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The Elite Coup: the Transition to Democracy in Bulgaria

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“MOBILIZING FOR DEMOCRACY:
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY” PROJECT
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Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.

The Elite Coup: the Transition to Democracy in Bulgaria

Federico M. Rossi

Cosmos Working Paper 2012/10

Abstract: The transition to democracy in Bulgaria is commonly defined as a coup d'état carried out by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) elites against the long-standing dictator Todor Zhivkov. The Bulgarian transition to democracy was a direct by-product of the economic and political collapse of the USSR. No contentious events had any important impact on the democratization process. In brief, Bulgaria was the USSR's closest ally, acting as a satellite state. The collapse of the USSR (signaled by the fall of the Berlin Wall) implied the end of Bulgarian communism. No other way out was possible at that point in time. The transition was peaceful and elite-led due to the "positive" examples of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as the wish to avoid entering into a cycle of violence similar to that suffered in Romania.

Keywords: democratization, post-communism, ethnic conflicts, environmental movements, coup d'état, Bulgaria

Introduction

The transition to democracy in Bulgaria is commonly defined as a coup carried by Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) elites against the long-standing dictator Todor Zhivkov (Linz and Stepan, 1997: 338-339). The role of mobilizations prior to the coup was irrelevant and almost non-existent, with the exception of conflicts with the Turkish ethnic minority (Spirova, 2010: 403). As Dimitrov (2001: 35) states: "Bulgaria's transition to democracy began not as a result of internal evolution but rather as a part of an attempt by some Zhivkov's colleagues to save their power at a time when the communist bloc was collapsing around them". In other words, the key feature in the transition was the collapse of the USSR and how this affected Bulgaria.

Periodization

Concerning the periodization of the transition to democracy, the common agreement is that in Bulgaria "... the transition goes from the fall of Zhivkov to the adoption of a new constitution a year-a-half later. During this period, the influence of opposition leader Zheliu Zhelev was at its height and was reflected

in the roundtable negotiations between the ruling Communists, who soon changed their name to Socialists, and the opposition. The critical June 1990 elections and the work of the Grand National Assembly laid the groundwork for the postcommunist era in politics” (Bell, 1997: 353). The centrality of the round table negotiations was acknowledged by several authors (Todorova, 1992; Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996; Crampton, 1997; Dimitrov, 2001; Giatzidis, 2002), and led some scholars to say that the dynamics of the Bulgarian transition to democracy were defined by a “... relatively prolonged round-table negotiation resulting in an agreement to proceed with constitutional amendments designed to allow democratic and fair elections to select a Constituent Assembly...” (Kolarova, 1999: 150).

First phase: from the end of the Communist bloc to the coup

The transition in Bulgaria saw just two contentious events. The first took place in March 1988, and was organized by members of the dissident elites in cooperation with the population of a city on the border with Romania. The second was from May-September 1989, organized by the Turkish and Muslim minority living on the border with Turkey. While the first event had no impact on the transition, the second was important for the anti-Zhivkov BCP elites.

In Russe, a city close to the border with Romania, around 5000 people suffering the effects of pollution organized a demonstration against industrialization without environmental conscience. According to Bell, “In the city of Russe, which was being slowly poisoned by chlorine gas emissions from a Romanian chemical combine across the Danube River, celebrities from politics, the arts and sport formed an ecological movement, *Ekoglasnot*, that openly challenged the regime’s indifference to the destruction of the Bulgarian environment” (1997: 358). The mobilization had no impact on environmental policies, but represented the first instance of defiance to the absolute power of the BCP.

True defiance came one year later from the Turkish minority. In 1984 and 1985, Zhivkov had implemented a process of compulsory *bulgarianization* of the Turkish minority, forcing 10% of the Bulgarian population to change their names to Slavic ones, and forbidding the use of written and spoken Turkish and Muslim religious practices. Even though this policy, called the Revival Campaign, was condemned around the globe, in 1989 Zhivkov resuscitated the policy of forced assimilation. While there was no confrontation during the first forced assimilation process, this second time Zhivkov was faced with Turkish resistance: in May 1989 a protest was organized in the small town of Kaolinovo in the northeast of Bulgaria (Todorova, 1992: 155; Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996: 180-181). Immediately after, 300 suspected activists were expelled from Bulgaria (Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996: 181). Among the few existing

narrations of these events, Bell's (1997: 359) is particularly clear:

During the spring, a new challenge to Zhivkov's regime emerged in the regions of heavy Turkish population. Since the brutal Revival Campaign of 1984-85, ethnic Turks had prepared an underground organization [called the Turkish National Liberation Movement in Bulgaria] that now undertook a series of hunger strikes and demonstrations, soon escalating to violent clashes with the authorities and several deaths. By the end of May there were demonstrations with thousands of participants, forcing Zhivkov to appear on national television to quell rumors of massive unrest. Denying that Bulgaria had a substantial Turkish minority, he repeated the fiction that most of the ethnic Turks were really Bulgarians who had been forcibly converted to Islam and a Turkish identity during the Ottoman period. He attributed disturbances among Bulgaria's Muslims to confusion over the terms of a new passport law and to an anti-Bulgarian campaign carried on by Turkey and he challenged the Turkish government to open its borders to Bulgarian Muslims, so that it would be clear how few were discontented with life in Bulgaria. When Turkey responded to Zhivkov's challenge by declaring that it would accept refugees from Bulgaria, the authorities launched a broad reign of terror against the ethnic Turks, forcing thousands to cross the border, where they found refuge in hastily organized camps. Before the Turkish government again closed the border, more than 300,000 ethnic Turks had abandoned or were driven from Bulgaria [in June-September 1989], an exodus that focused world-wide attention on Bulgaria's human rights records and disrupted an already shaky economy.

The forced assimilation campaign of 1984-1985 and its 1989 reprise are considered as key events that showed the BCP elites that Zhivkov lacked the capacity or will to promote a liberalization process (Crampton, 1997: 214-215; Giatzidis, 2002: 47-48)¹. Within this setting, the coup was organized by two anti-Stalinist BCP leaders, Petûr Mladenov (at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1971) and Dobri Dzhurov (at the Ministry of Defence). The coup was carried out on November 10th 1989, the day after East Germany had opened the Berlin Wall, in a BCP politburo meeting that accepted Zhivkov's resignation. This forced resignation was the effect of an intra-elite coup that Mladenov had secretly coordinated with the support of Gorbachev.² Then, all Zhivkov's allies were expelled from the party at a fresh BCP meeting on November 13th, and replaced with anti-Zhivkov leaders. The BCP's control was completely consolidated on December 8th when Zhivkov and the entire BCP politburo were expelled from the party. From that point on the transition was fully led by post- and anti-communist elites through meetings and roundtables. Contentious politics was avoided by both sides as it was feared this could escalate into a violent upsurge similar to that taking place in Romania (Dimitrov, 2001: 36-37).

¹ Zhivkov was increasingly isolated. He was not only condemned by the Turkish government, but Bush (US) had also offered support to Turkey and placed sanctions on Bulgaria, while Gorbachev (USSR) said that they would not get involved while secretly condemning the action (Crampton, 1997: 215).

² Mladenov visited Gorbachev in secret in Moscow on December 4-5th 1988 (Bell, 1997: 360, n. 20).

The division of the BCP from the state was decided in a second meeting of the BCP on December 11-13th 1989, when Mladenov resigned from the party leadership while remaining head of state. Andrei Lukanov, another anti-Stalinist, became chairman of the renamed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSF) in his stead.

On December 14th the anti-communist groups coordinated their efforts in the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition for the first time and organized a demonstration in front of the parliament to ask for the dissolution of the secret police and the end of the BCP (Dimitrov, 2001: 37).

On December 29th Mladenov declared that the forced assimilation program had ended and condemned it. Turkish people were free to return to Bulgaria, reassume their names, language and religious activities. In addition, and as a result of the UDF protest, Mladenov dissolved the secret police, the “Committee for State Security”.

Trade union independence from the BCP was also a swift process. On February 16th 1990, the Central Council of Trade Unions (CCTU) declared its independence from the party and elected a new leadership immediately after the BCP meeting. In parallel, a new independent union was created: *Podkrepa* emerged as the post-communist trade union (Crampton, 1997: 216-217; Tafel and Boniface, 2003; Robertson, 2004).

Finally, the main organization of the student movement was dissolved at the same time that the BCP and CCTU underwent changes. The Communist Youth League dissolved itself in February, and immediately after created a new student association that declared itself independent from the BCP and the state (Bell, 1997; Crampton, 1997: 217).

Second phase: from the coup to the new constitution

Beginning on January 3rd 1990, the anti-communist coalition UDF, the post-communist BSF and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) conservative pre-communist party initiated a series of roundtables that ended with the elaboration of new political institutions for Bulgaria. A new Constitution was agreed upon and the first free and open elections called. The whole second phase of the transition was dominated by these inter-elite negotiations, with no important contentious events either in favour or against them. The results of these negotiations were expressed in three agreements signed on March 12th 1990. The agreement stated: 1. the call for elections for a new national assembly that would (within 18 months) elaborate a new constitution while functioning as the national parliament; 2. that the national elections would be held on two days, June 10th and 17th, using two different electoral rules, and; 3. that Mladenov would hold the presidency of the country during the whole period until the elaboration of the new constitution. Finally,

and as a result of the violent transition in Romania, all the parties and organizations agreed that no extra-institutional means would be used in the transitional period.³ Following this agreement, intra-parliamentarian disputes were the most important arenas of contention until the end of the transition on May 15th 1990, when the new constitution was elaborated and the roundtable talks ended (Bell, 1997; Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996: 205-208; Kolarova, 1999).

The first free and open elections were evaluated by anti-communists and international observers as transparent and fair. The BSF won with 47.15% of the votes, followed by the UDF with 36.2% and the BANU with 8.03% (Bell, 1997: 369, table 9.2). This gave the post-communist elites control of the government, but not a clear majority to promote change without the agreement of anti-communist forces. In addition, the decision to shape Bulgaria as a parliamentary system with a weak president made the parliament the arena for the resolution of post- and anti-communist elite conflicts. This fact produced very unstable governments, but quickly institutionalized the democratization process. Finally, exchanges of power between the BSP and the UDF were never total, since the electoral victories of one or the other were never absolute, leading –as is common in parliamentary systems- to the creation of coalition governments (Crampton, 1997; Dimitrov, 2001; Giatzidis, 2002). In other words, the transition is generally considered to be successful because “The established system of government has proved to be stable and capable of channelling political and social conflicts smoothly” (Kolarova, 1999: 151).

Structural conditions

Communist Bulgaria is commonly regarded as a one-party authoritarian regime with a single undisputed leader: Todor Zhivkov (Spirova, 2010). Specifically, according to Linz and Stepan (1996: 42-43), Bulgaria should be considered as a case of early post-totalitarianism. This means that Bulgaria was an almost totalitarian regime, except for the fact that Zhivkov shared some power with the BCP politburo. In addition, the regime had a very close relationship with the USSR, with Sofia linked to Moscow as if Bulgaria were another Soviet Republic. This relationship led to the USSR’s heavy investment in the quick industrialization of Bulgaria, which produced several important changes in society.

First, there was a demographic transformation: Bulgaria entered its communist era as a mainly rural and non-industrialized society, and ended this stage in its history as a mainly urban and highly industrialized country:

³ This agreement was also signed by both trade unions and all social movement organizations, which accepted to refrain from calling strikes or mobilizations.

The combined effects of the extremely rapid industrialization and the miserable overpopulation in the countryside in the interwar period, alongside the administrative pushing through of the collectivization program, resulted in a drastic change in the rural/urban ratio of the country: from 24.7 percent in 1946 the urban population almost doubled by 1965 (46.5 percent), to reach 66.4 percent in 1987. This depletion of the number of agricultural workers resulted in an automatic swelling of the ranks of industrial, construction, and transportation workers (Todorova, 1992: 152).

Second, there was a process of cultural assimilation with Russia. Bulgaria's Russophile policy was such that "Since the early 1950s Bulgaria was beyond any doubt the closest Soviet satellite in Eastern Europe, and the Communist regime was perhaps the most stable in the region. The 'total assimilation with USSR' doctrine promoted by the ruling party elite reached an apogee in the discussions held in 1961-1962 at the politburo level, considering possible political unification and Bulgaria's application to join the USSR" (Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996: 179). As a result of this, Bulgaria's international relationships were not those of a sovereign state, but rather followed the decisions and changes of USSR foreign policy as decided in Moscow. This fact was so relevant that the coup against Zhivkov is commonly regarded as planned with the authorization of Gorbachev (Bell, 1997; Crampton, 1997; Dimitrov, 2001; Giatzidis, 2002).

It was the collapse of these two crucial elements that led to the end of communism in Bulgaria. First, the country's model of economic development began to meet with difficulties due to technological changes, political transformations and bad internal decisions. A specific combination of factors led to the collapse of the Bulgarian economy: 1. the 1985-1986 fall in oil prices led to the loss of the country's only dollar market in the Middle East, and 2. the disintegration of the Eastern European and Soviet markets, the only export destinations for Bulgarian goods, left the country with no consumers for its industrialized products (Todorova, 1992: 149). In other words, the Bulgarian economy suffered in the late 1980s from a profound structural crisis. Second, there was the change in the USSR's political approach to Bulgaria.

Cleavages

Class and urban/rural cleavages are not regarded as important organizing factors of politics in communist Bulgaria. According to Karasimeonov (1999b), there were two main cleavages in Bulgaria during the 1980s: 1. ethnic: between the majority of the Bulgarian population and the Turkish minority based on a nationalist discourse of forced assimilation and the resistance to this process by the Turkish minority; 2. political: between modernizers, pro-western groups that wanted to open the country to international reform and the traditionalists, tightly linked to the USSR, who were in favour of increasing integration with the

Soviet Union (Karasimeonov, 1999b: 44).

According to Kolarova, the main cleavage of post-communist Bulgaria was the “transitional” one, meaning that “... the main divide between their [BSP and UDF] party platforms and their voters’ attitudes is of an ‘ideological’ nature (pro-communist/anti-communist)”, and she adds “The classic socioeconomic cleavages do not yet divide parties and voters” (Kolarova, 1999: 151).

With a more complex view than Kolarova, Whitefield (2002) suggests that there are six main cleavages in post-communist Bulgaria, three social and three ideological. The first three are: 1. ethnic (a continuation of the ethnic cleavage during communism between the majority of the population and the Turkish minority), 2. age/class (based on the distinction between those workers who lived most of their lives in the previous regime and those younger ones who entered the workforce during the capitalist era), and 3. religious (between a conservative resurgence of Bulgarian Orthodoxy and secular visions of religiosity). Concerning the ideological cleavage, he identifies the following: 1. economic (between liberal pro-western sectors and anti-western state-controlled economic visions); 2. ethnic (between those sectors in favour of the promotion of a multicultural Bulgaria and those in favour of a monist Bulgaria); and 3. nationalist (based on the acceptance versus the rejection of the inclusion of Roma as nationals of Bulgaria).

International context

The international context was very important for the transition in Bulgaria. As Kolarova and Dimitrov (1996: 185) so nicely put it:

The changes in each of the Eastern European countries influenced the events in Bulgaria in different ways. The Polish case was used as a general model by both the BCP and UDF. The events in the German Democratic Republic were the last argument in favour of active and quick reform activity within the BCP and to a significant extent encouraged the beginning of mass rallies. The events in Czechoslovakia were a ‘positive example’ that was much more an ideal than a real goal. The Romanian ‘revolution’, which was broadcast live by the Bulgarian national television, immensely influenced attitudes toward mass protest, creating fears of violence and terror. The Romanian case was often used as an argument in favour of the slow pace of transformations.

Notwithstanding this, dissidents were isolated from the main transnational coalitions against authoritarianism in the region during the resistance period. Prior to 1989 there was no Bulgarian participation in the transnational human rights coalitions. In addition, before 1989, there were no Bulgarian signatories to the Helsinki Memorandum of 1986 (Chilton, 1994).

Protests

In the period before the transition there is common agreement on the lack of mobilization or the organization of dissidents against the regime (Crampton, 1997: 198-205; Kitschelt et al., 1995: 145; Giatzidis, 2002: 45). This situation was even recognized by the main leader of the pro-democratic forces:

The context in Bulgaria was very different from that of Central Europe, since there had been no organised opposition to the regime and somewhat less social pressure for change, especially in the countryside. Unlike the ruling parties of other Eastern Bloc countries, Bulgaria's Communist regime, throughout its long reign, was never challenged by dissident forces or political groups. As Zhelev admitted, 'only in Bulgaria nothing ever happened: not a single uprising, not a single revolt or rebellion, not a single political strike or a student demonstration... Bulgaria can boast absolutely no practical attempt to topple the totalitarian system' (Giatzidis, 2002: 45).

According to Giatzidis (2002: 44-47) there were no resistance movements in Bulgaria as a result of four main reasons: 1. the co-optation of intellectuals; 2. low ambitions in the country (as the Bulgarians compared themselves with Greece and Turkey on welfare indicators, and not with Western European countries); 3. the close cultural relationship between Bulgaria and Russia which entailed a positive opinion on the USSR and its role in Bulgarian politics and economics; and 4. the successful and rapid industrialization and the accompanying improvement in welfare Zhivkov accomplished with the USSR's help since the 1970s.

According to Kitschelt et al., the reasons for the lack of mobilizations before and during the transition to democracy are partially similar to those identified by Giatzidis: "Outright repression, a widely accepted parochial political culture, limited national sovereignty, and the clientelistic co-optation of most intellectuals into the system prevented the rise of challenging groups similar to those that could be observed in the 'national Communisms' of Poland and Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s" (Kitschelt et al., 1995: 45). Even though Kitschelt et al. include repression as one of the important reasons, with the exception of a period of large scale killings in the 1940s-1950s, there is no information on physical repression since the de-Stalinization of Bulgaria in 1965 (Crampton, 1997: 184-195).

There were few protest events during the transition with the most important being the *Ekoglasnot* mobilization in Russe, and the Turkish resistance to the second round of forced assimilation in 1989. While the *Ekoglasnot* event had no impact on the transition process, the Turkish events were important in showing that Zhivkov was isolated and incapable of resolving the Bulgarian transition. Finally, there were no mobilizations against the neo-communists with the exception of the UDF protest calling for the dissolution of

the secret police.

One of the reasons for the quasi non-existence of mobilizations is the effect produced on the Bulgarian elites and society by the massive violence seen in Romania's democratization. Even though widespread violence started on December 15th 1989 in Romania, its emergence and peak were contemporary to the main events in Bulgaria, including the meetings of the BCP politburo and the UDF's decision not to organize more protests after those of December 14th 1989, held just one day before violence began in Transylvania. The Bulgarian coup was thus planned and coordinated with the USSR's support, and regime change did not lead to violence because violence emerged in Romania just after the coup, scaring neo- and anti-communist elites alike. The fear of violence in Bulgaria was clearly expressed in the several peace agreements signed by the BSF, UDF, and all the main trade unions and social movements between December 1989 and the summer of 1991 (Crampton, 1997: 220-223). These helped to quickly institutionalize the process in roundtables, leading to a fully elite-led transition with non-contentious dynamics.

Actors in the transition I: elites

The anti-communist elites

The anti-communist elites were irrelevant during the coup, emerging immediately after November 1989. More than fifty parties were founded, but there was only one main anti-communist coalition, founded on December 7th 1989 by ten parties and organizations. This was the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), and was composed of the Federation of Clubs for the Support of Glasnost and Democracy, *Podkrepa* Independent Labour Confederation, the social-democratic party Bulgarian Agrarian National Union – Nikola Petkov, the Committee for Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience and Spiritual Values, *Ekoglasnot*, the Independent Association for the Defence of Human Rights in Bulgaria, the Green Party, the Radical Democratic Party and the Democratic Party. The leader of the UDF was Zheliu Zhelev, the most prominent dissident in Bulgaria. Zhelev was a philosopher who had published a very popular book called "Fascism" in 1981 in which he put forward a clear critique of the BCP regime. Later, in 1989, he was the founder of *Ekoglasnot*, organizing the first and only protest against Zhivkov before the November coup (Bell, 1997: 362-363).

The military and the secret police

The military and the secret police played no role either in favour or against the democratization process. Moreover, after the UDF mobilization calling for the dissolution of the secret police, Mladenov's first decision in power was to dissolve the Committee for State Security.

The church

The Orthodox Bulgarian Church was completely passive due to its links with the communist regime and internal conflicts. According to Giatzidis (2002: 22), "With the end of the 1950s even the Bulgarian Church lost its autonomy and thus was unable to play a role similar to that of the Catholic Church in Poland". During the transition the Church entered into a period of internal crisis involving those sectors that had been in power over the last 20 years and the formerly excluded prelates. This conflict was not related to struggles for the democratization of the Church, but rather to internal struggles for power. The consequence was that the Orthodox Bulgarian Church was in such crisis that it played no role in the transition, even in the roundtables (Raikin, 1996: 210-224; Crampton, 1997; Giatzidis, 2002).

The intellectuals

"Before the late 1980s there were dissidents in Bulgaria, but no organized dissident movement. In part this was due to Zhivkov's policy of heaping rewards and honors on compliant intellectuals and to the small size of the country and its intellectual communities" (Bell, 1997, 357). Among the causes for the lack of dissident intellectual organizations is Bulgaria's cultural isolation from Western Europe and the very small emigrant community (Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996: 180). However, there were the well-known cases of BBC and Radio Free Europe journalists (Georgi Markov and Vladimir Kostov) who had to escape from Bulgaria in order to avoid being killed. While Kostov did survive assassination attempts, Markov was assassinated in London by the BCP (Bell, 1997).⁴

Actors in the transition II: civil society

The environmental movement

The first protest against the regime was organized in March 1988 on the border with Romania by the environmental movement. The organization behind this

⁴ Petrova (2004: 164-167) offers a longer list of individual dissidents, but in no other case was a person killed.

protest was founded by the main dissident and UDF leader, Zhelev. *Ekoglasnot* was a small intellectual organization that coordinated a protest against a Romanian factory contaminating Bulgarian rivers with the local population of Russe, indirectly complaining in this way against the negative consequences of the quick industrialization of Bulgaria. According to Petrova, *Ekoglasnot*'s main goal did not concern environmental issues, but to question the regime in one way or another:

Ecoglasnot raised various concrete environmental issues and demanded a media law allowing independent associations to have their own free press. The link between environmentalism and democratic change was seen as follows: 'Ecology is not a single, isolated issue. Followed through to its logical consequences, the demand for an ecological reconstruction is a call for radical social change. Proceeding from the assumption that the right to good health and environmental safety is a fundamental human right, the participants regard their movement as a part of the wider democratic movement for peace, human rights, freedom, and justice'. The strategy included a variety of actions -from cooperation with research institutes to marches to the parliament and street demonstrations (Petrova, 2004: 174).

As part of its multiple strategies, *Ekoglasnot* was the first civil society organization to request state recognition, a goal achieved after the fall of Zhivkov:

Ecoglasnot and the Committee for Religious Freedom decided to apply for registration as a strategy of expanding the sphere of the permissible but were recognized only after the fall of Zhivkov. While *Ecoglasnot* had no more than several dozen active members in summer 1989, it was firmly oriented at mass mobilization. In October, the group began collecting signatures against environmental projects of the government. What mattered to the members was not so much the concrete projects themselves, but creating the very possibility for thousands of people to sign something 'against' the system (Petrova, 2004: 176).

Even though the environmental movement was responsible for the first protest against the regime, once *Ekoglasnot* achieved institutional recognition it became member of the roundtables, accepting the agreement to not organize street protests. Later on, once the roundtables had ended, it became an irrelevant actor in its attempts at organizational survival, suffering from several divisions which led to the creation of a couple of smaller social movement organizations (*Ekoglasnot* '89, the Political Club "*Ekoglasnot*", etc.) and two very small political parties (the Green Party and the Conservative and Ecological Party) (Meininger and Radoeva, 1996: 48-49; Koulov, 1998: 145-149; Giatzidis, 2002: 119).

The labour movement

The labour movement was irrelevant during the resistance to the regime and the transition. However, its liberalization took place as quickly as the collapse of the regime, with the CCTU declaring its independence from the BCP as soon as February 16th 1990. In addition, soon after Zhivkov was deposed, a new independent union was created. In fact, “Poland’s Solidarity inspired the physician Konstantin Trenchev to create *Podkrepa* (Support), an independent trade union, that began to challenge the monopoly of the party-controlled unions” (Bell, 1997: 358).

On December 24th 1989 *Podkrepa* called the first strike of the post-communist era, but this was merely a symbolic declaration since the union had no capacity to strike and no actual strike was held that day. Thus, “the threat by *Podkrepa* leaders sounded plausible only in the context of the political situation in Romania” (Kolarova and Dimitrov, 1996: 185).

Both the CCTU and *Podkrepa* supported political democratization and economic liberalization policies during the transition in return for their participation in the roundtables and the new institutions that were being created (Tafel and Boniface, 2003: 324).

Conclusion

The Bulgarian transition to democracy is the direct by-product of the economic and political collapse of the USSR. No contentious events had any important impact on the democratization process. To sum up, Bulgaria was the USSR’s closest ally, acting as a satellite state. The collapse of the USSR (signaled by the fall of the Berlin Wall) implied the end of Bulgarian communism. No other way out was possible at that point in time. The transition was peaceful and elite-led due to the “positive” examples of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as the wish to avoid entering into a cycle of violence similar to that suffered in Romania.

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