

THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

Round table discussion with Tzvetan Todorov, Bogdan Bogdanov, Stoyan Atanassov, Boyan Znepolski

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Tzvetan Todorov, the famous thinker, theorist of culture and literature, paid a brief visit to Sofia in September 2014. The reason for his rare return to Bulgaria was the launch of the film Saving Humanity During Office Hours made by his daughter Lea Todorov, which documents comical oddities in the work of some OSCE experts in Kosovo. The screening at the French Cultural Institute in Sofia was followed by a Round Table Discussion entitled "The Future of Democracy in Europe", hosted by the French Ambassador in Bulgaria Xavier Lapeyre de Cabanes. We publish here with minor editorial revisions the contributions by the main speakers Professor Bogdan Bogdanov, Associate Professor Stoyan Atanassov, PhD, Associate Professor Boyan Znepolski, PhD and Tzvetan Todorov himself.

Bogdan Bogdanov: I would like to start with a heart-felt praise for Lea, because this has been a meticulous, realistic and critical film where her eyes have captured this rich, full-blown reality in its completeness. And this reality never amounts to human relations at a certain level, but one type of relations at several different levels. And because there, in Kosovo, the lowest layer is fairly visible, she has presented it brilliantly, together with the objects, with the environment itself. In a country like Kosovo, the environment turns into an inhuman environment. And this is the most wonderful part of the film. In it we saw all the possible layers.

But this film should be seen many more times so as to pass on the message about this transition of ours, in which we have been living. As an ambassador, I would like to give you my opinion of this transition. It is not easy at all, your excellence Mr Ambassador [of France to Bulgaria], because this transition which is still in progress and which seems to have stuck, appears to have become a more or less complete course of a lifetime, so full of wonderful things. Mind you, I would not like to speak like those who constantly grumble. What I mean is that in this life that is taking place in front of our eyes, we can see how slowly and painfully, precisely because of the will of some people to take hold – if possible – of the superior power, slowly and surely all aspects of democracy have their say. One thing which has left its mark on Bulgarian democracy in the decades after 1990 is what I call with a term I have not seen elsewhere – do not think that I have read it somewhere – I call it 'domestication'. It is this type of domesticated freedom that is taking hold of Sofia – most of all, but also – of provincial towns as well. The freedom, first of all to move about regardless of who we are, even the eldest who need crutches, but they still move around. This domesticated type of freedom has given us an interminable array of objects and belongings. Of course, we are blessed that in Bulgaria – because our market generously welcomes it – we have foreign merchandise. We live in an open, domesticated world. Freedom has several layers. Today I perused *The Unfinished Garden* by Tzvetan Todorov, I flipped through the pages and found outstanding passages which convinced me that even in Tzvetan's paraphrase, we have little to contribute to what Mill has said about democracy, because

everything has already been said. I can give an excellent example from Sofia. Those who know a street nearby strewn with small shops, they might feel the same way there as they would feel in a street in Paris. But Mill does not know and could not have known in his time that the human being, not because of its innate badness and tendency to disobey public order, but because it is a human being, it is not just a social being but is in fact a social being that is a little bit reduced, with a permanent trend to be non-human, which I do not say with a reproach to the human. Human society is always with one foot outside society, and in this sense – outside democracy, which is the largest community capable of encompassing almost all people. But each human being is with one foot outside society and outside the best society of liberal democracy. In this way liberal democracy, expanded to embrace all human beings or at least reaching out for them, in fact has found the strongest resource to enhance itself. The fact that the human being refuses to be subordinated by an order leads to a multiple society. But I do not mean to speak extensively or lecture you here.

In Bulgaria, throughout these decades after 1990, we saw the spread of a large-scale domesticated freedom. Take a walk along the streets of Sofia and you will meet – like I do – at least seven women out of ten speaking over smart phones, maybe engaged in conversations that are not too high brow, but still they talk and communicate. The process of domestication in Bulgaria has taken hold widely. We have also seen the implementation of the most important type of democracy under those superficial layers – the democracy of small teams and little societies. The democracy of firms, of households where people have united to accomplish a task. Bulgarian democracy has been implemented wherever you look. And certainly, it has taken place in the highest circles as institutions.

What Lea talks about in her film and what sounds funny is how EU officers are trying to bring democratic institutions to Kosovo. This is funny because democracy and public order can be demonstrated but not imported into a country. They are not subject to import from abroad. But you see, a small society resists our efforts and would not succumb to democracy. Democracy evolves slowly. And I ask myself – is it not like that in France as well? And this is where I end.

Stoyan Atanassov: We know very well that the idea of democracy comes from antiquity, from Ancient Greece. And if I make a mistake, we have here an expert to put me right about ancient Greece. But I will not go into details, and it seems to me that I cannot go wrong saying that the pure and simple truth is that Athenian Democracy built one vision of overall governance, which, in effect, took place within strictly limited boundaries, outside which stood people labelled barbarians. Besides, democracy was reserved for a higher social stratum of citizens, outside which, for instance, in the Athenian Polis, there were slaves. Therefore, Greek Democracy, to put it succinctly and generally, offers a democratic model, which presumes two forms of excluding members of humanity – the so-called barbarians and the slaves. Democracy nowadays cannot afford such exclusions. I even believe that one of the criteria to assess a democracy is, indeed, by the way it treats, broadly speaking, foreigners.

Without further ado, let me move on to the situation in Bulgaria and share a few thoughts about the relationship between our drive for democracy and our attitude to foreigners, and more specifically – to refugees, about whom we speak all too often this year. By necessity, I will resort to a brief sketch here. The manner of speaking that dominates in Bulgarian media and among people and even among representatives of the Bulgarian government concerning the foreign immigrants and specifically – the refugees proceeds from a general feeling of fear. In his book *The Inner Enemies of Democracy* Tzvetan Todorov outlines a few faults, so to say internal flaws, tumours of democracy that multiply and grow inside the body of

democracy. One of these flaws is populism, whose specific projection is xenophobia. And xenophobia – Tzvetan Todorov rightfully observes, breeds a sense of fear. I can see such a fear of refugees among us, Bulgarians. A fear that they can take away from us the scanty means which would otherwise be given for a minimal rise of the pensions, a fear that they can occupy buildings which can be put to more useful purposes for us, a fear that they behave in ways we, Bulgarians find unacceptable.

Running the risk of appearing revengeful, I would say that this is a spontaneous, wild form of xenophobia. It is worth considering what the relationship is between xenophobia as a projection of inhospitality to the people who have entered our national territory, on the one hand, and our proverbial hospitality which we, Bulgarians, boast with better arguments than, for instance, our diligence, I would say. What bothers me is not the problem that these refugees need to enter and be accepted in a legal way – this is beyond doubt. What bothers me is the way public opinion meets these people, once they have been admitted in all those legal ways. So, when this mode of speaking began, I used to watch Bulgarian TV stations, and then – French TV stations covering the same events. Of course, in France the coverage was a great deal more extensive. When in December 2013 in Bulgaria we spoke of 2000 refugees, in France the number was 18 000, in Turkey there were hundreds of thousands. But what impressed me at the time was that several public organisations in France, civil society at large broadcast imperative demands to the French Government, to the local authorities to welcome foreigners unreservedly, to treat them more humanely and to integrate them so that they feel equal. We could see in the French a hospitality at a national scale, which, in my opinion, the Bulgarians lacked. On the other hand, I have lived in France, where my French hosts certainly extended the necessary cordiality and hospitality, but I can say that in my opinion, the average Frenchman is not as hospitable as the average Bulgarian. The average Bulgarian is prepared to welcome not only relatives, friends, acquaintances to his home, but also strangers, foreigners. And he would do that not because he has means to spare, he might even borrow to entertain his visitors and starve the next day to repay the debt.

That is to say, comparing the situation in Bulgaria and in France, a similar type of mismatch is observed in both cases between hospitality at home and on the national territory. The Frenchman is hospitable on the national territory, but less so - at his private home. The Bulgarian is hospitable at home, but he is reluctant to admit foreigners on his national territory. How can such a mismatch be explained? Maybe, on the one hand, some sort of a general breakdown and insufficient connectedness between the public and the private sphere. Undoubtedly, each democracy should respect the distinction between the private and the public space. Tzvetan Todorov has spoken about this several times. However, it seems to me that when talking of hospitality as a moral duty, separate spaces for private morals and public ones are unacceptable. One of the two is not genuine, one is fake. And it seems to me that if we, Bulgarians, via our education in general, and why not – by reading Tzvetan Todorov's texts, can take the step from hospitality as a private virtue to hospitality as a national, collective value. Because, unlike ancient Greeks, we cannot view the modern foreigner as a barbarian. No matter how little we like his beard, his screams or maybe – his religion. I myself am not religious, so faith is not a big problem for me, but others can find confessional differences disturbing.

We should never forget that the phenomenon of seeking shelter, being a refugee, is not the fate of one single people or religion in the world. In the above mentioned book by Tzvetan Todorov *Inner Enemies of Democracy* there is an example that if the sea level was raised by one centimetre, this would cause hundreds of thousands of refugees, huge waves of migrants, that is to say (with a slight paraphrase) each of us is potentially a foreigner. We do not know

what fate has in store for us. We may end up being refugees just like the ones we have here, that is to say, the refugee is not so different from ourselves. Once we wake up to this concept, we will become more hospitable and maybe we will grow more respectful not only to the refugees but to ourselves as well. This seems to me to be one of the ways to instil morals, sorry! democracy, unlike the officers in Lea's film, one of the ways to build a true democracy is to develop a common moral ground for all. One of the inbuilt virtues wherein will be hospitality.

Boyan Znepolski: A democratic activity which seems to project our craving for democracy most of all are democratic protests. Bulgaria saw numerous citizen protests for the past 20 years and they were all of a different strain. In our transition there was something painful because democracy and the democratisation process were not of our choosing only. In Bulgaria the changes came with a push from the outside and we had to adapt to a world that has taken the route to democratisation. Likewise, our desire for democracy together with the external push to democratise, as we saw in the film about Kosovo, where the external push is in focus, with the attempt to implant a specific model of democracy. Which is why this creates a sense of a lack of authenticity, the feeling that democracy does not belong to us, it is a model externally imposed on us. Nevertheless, civil protests are the way to adopt the routine of democracy. As we protest, we declare it is us, and not anyone else that wishes to live in a democracy.

Now, difficult as it might be, a brief classification of the protests. They are inseparable from my personal experience, private feelings, but also - from my academic engagements for more or less systematic analyses. The protests during the 90s - the early 90s, 89, 90, 91 and 97 after that were the times of liberal protests, protests aimed at the removal of the monopoly of one political party over the political life in the country, those protests were aimed at dismantling the totalitarian state and at fighting for the rights and freedoms of people. This was the common denominator for all the protests through the 90s. These protests culminated in 1997 when the fate of Bulgaria and its orientation was finally sealed.

However, a long period of calm followed for about 10 years, between 1997 and 2007, for Bulgaria's neoliberal dream. The ideological clash between the Socialist Party and the Union of Democratic Forces was outgrown through some sort of national consensus over liberal democracy, accession to the European Union and NATO. Things seemed to have worked out somehow, the economy was beginning to show a tangible growth through the following years. Citizen protests abated and stopped. From then on the main thrust of those 10 years was in personal realisation, enriching society, albeit with a tinge of distaste people said to themselves "enough of those ideologies", "enough of political clashes, we want a good life". It was not accidental that Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, after a two-month-long campaign took over the Bulgarian political stage with the promise to improve significantly the welfare of the Bulgarian people in 800 days. Thus, making money, fulfilling our potential, succeeding - that would be the formula for the following 10 years.

The first cracks in those lacquered, of course, dreams, hiding a range of failures and humiliations, came with isolated professional and social protests of workers in various plants, of doctors, of agricultural workers and most of all - with the teachers' protests in 2007. Those were extremely significant; they presented the biggest strike in Bulgarian history. They lasted more than a month and involved about 90% of the teachers and staff at the primary and secondary schools. In October 2007 the teachers held a huge rally, maybe between 70 and 80 thousand people took part. They raised slogans for a pay rise. The teachers were fighting for pay increases, but no one read into it the struggle for recognition. In fact, the teachers were

fighting to gain recognition for their profession, so that the Bulgarian society would appreciate their labour accordingly and thereby education could enhance its status in Bulgaria. But what they encountered in the public space was a discourse that was technocratic, purely economic, which said that all the problems in Bulgarian education proceeded from the fact that it has not been driven into the market. We needed to get education in the market sphere. I still remember distinctly the words of a financier, widely interviewed, who said: “The only objective principle of development for Bulgarian society is efficiency.” Social justice is a subjective and therefore – random principle.

Paradoxically, citizen protests under communism were unthinkable and forbidden because policies were determined at party fora, but on the other hand, in a neoliberal logic they also seemed unwanted – they hampered the functioning of the markets and this was clearly stated. Citizen protests and strikes seriously impeded the free, unobstructed operation of the markets. This was the first misunderstanding when a protest that was, in effect, moral, was met with a vocabulary that was very limited, economic and technocratic, which reduced Bulgarian teachers to consumers who demanded to devour more and who needed to deserve what they demand with improved efficiency. At the same time, education itself was presented as a service that needed to be sold so as to form a market value for the product. Therefore the only aim of education was to build values that mattered on the market so that people could be successfully sold on the labour market. There I identify one of the enemies of democracy in the sense of Tzvetan Todorov’s work, an enemy that is innate and intimate, which, on this occasion was projected through this insensitive, neoliberal vocabulary.

After that the protests took a different shape. They were no longer liberal, they raised problems of a more general nature, which could be called social as well; they concerned the type of society Bulgaria needed to become. Paradoxically, the teachers were successful to a great extent, their salaries were raised, the reform took the desired direction, although no one acknowledged the genuine meaning of their demands, that is, their demands were met tactically so as to prevent them from posing a political problem. Other protests followed – those of the Universities in 2010, which proceeded in the same vein, concerning the place of Bulgarian education in society.

Which brings us to the year 2013, when Bulgarian society finally showed such an upheaval that the fears that we can never be like France or Greece – because people rise in protests there while we are in a permanent slumber – were rendered vain. The society was in such turmoil that there was nothing other than the protests to consider. All the media and the entire public space were dominated by the protests. The protests in 2013 were numerous. Firstly, people struck in February because of the high electricity bills, a protest that was labelled ‘social’ and led to the resignation of Borissov’s government. The summer protests on which I shall dwell longer than on the occupation of several Universities about which I shall speak less extensively than I’d like to.

The summer protests came about, as we remember, because of the appointment in June 2013 of Delyan Peevski, a politician from the Movement for Rights and Freedom as Director of the State Agency for National Security. In effect, what was it that the politicians and the governing majority did? They merged in one four types of power, the economic and media power that Delyan Peevski embodied with the legislative and the executive. He was made head of the security services in Bulgaria. Of course, this triggered an immediate reaction. Protests began which lasted a few months with daily rallies. The numbers varied from several thousand – on one occasion we had maybe 30-40 thousand, to 10-15 thousand, then – a few hundred. These protests demanded the resignation of Oresharski’s government because of

this very appointment and for moral reasons. Of course, the government chose to ignore the protests, to neglect them in the hope that they will peter out sooner or later. In the end, this is what actually happened, but the outcome of the protests became obvious in the ensuing election for MEPs this year.

But what impact did these protests have? For the first time these protests separated the political from the parties. Until those protests the political was thought of as party as well, until the moment the citizens came into the streets saying: “we have political demands but we do not identify with a political party.” They said: “We would like to take part in political life as citizens; we claim a place on the stage of politics.” That was the incredibly big contribution these protests made in the direction of democratisation.

However, the pathology we observe here, the second pathology, the second flaw and enemy to democracy is precisely this arrogant and cynical merger between business and politics and specifically - the use of politics directly and openly for the benefit of private interests. The politicians, the political elites disparaged themselves as incapable of defending a common interest, of creating a collective will of sorts.

Politicians disparaged themselves by placing private interests above the public ones through their subservient media. So this is the second pathology that I establish. The third one, I could say, can be found in society itself, the protests themselves created a division in Bulgarian society along the line what the aim of the protests was. Those who took part claimed that the protest was on moral grounds, those who disapproved said that the protests posed social demands. The protests never raised social demands such as pay rises or pension increases. The problem was that they combined the moral and the social. The protests were on moral grounds because the power given by the electorate to politicians was used for achieving private goals, which is immoral. This is why the protest had the right to raise moral demands. But it was social for different reasons, less obvious perhaps, because where private interests reigned unrestrained, the weakest, the most vulnerable remained least defended. Thereby the moral and the social were inseparable in those protests.

Tzvetan Todorov: I do not speak to Bulgarian audiences often, which is why maybe you expect me to voice some fabulous revelations. I am afraid that this will not be the case here. Because I have come here to learn from my colleagues and from other people I meet what is it that they think rather than to give lessons. If I were to lecture them, I would be like those OSCE officers in Kosovo who explain to the poor Albanians and Serbs there what democracy is.

This is a role that does not become me. Besides, as some of you know, for 50 years already I have been living in a different country and all my professional efforts are connected with that country. That is why I do not feel competent to explain to you how you need to live and how you can enhance democracy. However, I do realise, as the other speakers said, that France and Bulgaria are not as distant as they appear. Of course, our style of living differs, there are different levels of fortune accumulated from previous years, but there is also a lot in common which stands before the people of the two countries. And the first observation that I would like to remind about is that in the modern world democracy does not stand threatened by its overt enemies, as was the case between the two world wars or during the Cold War, when it was the ideal of democracy that came under attack, rather than its concrete instantiations.

Today democracy is under attack maybe from some theocracies such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and the new Islamic Caliphate, but this is not seen as a serious threat by the democratic states and I think they are right not to construe those countries as a serious threat. However, this

does not mean that modern democracies do not have enemies. They do have their foes, but they come from within the democracies themselves. They present a strengthening, an extreme reinforcement of some democratic principles which in a democratic state have their counterbalances. And it is this isolation of certain principles over others – and I will give a few examples – that is the greatest threat to modern democracy.

In fact, my colleagues who spoke before me, in my opinion, illustrated brilliantly some of these internal dangers. I did not realise that the years between 1997 and 2007 presented the greatest neoliberal period in Bulgaria. See how ignorant I have been. However, everything Boyan Znepolski outlined here has been extremely interesting for me. To see that Bulgaria in a sense has passed through these periods faster than some Western countries, who took 100 years to do that, while we managed to cross the finish line in only 10 years. Let us hope it stays that way in the future as well. Also, what Stoyan Atanasov said here about populism, about this form of government, of ruling the country where it is not the people who have the power, as the very concept of democracy presumes, but the crowd, that is to say, those masses that can be manipulated in various ways and who correspond to the lowest common denominator “We are better than them and from now on we know what to defend and who to fight for.”

I would like to say a few words about what I call – for lack of a better term – messianism. Messianism is a type of religious divergence which dates back to the Middle Ages, the 16th century, when it was expected that Paradise would come to Earth in the near future. And because the aim was so elevated, all the means we could employ to pursue it were justified. In fact, we know very well one such form of messianism these days – communism. In the modern era, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, another form of messianism has been born, even more paradoxical in nature, which purports to import human rights and democracy through military means, by occupying countries whose leaders we believe behave outrageously. We forget, as one of us mentioned earlier, that democracy cannot be instilled by force, it has to come from the society itself, otherwise the means prove more powerful than the aim. Instead of achieving this higher aim, we destroy the country in a way that it cannot be rebuilt later. As we can see in Iraq or Libya – countries which had the good fortune of receiving our presents in the shape of bombardments or other occupations.

However, a milder form of this messianism exists and it is, of course, the one we saw in the film we watched a while ago. Let me specify for a start that I have not helped Lea in making this film, not the least bit and that I am not in a position to give whatever piece of advice to her. She did not find her inspiration in me, but in her own experience. However, I do find that her film illustrates brilliantly this milder form of messianism which is implemented not by military but by economic means. Because OSCE’s budget, that of the international missions to Kosovo is extremely big, incomparably bigger than the entire budget of the country. This is why the local people have no doubt what attitude to take to these lessons. They all attend the meetings they are invited to.

I am so happy about this meeting, to have heard your talks and to have learned so many useful things.

Is there a magic way to take the upper hand over these internal enemies? I should not think so; I do not believe that we can win through some new revolution, neither through the highest achievements of technology which change our lives all too often.

I truly believe more in the traditional values, such as education, upbringing because if these enemies had a birth one day, they can also have their death one day! We should not despair.

The transcript of this discussion was made by Elena Borissova. It is produced with the assistance of Vesselina Vassileva and Marin Bodakov.