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PROTEST MOVEMENTS AND THE BULGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2013–2014

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, Bulgaria's political system was shaken to its core by an unprecedented wave of mass protests. The protests, which began with dissatisfaction over the government's policy towards household electricity bills, brought down the government and led to new elections in June 2013. But after the new government was formed, a new wave of protests began. The renewed protest movement demanded transparency and accountability. Under the slogan 'Who?', the movement protested against corruption by the new government, and demanded to know who was governing the country 'behind the scenes'.

Political developments in Europe and beyond have demonstrated links between protests and the rise of populist parties. Yet, the Bulgarian case stands apart from these developments. In Bulgaria, the protest movement and the populist parties remain disconnected from each other; the agenda of populist parties does not correspond with the demands of the protest movement. In this paper, we attempt to investigate why this is the case. We argue that the disjuncture between the protest movement and the populist parties in Bulgaria can be explained by the increasing polarization of Bulgarian society. The protest movement represents the pro-European and pro-democratic part of the electorate; the nationalist populist parties that entered parliament appeal to the euro-sceptic and socially conservative part of society, and ultimately those who hope for a restoration of social order through a 'strong hand' and authoritarian rule. The paper is based on the analysis of secondary qualitative and quantitative materials.

Keywords: Bulgaria, #DANSwithme, political parties, populism, protests

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2013 was a year of protests in Bulgaria. Protests initially began in February with dissatisfaction with the government's policy towards household electricity bills and the state regulation of energy providers. Eventually, the protests brought down the government of the right-wing Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party (GERB), and led to new elections in May 2013. But two weeks after the new government was formed by the leftist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the centrist Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), with the support of the nationalist populist party Ataka, a new wave of protests began. The renewed protest movement, which became known as #DANSwithme, demanded transparency and accountability; under the slogan 'Who?', the movement protested against corruption by the new government and demanded to know who was governing the country *“behind-the-scenes [...] where nothing is ever clear”* (Kiossev 2013). Yet the new elections of October 2014 showed that the protests did not bring about the change that was sought after. Voter turnout was the lowest in decades; the new government, led once again by GERB, was formed, but its composition and policies did not differ significantly from the first GERB government of 2009–2013. At the same time, the elections that were held in the course of the protest wave, both at the national and European level (2014), saw a redistribution of votes to the smaller populist parties. In addition to Ataka, which received fewer seats in 2014 than in 2013, two more populist coalitions made it into parliament: the Patriotic Front and Bulgaria without Censorship.

In this study, we thus seek to explore the links between Bulgarian protest movements and voting for right-wing populist political parties in the national elections of 2013–2014. This is an important question, particularly in the context of the recent rise of right-wing populist parties all over Europe. In these and other cases, right-wing populist parties succeeded in engaging with the protest movements, and made significant electoral gains due to their ability to respond to popular demands. In Bulgaria, the relationship between the protest movements of 2013 and the right-wing populist parties remained weak; and the electoral change achieved after a year of protest was rather modest compared to the extent of the movements.

In this paper, we explore the applicability of the contentious politics framework for the understanding of the interaction between the protest movements and institutionalized political actors in Bulgaria. While these links are researched in depth in many Western European contexts, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) they have on recently received attention. In Bulgaria, the link between collective protest action and right-wing populist parties has not been researched, and thus our study seeks to contribute to this gap in the literature.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the theoretical literature that investigates the links between protest movements and party politics. We then turn to the existing attempts to apply these theories

to protest movements in Eastern Europe and situate the Bulgarian protests of 2013 in this framework. Finally, we discuss the interaction, or lack of it, between the 2013 protest movements and right-wing populist political parties.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND ELECTORAL CHANGE

In social movement studies, the interaction with institutionalized political actors is not generally of central concern. According to Della Porta and Diani, political process theories examining how the protest movements which challenge a “given political order [...] interact with actors who enjoy a consolidated position in the polity” (Della Porta–Diani 2006: 16) are only one of four major research directions in the analysis of social movements (ibid: 6). Research in this subfield has been successful in shifting attention towards the interaction between new actors (social movements) and traditional ones (political parties and states), and between less conventional forms of action and institutionalized systems of interests representation (ibid: 17). The contentious politics framework introduced by Charles Tilly (1995) and developed by his associates (Tarrow 1998, McAdam Tarrow–Tilly 2001), has been the most influential approach in the attempts to link protest movements with institutional political process.

Contentious politics can be defined as “*episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of a claim and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claim and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interest of at least one of the claimants*” (ibid: 5). The contentious politics approach sought to connect scholarship on social movements with scholarship on democratization, civil wars and revolutions, and to introduce dynamic, rather than static analysis of the process of interaction between movements and what Tarrow and McAdam referred to as “routine political actors” (McAdam–Tarrow 2010: 532).

In seeking to illuminate the relations between movements and institutionalized political process, McAdam and Tarrow suggest six mechanisms of linkage. These mechanisms include the following.

- Movements introduce new forms of collective action that influence election campaigns.
- Movements join electoral coalitions or, in extreme cases, turn into parties themselves.
- Movements engage in proactive electoral mobilization.
- Movements engage in reactive electoral mobilization.
- Movements polarize political parties internally.
- Shifts in electoral regimes have a long-term impact on mobilization and demobilization.

Few studies have examined the impact that citizen's protest behavior has on electoral outcomes (ibid). Thus in our study, we extrapolate the research on contentious politics in the case of the Bulgarian 2013 protest events, looking for a link between social protests and the electoral success of right-wing populist parties.

McAdam and Tarrow also emphasize the importance of “domestic opportunities and constraints” (McAdam–Tarrow 2010: 531) in the relations between collective protest actions and routine political actors, even for transnational movements which appear to transcend national boundaries. As Jacobsson and Saxonberg (2013: 2) point out, the differing domestic political, legal and economic opportunity structures encourage

social movements to pursue different repertoires of actions in each country. Social movements are flexible, and adapt to changes in domestic opportunity structures (ibid: 18). In cases where policymakers are not responsive and the population is politically passive, it may make sense for social movement organizations to concentrate on economic and legal opportunities (ibid: 3).

Turning to the interaction of movements with political parties, various patterns of interaction have been identified. Generally, movements and parties differ greatly in terms of their organizational principles, with parties presenting more hierarchical structures and movements adopting more flexible and open forms of network (Della Porta–Diani 2006: 25). At the same time, unlike parties which usually have more centrist electoral logics, movements “*tend towards narrow, sometimes extremist views, and uncompromising commitments to single issues*” (McAdam–Tarrow 2010: 535). Unlike parties, movements and other civil society associations do not aim to control public power or the state apparatus (Kopecky 2003: 8) However, in recent decades, movements have “*challenged the centrist electoral logic that defined the parties in the post-war period, injecting extreme partisan ideologies and a concern for single issues into electoral politics*” (McAdam–Tarrow 2010: 535). Movements have been shown to give rise to new political parties or turn into political parties themselves. Thus, in post-communist Eastern Europe, new parties emerged out of revolutionary movements through competition and mobilization for electoral support (Glenn 2003b: 165). In some cases and under specific conditions, some political parties may feel and be recognized by others as part of a movement. However, this is rather unusual, and is largely restricted to parties whose origins lie in social movements. In this situation, a party is part of two different systems of action: the party system and social movement system, where they play different roles (Della Porta–Diani 2006: 25). Furthermore, with the weakening of the identity-building functions of political parties, especially in Europe under the influence of neoliberal consensus, the autonomous role of social movements as “*arenas of public debate on political issues and construction of collective identities*” has been increased (ibid: 87). This emergence of protest as an arena of public debate and the construction of “protest identity” was highly visible during the protests of June 2013. Unfortunately, they did not succeed in going further or constructing a viable political alternative, as we will see in the following section.

Movements can also impose various challenges on established political parties, including organizational and electoral challenges, such as giving rise to new party coalitions, or encouraging programmatic changes (Della Porta–Chironi 2015: 65). Della Porta and Chironi (ibid) describe a case when a social movement challenged a political party (the Italian Partito Democratico, or PD) from within, through a protest action called Occupy PD. Movements and political parties also often enter into more or less temporary alliances, when political parties seek electoral support from the movements in return to policy changes. Traditionally, the cooperation of movements with parties has been deepest with the actors on the left of the political spectrum (Della Porta–Chironi 2015, Poguntke 2006, Kriesi et al. 1993). This has been most recently the case in Greece, where the radical left coalition Syriza entered into dialogue with the anti-austerity movement, which allowed it to gain electoral support beyond the radical left.

In the case of Syriza, as well as in the case of Spanish Podemos, the roots of the electoral successes of the challenger parties can be found in the interaction with popular protests which were a response to

the economic crisis (Della Porta–Chironi 2015: 63). Such party-movement alliances have been attributed to the affinity and convergence of the reformist agendas of many social movements and left-wing party politics (ibid), as well as shared values. However, it is also important to note that this cooperation often takes place with smaller, less-known political parties, a kind of political underdog. As parties become larger, they tend to gravitate toward the center and are less open to change (ibid). At the same time, some authors have suggested that scholarship has tended to excessively focus on reformist movements, thus obscuring the interaction between conservative movements and right-wing political parties (Tarrow–McAdam 2010). Recent research points to a similar dynamic of interaction between conservative movements and right-wing political parties (Mudde 2004).

MOVEMENT-PARTY INTERACTION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

In the past three decades, Eastern Europe has been a site of mass mobilization at least twice: first, during the collapse of communist regimes and then in the course of “electoral revolutions” in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia in the early 2000s. In both of these instances, the empirical links between movements and party politics have been both apparent and recognized, although they remain insufficiently researched. Thus, the role of the Solidarity movement in Poland in bringing down the communist regime has become a textbook example of a movement's role in political change (Tarrow 1994). Although less spectacular, the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia also played an important role in bringing down the communist regime (Glenn 2003b). In both of these countries, social movements became the formative sites of political parties that still remain key players in the political process (Glenn 2003a). The dynamic conditions of post-communist change, with their unstable and volatile political identities and economic interests, pushed “leaders of new political parties to act like social movement entrepreneurs, seeking to mobilize potential supporters in light of varying opportunities, resources, and ways of claiming their claims” (Glenn 2003b: 165). In the former Soviet Union, national movements had played a crucial role in undermining the influence of the Communist Party and gave rise to a multitude of political parties in the post-Soviet period (Beissinger 2002).

The interest paid towards protest action in Eastern Europe resurged once again after the so-called electoral revolutions in Serbia (2000), Ukraine (2003) and Georgia (2004) (Kuntz 2013, Nikolayenko 2007, Bunce–Wolchik 2011). Here, the alliance between social movements with oppositional parties led to large-scale mobilizations around stolen elections, which allowed a recount of the results of the elections and eventually brought oppositional parties to power. Although relatively better researched, these events are rarely looked at from the contentious politics perspective (Kuntz 2013, Bunce–Wolchik 2011).

In both of these literatures, Bulgaria protest activities rarely merit significant attention. Although, like elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the fall of the communist regime here was accompanied by mass protests, they were less significant than in Poland or Romania. Bulgaria also had no “electoral revolution” as Serbia had in 2000; however, the protests of 1996 and 1997 not only precipitated electoral change in this country, but also played a role in the diffusion of an electoral model that was implemented in Slovakia in 1998 and Serbia in 2000 (Bunce–Wolchik 2011: 57–58).

In this paper, we focus on the protest episodes of 2013 and suggest some possible linkages between the movements and the electoral outcomes in the ensuing elections. We further indicate some other ways of interaction between the protest movement and the institutionalized political process beyond the elections of 2014. In the next section, we provide a brief descriptive overview of the protests in order to set the context. We then proceed to the tentative analysis of the ways in which the protest movement affected the political parties and the electoral process.

THE BULGARIAN PROTESTS OF 2013

The first wave of protests in February 2013 began with household electricity bills that were higher than expected. In various cities, spontaneous protests erupted in which people burned their electricity bills, claiming that the bills were wrong, and that the electricity distributor was over-charging them (Iakimova 2016). Among political parties, the nationalist-populist Ataka took the most active stance against these companies, even establishing the goal of ridding Bulgaria of “colonizers”, as the distributors were labeled, in its official electoral program of 2013 (“Siderov's plan against the colonial yoke”). The protesters held primarily economic claims, and their main demand was to decrease the price of electricity.

Although the claims of the protest movement at this stage remained overall socio-economic, the issue of the need for a new political party that would represent the interests of the protesters was discussed. However, although a majority of the population said that they supported the economic claims of the protesters, according to a sociological survey, only 14% expressed a wish to vote for a party that would represent these interests. Consequently, the protest party, Democratic Civic Initiative, was established, but received less than 1% in the elections (CEC, 2013). However, a nationalist-populist party, Ataka, was able to make use of the protest sentiments and considerably increased its influence. Its popularity increased from 1.9% in January to 5.5% in March 2013. Another party that gained from the protests was NFSB (National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria) (Alpha Research, March 2013).

After failing to quell the protests, the incumbent government resigned and new elections were held. Following snap elections, a coalition government formed of BSP and DPS was established. However, the new government was extremely unpopular, and its cadre policy raised many questions. In particular, the appointment of DPS MP Delian Peevski, a media tycoon with a questionable reputation, to the position of Head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS), was contested. In fact, it stirred yet another wave of protests, known as #DANSwithme, that began in June 2013. The new wave began in Sofia, and at first the protesters demanded the removal of Peevski from this position. Although Peevski resigned, the protests escalated. The key question of the movement became 'Who?', as the protesters demanded to know who made the decision to appoint Peevski to this key state position. Thus, in contrast with the February events, the new wave of protests of “citizens against the oligarchy” (Dainov 2013) had clear political (rather than economic) claims. As Nikolov (2016) argues, the #DANSwithme protest was a result of social eruption caused by “gradual colonization” of the Bulgarian democratic system by oligarchic elites.

As the government failed to respond to the question of 'who?', the movement's demands changed, and

it began to call for the resignation of the new government. The government itself refused to resign, and instead attempted to demonstrate its popularity and social support (according to a survey conducted by Alpha Research sociological agency cited in Popova, 2016, 50% supported and 43% opposed the demand for resignation) by staging counter-protests, even bringing supporters from the provinces to the capital. Yet, these measures were not convincing for the movement, and by October, yet another stage of protest, an Occupy sit-in began in the University of Sofia, and some other universities in the capital and provincial cities. An activist group by the name of Early-rising Students (*Ranobudnite studenti*) declared that they would protest against “the cynicism, corruption, irresponsibility, and unaccountability in the Bulgarian political class” (Znepolski 2016). However, after several weeks of the Occupy strategy, the protest activities gradually died out, and the aims of the protest movement were not achieved.

THE BULGARIAN PROTEST MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL PARTIES: IS THERE A CONNECTION?

After a turbulent 2013, new parliamentary elections were held in 2014. At first sight, it appears that the protests that had shaken the country for nearly a year had brought little or no change to the political establishment. Indeed, the new government, which was once again led by GERB, looked similar to the first GERB government of 2009–2013. So did the protest have an impact on the political system of Bulgaria, and what was this impact? In order to answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at the smaller changes that took place in the party composition of the new parliament.

Table 1 presents the party compositions of three consecutive parliaments formed in national elections. As can be seen, there is a decline in votes for GERB in 2013 and 2014, which can partially be attributed to the protests, and particularly the February wave. Being an opposition party in 2009–2013, BSP gained votes in the 2013 election. This was followed by a drastic decline in BSP votes in 2014, which could also be explained with the one year that BSP was in power and the June anti-government protests that led to the delegitimization of BSP as a trustworthy democratic actor. If we pay attention to DPS, we can see that there was a drastic decline in the 2013 results and stabilization in 2014. But as a party with strong ethnic affiliation, DPS had no chance of gaining a majority, and was generally not considered a reliable coalition partner. In Bulgaria as a whole, the party is highly unpopular among all social groups beyond the Bulgarian Turkish community. The fourth major party, the nationalist populist Ataka, also lost votes in both the 2013 and 2014 elections, with 2014 being particularly low.

One populist party, Order, Law and Justice, completely disappeared from the political scene after its unexpected rise in 2009. In the 2013 election, it received only 59,145 votes and did not pass the electoral threshold; in 2014 it did not participate in the election at all. There is also a consistent decline in voter turnout, from 60.20% in 2009 to 51.33% in 2013 and 48.33% in 2014. However, a larger share of voters was represented in parliament in 2014 than in 2009.

But perhaps the most visible change in the 2014 election was the emergence of two new parties/electoral blocs: the coalitions Bulgaria without Censorship and the Patriotic Front. Both are populist coalitions exploiting the usual populist distinction between “the people” and the elite, and making promises of “taking

care” of their voters by addressing their socio-economic needs. The third new party in the parliament is the “Alternative for Bulgarian Revival” or ABV – a splinter group from BSP, headed by former President Georgy Parvanov. These two coalitions and one party received roughly the same number of votes that had been lost by BSP and Ataka. This may indicate a re-distribution of left-wing and populist votes towards the new parties. It is also worth noting that the two populist coalitions exploited the sentiments that had been expressed in the course of the February 2013 protests; they used similar language and addressed claims put forward during that time.

Finally, there is almost no change in the votes for center-right, democratic parties. The so-called Reformers’ Bloc, which is a coalition of center-right parties, has nearly the same number of votes in 2014 as a previous center-right coalition (the Blue Coalition) in 2009. It is worth noting however, that center-right parties have lost votes since 2013, when the parties that make up the Reformers’ Bloc gathered a combined 332,835 votes, but were not able to overcome the electoral threshold of 4% (see Table 2).

Thus, to summarize, the elections that took place in 2013 and 2014 demonstrate an overall decline in turnout, a loss of votes for major political actors and an emergence of new populist parties. This last development can be attributed to the protests of 2013, especially to the first wave of February, which had socio-economic claims. However, it is worth noting that there is no significant gain in populist votes, but rather a redistribution of votes from established parties to new ones. This electoral change appears rather insignificant when compared to the length, breadth and depth of the overall protest movement. It was expected that the movement would bring much more visible changes. The reason that this did not happen is that in fact, the protests of 2013 included not one, but two different movements with different claims. While the socio-economic protest of February 2013 did give rise to new populist parties, it was rather small, hence there was little change. The much longer protest that began in June was decidedly anti-populist; it had no socio-economic claims, it did not seek care from the government, and lacked any attempts at personal or charismatic leadership. As Ivan Krastev remarked, the rejection of political leaders and “not giving birth to new political parties” were simultaneously the strength and the weakness of the second wave of the protest (Krastev 2013). Paradoxically, the movement with openly political demands did not seek political representation, and thus could not give birth to a new political alternative in 2014 (Garnizov 2013, Stoychev 2013, Znepolski 2016).

On this basis, we can conclude that there has been a movement of voters among parties rather than a recruitment of new voters for new parties. The protests of 2013 led to a politicization of society, but did not give rise to the engagement of citizens with political parties. This is in line with the earlier observations that in Eastern and Central Europe, the voices of citizens remain poorly represented in the decision-making process (Petrova–Tarrow 2007: 78). Thus, 2014 saw the lowest turnout in the history of Bulgaria's post-communist democracy. The implications of the June protest could be viewed as part of the sharp decline and delegitimization of BSP as a democratic party. National-populist Ataka is no longer considered to be a viable alternative, but is rather regarded as the party of the status quo. The protests of June 2013 did not lead to an emergence of new parties, but according to some sociologists, this was not the goal of the protesters (Stoychev 2013, Galubov 2013, Kolev 2013).

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE PROTEST-ELECTION DYNAMIC

To conclude, although this was the deepest political crisis in Bulgaria since 1997 and resulted in critically low levels of public trust in political institutions (Znepolski 2016), the protests of 2013 brought about surprisingly little electoral change. Given the mass character of the protests and the broad support of the public, a higher rate of participation in the elections could have been expected. Yet, the turnout was in fact the lowest in the 25 years of post-communist Bulgaria's development. In terms of composition of the 2014 parliament, there was also little change among the main players. However, there was a rise in the number of populist parties, but not in the consolidated populist votes. Thus, it is possible to speak of a redistribution of populist votes from older, established parties (especially BSP and Ataka) to new challenger parties. On the other hand, there is also some consolidation among the centre-right parties that united into the Reformers' Bloc and succeeded in getting representation in parliament. However, in terms of the number of votes, the change was again rather insignificant.

The limited electoral change achieved by the protests can be best explained by the fact that the protest was in fact comprised of two different protest movements, with different participants and different claims. Here, some tentative connections between the trends we have identified and the mechanisms of movement/party interaction that were introduced in the theoretical section can be made. Thus, the first wave of protest that began in February may have contributed to the internal polarization of BSP, and fueled the emergence of new nationalist populist parties. On the other hand, the protest that began in June did not put forward concrete political goals, except for the resignation of the government, but rather rejected the system. Consequently, it contributed to the delegitimization of the existing political system in Bulgaria without offering a convincing program for political change. In the long-term perspective, this delegitimization and a growing cynicism among citizens may have led to a rise in the popularity of populist parties, which attack the democratic system itself.

However, the second wave of protests also gave rise to several small-scale progressive initiatives in the post-election period. In particular, the notion of a referendum on the issue of online voting has been supported by the president, and was realized on October 25, 2015 with moderate success. There is also an ongoing campaign for judiciary reform, which was also initially voiced during the protests. This finding is an example of a social movement pursuing a legal goal in which a political solution is not possible, as described by Jacobsson and Saxonberg (2013).

Finally, the protests gave birth to one political party, the Movement for European Unity and Solidarity (DEOS). This party did not take part in the parliamentary elections of 2013 and 2014, but participated in local elections in 2015 and national elections in 2017, albeit without success. Thus, the protests did not cause significant political changes in the Bulgarian party system, but they may go on to have a longer-term impact on the Bulgarian democratic system.

Thus, the protests may have longer-term impacts on the “electoral regime and patterns of mobilization” (McAdam–Tarrow 2010).

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Table 1. Party representation in the 2009, 2013 and 2014 parliaments

Party/votes	2009	2013	2014
GERB	1,678,641 (39.72%)	1,081,605 (30.535%)	1,072,491 (32.67%)
BSP*	748,147 (17.70%)	942,541 (26.609%)	505,527 (15.40%)
Ataka	395,733 (9.36%)	258,481 (7.297%)	148,262 (4.52%)
DPS	610,521 (14.45%)	400,466 (11.306%)	487,134 (14.84%)
Order, Law and Justice	174,582 (4.13%)		
Blue Coalition**	285,662 (6.76%)		
Reformers' bloc			291806 (8.89%)
The Bulgaria without Censorship coalition***			186,938 (5.69%)
The Alternative for Bulgarian Revival coalition			136,223 (4.15%)
Patriotic Front****			239,101 (7.28%)
Total votes:	3,893,286	2,683,093	3,067,482
Turnout (%):	60.2	51.33	48.66

* Participated in the 2009, 2013 and 2014 EP elections as Coalition for Bulgaria; in 2014 as Coalition Left Bulgaria (BSP).

** The Blue Coalition included SDS and DSB; in 2013, they participated in the elections as parties and did not enter into parliament; in 2014, SDS and DSB became part of the Reformers' Bloc along with BZNS, DBG and NPSD.

*** Bulgaria without Censorship in the 2014 elections also included the Lider party.

**** The Patriotic Front includes NFSB and VMRO.

Table 2: Parties comprising the Reformers' Bloc in the 2013 elections.

Bulgarian Agricultural National Union (BZNS)	7,715	0.218%
The Bulgaria of Citizens movement	115,190	3.252%
The Democrats for Strong Bulgaria coalition and the Bulgarian Democratic Forum (DSB, BDF)	103,638	2.926%
People's Party for Freedom and Dignity (NPSD) (formerly Center for Freedom and Dignity)	57,611	1.626%
Union of Democratic forces (SDS)	48,681	1.374%
Total	332,835	9.396%