperation with other protest groups i.e.:** joining representatives of the tourism industry to adopt a crisis plan against the effects of COVID-19, joining the association of the disabled and demanding the resignation of the government, marching on the Prime Minister's house; joining protests fighting for LGBT rights and anti-racism

**Petitions, organizing into more formal structures:** the creation of a citizens' parliament on 2 August and the collection of signatures for a petition for the resignation of the government

**Support from academia:** signature of an open letter on 11 August by scientists regarding the resignation of the government

**Performance protests:** chaining to make it harder to remove protesters; laying dead fish before the Council of Ministers; On February 13, he gathered in front of Borisov's house and on March 6 once again and painted with chalk in front of his house inscriptions such as "resignation", "prison", "thief", etc.

**Confrontations with the police:** On September 2, demonstrators tried to break the police cordon and storm the assembly, clashes with the police, throwing firecrackers, bales of hay and bottles at the police, including arson, riots, insults.

There were also frequent mixed actions, such as the simultaneous blockade of roads, intersections on 24 July, throwing garbage cans and bottles to get to the Bulgarian national television. The largest anti-government protests took place in Sofia on July 29. Among the distinguished protest actions, violent actions include: some blockades, acts of vandalism, partly preventing the movement of politicians, clashes with the police. In the case of peaceful actions, the following can be classified: emigrant protests in other European countries, verbal appeals addressed to protesters, addressing external institutions, cooperation with other assemblies, petitions and the creation of more formal structures, support by scientific circles, performance protests.

#### **Policing civil disorder during protests**

A separate classification has also been created for police activity during the protests of Bulgarians.

**Distribution of counter-demonstrations:** on July 10, the police distributed counter-demonstrations

**Arrest:** arrests of protesters, e.g.: on 11 July; On July 20, the arrest of an MP who was supposed to be co-responsible for blocking the metro system

**Use of force:** On July 14, the accusation of beating protesting students, on September 3, violent clashes, arrests, dismantling tents, pushing protesters so that they do not block the boulevards

**Interacting with protesters:** police removed their riot shields in gratitude to the protesters

**Police detention other than persons:** the arrest of a truck that was supposed to be supplying technical and audio equipment to the protests in Sofia

**Elimination of tent towns and protests blockades:** police dismantled protesters' tents and dismantled roadblocks

**Locks:** police cars blocked the vehicles of protesters who wanted to block the highway; police set up checkpoints to control the flow of people

**Imposition of financial sanctions:** e.g. fines

**Use of security measures:** use of tear gas, water cannons, pepper spray, batons, arrests

This is a very conventional classification, because as in the case of civil disorder, often the activity undertaken by the security services was mixed. Repressive actions are primarily: use of force, some stops and removal of blockades, imposition of fines, application of security measures, including some of the blockades. Non-repressive activities are mainly: separating counter-demonstrations that could otherwise lead to an escalation of moods and pose a greater threat, interactions with protesters to express gratitude.

### Conclusions

The long-standing protests in Bulgaria were very dynamic and varied. Although the main demands and goals remained unchanged, the actions taken by the protesters included many types of violent and peaceful activities. Among them, the following were distinguished: blockades of various nature, including preventing the movement of politicians, protests in front of key institutions, acts of vandalism, verbal declarations and calls, including addressing external entities, writing petitions, confrontations with the police or symbolic actions defined as performances. Also important for these protests was the involvement of protest groups that wanted to achieve their own goals and support for citizens in exile in other countries.

The repressive and non-repressive activities that were distinguished on the part of the police included: the distribution of counter-demonstrations, arrests, the use of force, interacting with protesters, detentions, the liquidation of tent towns and blockades set up by protesters, the creation of police blockades, the imposition of financial sanctions in the form of fines and the use of various security measures.

The protests analyzed revealed the great dissatisfaction of citizens with the situation in the state and the rulers. However, despite the long duration of the protests and their dynamics, the main goals of the assemblies were not achieved. The protests ended naturally with the end of the government's term. What was achieved in the period under review was a large social mobilization and the expression of a clear disagreement with the lack of respect for democratic values. In addition, apart from a few examples of the security services exceeding their powers, most of the actions taken were justified. The analysis of the protests in Bulgaria presented in this article confirms the observations made by other researchers that the use of repression had a significant impact on violent actions, and its abandonment did not affect the greater mobilization of protesters. This does not mean that there were no acts of unjustified vandalism on the part of the protesters. However, on the side of the security services, cases of abuse of force against peaceful people have also been reported.

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**Резмер-Плотка К. Поліційне подолання громадських безпорядків, спричинених пандемією, у Болгарії**

Пандемія коронавірусу та численні обмеження, запроваджені урядом, сприяли виникненню численних зборів та акцій протесту. Громадяни висловлювали невдоволення обмеженням їхніх прав і свобод, водночас вимагаючи вирішення проблем, які мали місце до початку пандемії. У Болгарії серед основних проблем виділялись корупція, невдоволення діями уряду та недотримання незалежності судової системи. З цієї причини з 9 липня 2020 року до 16 квітня 2021 року відбувалися акції протесту громадян, які вимагали, зокрема, змін та відставки уряду. Аналіз надає відповіді на два запитання дослідження: які дії здійснювали протестувальники в період з липня 2020 року по квітень 2021 року? Як силовики боролися з громадськими заворушеннями під час протестів? Основна проблема дослідження стосується впливу репресій на мобілізацію або демобілізацію протестувальників та застосування насильницьких дій протестувальниками. Деталізація аналізу вказаних дій дозволила розрізнити насильницькі та мирні дії. У свою чергу, оцінюючи дії спецслужб, дослідження розмежовує репресивні та нерепресивні дії поліції. У цьому дослідженні використовується метод якісного аналізу джерел. Він спирається на методіку контент-аналізу саме медіа-висвітлення діяльності міліції та учасників протестів у вказаний період. Аналіз ґрунтується на повідомленнях, які з'явилися на найважливіших сайтах та інтернет-порталах, які повідомляють про хід протестів. За результатами аналізу встановлено, що основні вимоги та цілі залишилися незмінними, а дії мітингувальників включали багато видів як насильницької, так і мирної діяльності. З боку органів охорони правопорядку також було зроблено поділ на репресивну та нерепресивну діяльність. Протести закономірно закінчилися із закінченням повноважень уряду. Репресії не вплинули на масштаби мобілізації протестувальників і викликали бурхливі протести.

**Ключові слова:** Болгарія, поліція, пандемія, громадянські заворушення, протести