

Transition, Violence and the Role of NGOs: the Case of Bulgaria

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1. Violence in the post-modern world

It is a mistake to think of violence as an aberration – a virus in the software that can be eradicated by narrow specialists. It verges on conceptual and political impotence to grasp violence as the product of a specific recent outside influence – television, pornography, Terminator-3, Tom and Jerry, George W. Bush – that can be legislated away or voted out.

In post-modern times violence – particularly violence between large groups – is to do mostly with identity, status and recognition. In times when such matters are seen as settled and self-evident, they do not produce violence. In times when moorings are adrift – they do.

There are things that can be done to counter, minimize or de-fuse violence. Some measure of success in this seems to be possible under two basic scenarios. *One*: when deciding to do something about violence, it may be useful to keep oneself as far away as possible from conceptual thinking (in order not to paint oneself into a corner by not seeing the full possibilities because of pre-existing conceptual limitations); and just try out all sorts of things that look as if they may work. And / or, *two*: have the right – the useful – conceptual basis, on which to construct a system of activities.

There are few things more de-mobilising than seeing the results of action based on erroneous concepts. For example, if one were to follow a current school of thought and manage to, quickly and dramatically, improve living standards in the greater Middle East, this would not eradicate terrorist violence, because it would be based on an erroneous concept. The roots of today’s terrorism are not to be found in poverty. They are in an altogether different place – in that boiling cauldron where resentful identities are made and let loose upon the world.

A clever but hugely complicated thing that can also be done about violence is this: to find ways – or, rather, engineer situations – in which the different collective identities can attain the completeness and the recognition they desire by means other than violence.

Some significant aspects of this can be reconstructed, with the help of hindsight, out of the past 20 or so years of developments in Bulgaria, the multi-ethnic Balkan country, which avoided not only the ethnic wars of the 1990s, but also – the spectacle of million-strong crowds

chanting “Macedonia is ours!”, as was happening over 1992-4 in neighbouring Greece, member of NATO and the EU.

The crux of the matter is this. Power-related violence, i.e. violence that has to do with getting yours, rather than somebody else’s orders carried out, was at a certain historic juncture contained by displacing the whole problematic of power to the arena of representative legitimacy. You get yours, rather than somebody else’s orders carried out if you get elected into office – i.e. if your constituency, whatever the level of power in question, declares explicitly and publicly that it wants your orders to be carried out so as to achieve a promise that you have made regarding the common good. The displacement of power-related violence goes by the names of democracy and representative government and it does something very simple: it ensures real gains in the power game without the need to use the instrument of violence.

Of course, power-related violence is present in any violent situation, but this is not the only inter-group violence that is these days available. And for this reason, the displacement to democracy and representative government no longer delivers fully the desired result. A further effort of displacement is needed in order to de-fuse and contain identity- and recognition-centered violence. This is a mammoth task, comparable to the invention of representative government. Such displacement needs to be able to guarantee real gains in the game of identity, status and recognition without recourse to violence.

As it turned out, this further mechanism of displacement and recognition was discovered in the version of “civil society”, which evolved, partly on a case-by-case basis, partly as conceptual reflection and partly as self-reflection, in Central-Eastern Europe since the beginning of the 1980s. Today’s media, NGOs and the characteristic “feel” of politics have all come out of “civil society” experiments.

2. Communists, violence and the “non-formals”

In pre-1989 communist Bulgaria, power-related violence was always on the menu, but by the early 1980s the Communists had realized that it was no longer producing a good enough result. Poland’s Solidarity movement had captured too many minds domestically, while the Soviet Union’s unprecedented restraint in terms of not invading Poland seemed to indicate that communism was perhaps on the wane and change was coming. The Russians themselves were seen not to be doing too well in Afghanistan, while at home prices had been spiraling upwards and shortages becoming endemic since 1979. The Communists feared – rightly – that this combination of developments was weakening their grip on power; and decided that they needed a new legitimacy to underpin their regime. Unable to raise living standards or “overtake the West” (which had

been their claim to legitimacy in the 1970s), they hit upon the idea of re-packaging themselves into a new, nationalist identity.

As befits Communists, they started with control over the past. By the early 1980s Bulgaria found itself locked in an endemic quarrel with neighbouring Yugoslavia, pushing the claim that Macedonia, rather than being a genuinely separate nation as part of the Yugo-federation, was a limb torn from the Bulgarian national body as the result of the world wars; the Yugoslavs claimed that the Macedonians were a completely separate (from Bulgarians) national entity.

But the quarrel over Macedonia did not increase domestic support for the Bulgarian regime and by 1983-4 the Communists decided to re-write history in a much more dramatic fashion: to attain “national unification” here and now. Until the Second World War, “unification” had meant annexing Macedonia and parts of northern Greece and Turkey. This being seen as impossible in the 1980s, the regime re-defined “unification” as the attainment of “national unity” through “national purity” and ethnic homogeneity. All inhabitants of Bulgaria would be members of one and the same nation, culture, tradition and history.

In June 1984, the Politbureau voted a policy named “For the further unification and inclusion of Bulgarian Turks into the cause of socialism and the policies of the Bulgarian Communist Party.” What this boiled down to was a grandiose plan to re-name all Islamic minorities – at the time some 15 per cent of Bulgarians – with Slav-sounding names, to ban the wearing of distinctive Turkish clothing, to forbid the use of the Turkish language and close down the mosques.

The new identity the Communists were after was this. From an arm of the international socialist revolution, as was, the Communist Party was to transform itself into that leadership which had attained national unity where all previous attempts since the 19th century had failed. This is how the exercise (officially referred to as “The Revival Process”) was sold to the ethnic Bulgarian majority. And there matters may have rested for a while, had not the plan run into problems on the ground.

Misled, as it was later to turn out, by their own agents among the Turkish minority (up to 12 per cent of the population), the Communists were genuinely taken aback when Bulgaria’s Turks refused to go along with the plan. Being atop a system that had no representation or public opinion and therefore – no capacity for negotiation and compromise, the Communists found themselves reverting to the violent methods of the 1950s.

Over 1984-6 the regime employed its repressive apparatus – including regular army units – to enforce the changes. This brought to a halt the slow drift of the Turkish elite into “Bulgarisation”, a result of 1960s policies of “positive discrimination”, aimed at integrating the minorities. Turkish intellectuals and even officials re-defined themselves

as representatives of a distinctive Turkish community, rather than as the bridge over which all Turks were to cross to become integrated. As usually happens in such situations, the recovery of its own intellectuals in a confrontational context led the Turkish community to strongly re-define itself as Muslim and distinct. Bulgarians came to be seen as occupiers and oppressors and protest demonstrations took place in some of the bigger villages in the southern and northern Turk enclaves.

These were the first open protests since 1947 and heralded the birth of modern Bulgarian public opinion. When the regime started shooting back and re-opened, specifically for Turks, the dreaded Belene concentration camp (closed down during the “thaw” of the 1960s), news of the oppression leaked out via the grapevine, which was already supplanting the controlled media as prime information source.

Instead of, as planned, rejoicing in its new unity and grateful to the Communist Party (BCP) for this, the nation was placed in a situation that was the last thing the regime wanted: to make up its mind. To choose whether, as the propaganda would have it, the Turks were discovering their Bulgarian identity and were therefore voluntarily and in droves changing their names and abandoning the mosques – or whether to believe the grapevine and its news of resistance, shootings and deportations? The grapevine carried the day, and then came a second, more fundamental choice: whether to condone the violence done to the Turkish minority in the name of national unity, or to condemn it – and the regime with it?

The regime’s violence did achieve its immediate ends – the orders of the Party were obeyed. The Turks did acquire Slav-sounding names, stopped speaking Turkish in public and abandoned the mosques. And yet, unlike previous experiences of repression, this was not to be the end – but the beginning of the matter. The groundswell of solidarity with the Turks, seen as victims of oppression, produced the first elements of significant opposition to the regime. Emblematic intellectuals and, more importantly for the long term, young journalists and university lecturers refused to join into the obligatory chorus of approval for the “national revival”. Opponents of the regime, in the knowledge that they were no longer isolated individuals completely out of touch with the popular mood (as had been the case with previous protests), began to find each other and plan ahead.

Out of these discussions an important conclusion emerged, by the second half of the 1980s. The regime’s renewed violence, the thinking went, would search out fresh targets for a very simple reason: the attempt to find an identity and legitimacy that would guarantee obedience beyond violence had backfired and had produced less, rather than more, obedience and legitimacy. What, the question was, does one do when the violence finds its next target?

By 1987-8, the hey-day of Gorbachov's *perestroika* in Russia, a fundamental choice was made. Violence would not be met with violence. There would be no clandestine cells, revolutionary conspiracies or acts of sabotage. Resistance to violence would be peaceful. To have a meaning, however, it would also be public. It would claim to be based on the Helsinki Final Act and on the country's own Constitution, which did include the right to conscience and free speech but had been seen, until then, as simply a façade to bamboozle the "West". Such thinking was, by the 1990s, to provide the basis for the national consensus around "peaceful transition".

The then opposition, writes Deyan Kuranov, a leading activist of the time, did not "attack the authorities directly with the intention of overthrow and replacement with another power, such as itself."¹

This choice of practical behaviour was theoretically underpinned by the concept of "civil society". Talk of civil society had come back into fashion, following a century of neglect, with the English-language publication, in the second half of the 1970s, of the "Prison Notebooks" of Antonio Gramsci, the founder and initial leader of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci had argued, in the early 1920s, that state power in the developed countries was no longer held only by deceit, subterfuge and violence. Power was based primarily on agreement – on the "hegemony" of certain sets of ideas and values in "civil society" (i.e. in that arena of life, where individuals found themselves neither in their private sphere, nor – in the grip of state power, and where they worked out their beliefs and values structures). Therefore, Gramsci continued, if you want to topple the power in place, violent revolution is not necessarily the best thing to do – because violence alone was not what propped up that power. First, you would do better to take a long march through "civil society" and change beliefs, attitudes and values in a direction critical of the power in place. And thereafter, having thus besieged it in a pincer movement, you could go ahead and topple it.

Gramsci wrote this as a recipe for a communist revolution in the West, but dissidents in the dictatorial Communist East found that it suited them perfectly. Not least, it opened up the prospect of avoiding violence when confronting a violent regime. Change the "hegemony" of ideas in "civil society", take away the voluntary obedience to the regime, and then hope for the best.

By the late 1980s, in Bulgaria "civil society" had acquired a more detailed shape and had come to mean something like: the formation of a critical mass of aware, enlightened and publicly-spirited citizens who, claiming their constitutional rights, would resist the oppression of the regime and would act towards the establishment of a non-violent and non-oppressive form of government. Since this was to be done openly and under the regime's own written laws, it was expected that the Communists

would hesitate to deport and imprison wholesale. And every time – in every situation – that they would retreat from wholesale violence, their resolve to use violence next time would be weakened.

Ultimately, the thinking went, the regime would find itself entangled in a web of public scrutiny and criticism and may, further, acquire the taste for the practice of non-violent government. It would then either reform (and run a system of “socialism with a human face”); or, if faced with the choice of holding on to power through great violence or avoiding violence and therefore relinquishing power – would be replaced by something less distasteful.

As Kuranov points out,

“a sustainable and organized opposition became possible from the moment when potential oppositionists realized that the violence of the regime, aimed at them, had certain limitations”.ⁱⁱ

The test for this line of thinking came in 1987-8. The Danubian city of Russe began to be heavily gassed by chlorine emissions from a Romanian chemical plant across the river. The regime, priding itself on its “brotherly relations” with the Romanian dictator Ciausescu, did nothing. Daily life became severely disrupted as the people of Russe, fearing for their safety, found themselves having to stay indoors. Then it transpired that those who had decided to cut and run – to migrate to the interior – were not allowed to do so by the authorities (not a difficult thing to achieve, given the system then in place of internal passports, work-books and obligatory registration).

Instead of being protected by their government, the people of Russe found themselves cornered by it. They reacted with a series of protest demonstrations, starting with several hundred participants (end of September 1987) and growing into thousands by February 1988.

This time, a major city, rather than peripheral Turkish villages, was engaged in massive and public resistance. Although the gagged media again carried no news of the protests, the grapevine supplied details to the entire country within hours.

What was of supreme significance from a political point of view was that the regime shrank from violence, surprised by the scope of the events and unwilling to roll over the young mothers, complete with babies, who were in the front lines of the Russe protests. Seeing this vacillation as a vindication of their approach of peaceful but public resistance – and of the strategy of tying up the regime in the web of “civil society” – oppositionists in the capital Sofia launched the first non-sanctioned (but also non-clandestine) organization since 1947: the Russe Defence Committee (“Russe Committee”).

This first Bulgarian non-communist organization was also Bulgaria's first NGO, combining what were to become the staple themes of the coming years: environment and rights, the right to clean air and the right to be heard. From then on and to 1990-91, activists in these arenas were to become known to the public as the "non-formals".

These events placed the regime in a novel situation, for which it had no action plan. It was used to dealing with clandestine cells, conspiracies or individual acts of defiance. It had no contingency plans for dealing with solidaristic NGOs that, on the face of it, had no specific political demands and were, least of all, in the business of overthrowing the government. Nobody was shot, disappeared, deported or imprisoned. By the beginning of 1989, most of the Russe Committee's activists, who were also Party members, were expelled from the Party. All Committee activists were threatened with dismissal from work, but few ended up jobless.

By April 1989 the Communist Party's Central Committee had sacked its own two leading ideologists on the grounds that they had not spotted the trouble coming, nor had found effective propaganda means to counter it. At the time this was taken as a sign of something close to panic: the regime was obviously not comfortable in the arena of public debate and, consequently, this would be the preferred arena, which the various civil society and NGO activists would use to resist.

Encouraged by such events, a group associated with the Russe Committee established, in November 1988 at a gathering at Sofia University, a new NGO: the Club in Support of Glasnost and Perestroika ("The Club"). Unlike the Russe Committee, which dealt with a particular problem in a particular part of the country, the Club brought the debate about the way the country was governed to the national level.

A debate about the future that treats the entire nation as one community is a debate about politics. This is where civil society becomes political society. In a Communist setting, this is particularly the case. Kuranov explains:

"The movement of non-formals in Bulgaria started and developed as a civic reaction, within the law, against the unlawful or violent acts of the authorities. In a non-totalitarian setting, this would have been a purely civic movement; under our conditions the authorities and the non-formals both saw it as... carrying within it an aggressively political content."ⁱⁱⁱ

The regime was privately furious at the appearance of the Club, but again found itself unable to solve the problem by the usual combination of (visible) propaganda and (unseen but hinted at) repression. For one thing, the founders of the Club were nationally known intellectuals and their disappearance from the scene would cause too many waves.

People would debate, argue, take sides. Political life would become more public – something the regime knew it did not want. For another thing, more than half (60 out of 110) of the founders of the Club were members of the Party and could therefore argue that they were not in the business of toppling the regime, but of improving governance. The Central Committee did draw up a list of 21 repressive measures against Club members, but these largely remained on paper and were a far cry from open terror, at their worst planning a ban on the practice of profession.

What happened in reality was that the political police talked to the Club leaders, they refused to repent and, in answer, the regime closed down the Institute of Philosophy, where most of them were employed at the time; and enforced the sacking of the few journalists who were among the Club's initiators and supporters.

And there the matter might have rested had not the regime, smarting at this loss of face, made a last-ditch attempt, in the spring of 1989, to find nationalist legitimacy so that, assured of popular approval, it could move decisively against all opposition.

Nobody – least of all the “West” – had bought the mid-1980s “national revival” package. The Turkish minority continued to protest at the change of their names, the “West” talked about human rights violations and the Bulgarian majority was increasingly fascinated with the doings of the “non-formal” opposition. A series of hunger strikes broke out in Turkish villages in early spring of 1989. More importantly, there were the beginnings of a movement to flaunt Turkish identity and openly face the consequences (arrest, fine, deportation). In retrospect, this is the start of the modern Bulgarian tradition of civil disobedience. Such a combination of events was just too rich for the regime and seems to have tipped the balance in favour of renewed violent repression.

The regime decided to cut clean – to push out, into neighbouring Turkey, Bulgaria's entire Turkish minority and then sell this to the public as national self-defence: as ridding Turkey of reasons to lay territorial claims (Turkey was doing nothing of the sort) to Bulgarian sovereign territory. It was hoped that the deportation, packaged in this way, would rally the majority around the regime and, when the “non-formals” jumped up in protest, would enable the government to label all malcontents as traitors and agents of that millennial enemy, Turkey.

By the high summer of 1989, an estimated 400,000 Turks had been pushed out into Turkey, their passports stamped with tourist exit visas (hence the officious name for the migration – the “Great Excursion”).

This time the majority, conditioned by generations of anti-Turkish historical mythology, by and large rallied round the regime. Unlike the mid-1980s, the Communists enjoyed the approval of the majority, but they also found they had to deal with something that was not there in 1985: a whole plethora of civil-society and human rights groups, organized as

NGOs; two semi-clandestine dissident journals, *Glas* (Voice) and *Most* (Bridge); plus a trades union, *Podkrepa* (Support – a conscious imitation of Poland’s Solidarity). Although swimming against the tide of opinion, these groups reacted with a flurry of public acts, most important of which was the circulation of so-called “petitions”, opposing the deportation and other regime acts, such as the continued sacking of journalists. These were protest declarations that collected signatures (plus full name, address, identity card serial number and telephone number) and were then presented to parliament.

The regime was furious at the petitions and with good reason. The “non-formals” had demonstrated, for the first time, that they had a constituency beyond themselves. They had shown a capacity to persuade members of the public to take up anti-regime positions openly and consciously, with their addresses and serial numbers, knowing that if repression came, they would be its immediate targets.

Civil society had acquired an organizational infrastructure (the various Clubs, Committees and NGOs), written texts (the petitions, the two journals and a mass of “samizdat”) and constituency. By the summer of 1989 it also had a serious organizational leader – another NGO, Eco-Glasnost, set up by young activists dissatisfied with the lack of meaningful activity of the Glasnost Club. Treating “ecology” in the widest possible sense, including “societal and political ecology”, Eco-Glasnost launched the biggest “petition” to date – a protest against plans to divert the rivers of the Rila mountain for industrial needs. This petition was to collect a record of 12,500 signatures and the mass demonstration at its delivery to parliament (3 November 1989) ultimately resulted in the demise of the communist regime.

These signatures were collected openly in one of the capital Sofia’s most public squares, rather than circulated among friends and colleagues. Such publicity was too much for the regime and it reacted with violence, sending the police to beat up and arrest the instigators, in front of hundreds of passers-by, foreign journalists and foreign tourists, on 26 October. A lightning protest followed from the OSCE and the Western Embassies, the regime had to back-track and even apologize – something which exposed its weakness and set the scene for reformist-minded Communists to engineer an internal coup and overthrow the Party leadership, in place since 1956, two weeks later.

By the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bulgaria’s civic activists had constructed the conceptual basis of future politics and society around two leading themes: human rights (a topic arising out of the oppression of the minorities) and environmental sensitivity. For their part, the Communists, weakened by their internal coup, and reeling under rising pressure from the “non-formals”, were in disarray and highly unlikely to react with violence to the emergence of democracy. On the contrary, their

new leadership was itself afraid of unexpected violence, one of its new leaders Alexander Lilov warning on 5 January 1990 that,

“Bulgaria is in the throes of a serious political..., and also a serious societal and moral crisis... Everything is now possible and not only on the streets.”^{iv}

In order to maintain as much as possible of its rule, the BCP no longer had the option of acting as a violence-based “power” (in order to ensure obedience), or – as a xenophobic force (in order to ensure nationalist legitimacy). The only way to survive was for the Communists to situate themselves into the agenda formulated by the “non-formals” and to claim democratic and representative legitimacy. A start was made on the second of these subjects when the BCP agreed, at the end of 1989, on negotiations with all existing groups for future elections.

The attempt to re-package itself as a democratic entity badly misfired, however, revealing the Communists’ continued inability to swim in the unfamiliar waters of open debate and public opinion. On 29 December 1989, the regime officially denounced the oppression (blaming it on the previous leadership) of the Turkish minority, declared as a mistake the attempt to attain an “ethnically monolithic nation”, and reinstated the right of Muslims to carry their previous Islamic names (by going through the courts).

Instead of providing the besieged party with a new veneer of democracy, this decision, coming out of the blue, upset all sides to the issue. It was seen as too little too late by the Turks (court procedures being cumbersome and, in any case, totalitarian courts not enjoying popular trust), who launched a series of protest demonstrations in the capital Sofia and in the Turkish regional centres. The complete inability of the Communists to “sell” the U-turn to the Christian majority left it stunned and produced nationalist counter-demonstrations (again – in Sofia and the Turkish majority areas’ key cities) and demands for a reversal of the decision. A National Committee for the Defence of the National Interest (an extreme nationalist faction) was set up by secret policemen who had decided to go into politics. By January 1990, the Committee’s regional organisers were telling newspapers that they would “march on Sofia”, armed, and put an end to the national betrayal. Years later the then Interior Minister was to write that the issue of “return of Turkish names” had set even the mass of police officers against the BCP.

As Bulgarian and Turk demonstrations eyed each other with hostility across several large cities and in the capital, in the opening days of January 1990 it seemed that inter-ethnic violence was hours, if not minutes away. More worryingly to the “non-formals”, it looked as if the whole agenda of civil society would be hi-jacked and the public would

sink into an ethnic-nationalist quarrel, out of which extremism and violence would emerge as stable national characteristics. With Turkey next door highly unlikely to remain a passive observer, should Bulgaria's Turks again become victims of violence, the entire national agenda hung by a thread.

The media, still coming to terms with the absence of censorship, failed to provide a lead in this confused situation, as did the intellectual establishment and all institutions of government. They simply disappeared from the public eye and let things unravel as they would.

Violence and spiraling to armed conflict was averted by the "non-formals", who stepped in to fill the vacuum. The thinking, when it emerged (watching the country unravel had stupefied everyone for a few days), was quite simple: get all sides to the conflict around the negotiating table, draw them into a procedure of formulating clear demands, and lead the negotiations towards an outcome that would evade violence, but would also satisfy all agendas, fears and concerns.

To this end, the "non-formals", together with members of the (still Communist) parliament, convened a "Societal Council on the National Question" on 7 January. As it turned out, the very act of channeling extreme passions into procedure defused the situation and ended the crisis. Unlike the Turks, who formulated clear demands (simplification of the process of recovery of Islamic names), the nationalists failed to do anything of the sort. The public consensus was already such that it was impossible to formulate, as demands during negotiations, street chants such as: "Bulgaria for the Bulgarians!", "Turks go home!", "Pure nation, holy faith" and so forth.

As the danger of xenophobic violence receded, the Communist Party came to life and entered power-sharing negotiations (known as the National Round Table) with all non-official groups and the newly emerging political organizations. This was a clear signal that negotiation and elections, rather than clampdown and violence, was to be the course of choice for the regime.

The concentration of public expectations around the subjects of rights, democracy and ecology, and the narrow escape during the Turk-Bulgarian stand-off of early January, ensured that the structuring of the principles of the future representative government would avoid traps characteristic of the mentality of the Balkan regions, such as: long and bitter arguments around the definition of "nation" and "ethnicity"; bickering over "historic facts"; and philosophizing about the proper place of religion in the life of the nation.

In fact, the Christian church establishment did not take part in the power-sharing negotiations. The office of the Chief Mufti did, and managed to contribute significantly to the shape the country would be taking. The Mufti's representative, Nedim Genjev, formulated a clear and

soon-to-be influential non-ethnic concept of the “nation”, centered on the issues of representation and participation – issues that were to become the heartland of NGO work over the coming decade and a half.

“For a nation to be monolithic,” argued Genjev at the Round Table, “it is not necessary for it to be composed of citizens, who all have the same ethnic self-identification. Once possessing real rights and freedoms, the citizens of the nation will by themselves evolve an identity of being part of it... In a word: equal and just participation in the entire life of this nation.”^v

This helped define the national agenda in terms that led away from violence. Another important breakthrough was the agreement of all participants that the aim of the exercise was to, ultimately, transform Bulgaria into a “Western country” – an idea launched at the Round Table by Kiril Drezov, then a young University lecturer and a “non-formal”, currently established at Keele University.

Following the successful displacement of the attempt at nationalist-based violence, and the start of negotiations for the real sharing of real power, the “non-formals” were faced with a choice that was itself more real than most had expected just weeks before – to continue as previously, or do something completely different? The problem was this: now that the process toward ending the Communist monopoly of power was under way, the tried and tested institutions of representative government were clearly within reach. Did this mean that the time of “civil society” and NGO-type action was over – its aims having been achieved – and that democratic-minded people should move into politics proper? Or was there more to civil society than preparing the ground for multiparty democracy?

The impotence of all institutions of politics and government in the face of the winter crisis, together with its resolution by the “non-formals”, indicated that there was more to civil society than to be a bridgehead to democratic politics. The choice was whether to keep civil society separate from politics even after the end of the Communist regime.

This question split the “non-formals”. Many went into the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), established on 7 December 1989 and increasingly seen as that political opposition to the regime, which would be capable both of ousting it and of assuming power in the name of democracy. The Party members among the “non-formals” mostly went into high-profile positions inside the Communist establishment, in order to reform it from within. Some “non-formals” went into the media.

The group of people associated with Eco-Glasnost mostly decided that there was more to civil society than just to prepare the ground for multiparty democracy. There was much work to be done still, and it could not be entirely entrusted to politicians and institutions of government, no

matter how democratic and well-intentioned. These “non-formals” stayed with the topic of civil society and, over the next few years, established the NGOs that Bulgaria was to become known for during the 1990s: the agenda-setting, civil society-centred non-government organisations.

The parting of the ways was also based on more profound philosophical differences, which went beyond the issue of civil society. Insofar as the civil society problematic was taken seriously during the 1980s, several strands of thinking had emerged. All of them shared the basic premise that not only Bulgaria, but also the world was entering into an entirely new reality – and that, in the past, such “transitions” had usually ushered in an age of extreme and widespread violence. Violence, in short, was seen to be the rule of “transitions” and, consequently, the brunt of the thinking was targeted at the issue of how to avoid it – or, at least, how to limit it significantly.

One popular conceptual framework was Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis. Its followers by and large entered into politics after 1989, convinced that all they had to do was to implement at home the liberal political agenda that, as Fukuyama had argued, no longer had a convincing competitor on the world stage. Another popular theory was Huntington’s “clash of civilizations”. Believers in this were to go on and produce the moderate intellectual nationalism of the mid-1990s, which argued that Bulgaria would do best to re-define itself as a Christian Orthodox nation and, in geopolitical terms, stay neutral, neither West nor East, but rather a half-way point, where these “civilizations” could meet and interact.

A third approach arose out of a fascination with post-modernism and multi-culturalism. The thinking here, moving forward crab-like and mostly by trial and error, was this. Existing collective identities and group agendas, produced by the Modern period, were disappearing, taking with them previously known ways of limiting violence. Moreover, the prescriptive relativism, being one of the inescapable consequences of multi-culturalism, re-affirmed the equal right of all collective identities and group agendas to be themselves prescriptive and therefore – expansionist. A Hobbesian-type situation was to be therefore expected, in which groups with equally absolute rights and freedoms would be drawn to war against each other – something seen as illustrated by the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the USSR during the early 1990s.

People who followed this line of thinking by and large stayed with civil society, intending to find in it the mechanism for violence-displacement and also to establish arenas of effective representation of identities and agendas. This, it was thought, would help emerging identities and agendas find recognition and fulfillment without recourse to violence.

These people set up the NGOs that were, in the Aristotelian sense, political – i.e. which addressed the overall agenda of the larger “polis”. Most would, at some stage, become involved in producing agendas of

collective identity and placing them in a “civil society” setting that would avoid, on the one hand, the closed and opaque nature of ethno-centrist and nationalist-xenophobic identities and, on the other, move beyond the autonomous individual of classic liberal thinking, on which the edifice of representative government rests.

Keeping the focus on groups (communities), rather than on nations or individuals, was designed to avoid violent extremes (nationalism on the one hand, or the tyranny of a crowd composed of alienated individuals in search of a leader, on the other); and also to cater to the empirically obvious need for community awareness and identity.

Self-awareness, recognition and empowerment would be anchored in groups of citizens, behaving as communities. Among the first actions of leading “non-formals”, following the end of the communist regime was to, over 1991, help organize the more significant minorities (Jews, Armenians, Tatars) along agendas of identity, cultural heritage and representation. The bulk of the Turks was already captured in the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), set up by Turkish “non-formals”, which was to become Bulgaria’s third-largest political party.

An early mission statement (1994, Centre for Social Practices) is an example of the approach of “empowering communities” that went beyond minority issues. It reads:

“We have come to believe the following: that the transition to mature democracy in Bulgaria is not solely a matter of implementing successful outside models; and that... the transition agenda can only be implemented if the citizens themselves practice the transition in their daily lives; and that this requires certain re-formulations in the understandings, motivations and practices of individuals and the groups which they form in civil society; and that this can not be done by education alone, but by civic networks set up by independent individuals; and that the re-formulations in motivations and practices are best achieved by encouraging people to work together and achieve their aims outside the framework of the state; while, at the same time, encouraging the state to interact with the citizens and to behave in accountable, efficient, open and transparent ways, which will facilitate Bulgaria’s inclusion into the European family of nations.”

3. NGOs, civil society and the social contract

The “non-formals” of the 1980s established the significant NGOs of the 1990s, among them: the Centre for the Study of Democracy (1990), working on the rule of law and the establishment of democratic institutions; the Institute for Market Economics (1993), producing agendas for market reform; the Centre for Liberal Strategies (1993), dealing with political parties and representative government; the ACCESS and SEGA Associations (1991, 1995) and Human Rights Watch, dealing with

minority representation and participation; the Centre for Social Practices (1994), working on the empowerment of citizens and the representation of vulnerable groups.

Early NGO-conducted research was mostly targeted at evaluating the potential for violence and for violent political agendas. The intention of the research was to test for two envisaged dangers: nationalist xenophobia, arising out of a crowd-type national self-identity; and inter-ethnic violence, arising out of majority-minority frictions. The problematic of social class and poverty was discarded from the start as a potential source of violence. On theoretical grounds, it was believed that, whereas society would inevitably begin to dramatically re-structure itself as it enters into the transition, it would not produce a class structure typical for the 19th and 20th centuries. On empirical grounds, by 1992-3 it was clear that people, once overcoming the shock and atomization of regime change, were drawn to collective identities based on community, region and profession, rather than social class.

During their first systemic attempt at collective self-reflection, which took place in 1994, leading NGOs managed to come up with a theorized version of what they were already doing. What the NGOs were up to, argued at the meeting Plamen Makariev, was to try and navigate between “liberalism” on the one hand and “communitarianism” on the other. In a world of new collective identities jostling for expression and recognition, Makariev argued, basing action on Rawls’s “unencumbered self” – the fully autonomous, free and self-motivating individual – would be a mistake.

“Liberalism, for example,” wrote Makariev, “cannot be used as a methodology for regulating relations between communities with differing cultural identities. It is not suited to the aspiration of such communities to maintain their sense of distinctive self.”

Communitarianism, on the other hand, was too close to group exclusiveness and had already revealed its limitations in Bosnia, where

“the absolute absence of moral engagement with the ‘others’, the absolute negation of their rights for the sake of the interests of the ‘own community’ leads to war of everyone against everyone else, exactly following Hobbes, with the difference being that, instead of individuals, we see communities as the actors.”^{vi}

In other words, the NGOs re-affirmed their conviction that their work was with communities of citizens, with cultures, groups, collective agendas, representation and participation – a brief much wider and more complex than simply implanting domestically the institutions and mores of

representative government, multiparty democracy and the rule of law. This implantation was necessary, but not enough, and it would be mainly left to the politicians.

Not surprisingly, much NGO attention concentrated on the southern region of Kardjali. Bordering on Turkey, here Turks and ethnic Bulgarian Muslims formed the overwhelming majority, and the region was the scene of some of the worst fears relating to ethnic conflict in the early 1990s.

It was also here that the limited usefulness of multi-party democracy was most fully revealed. Much as in neighbouring Yugoslavia, the national leaderships of political parties looked on the various ethnic and religious groups of the Kardjali region as captive electorates – and had all the incentive to exacerbate, rather than improve, inter-group relations. The political representation of the Turks, the MRF, saw as its aim the mobilization of all Turkish voters in the area. The Socialists had the same designs on the Christian Bulgarian minority, with the UDF attempting to make inroads into the ethnic Bulgarian Muslim communities. This coincidence of ethnicity and partisan politics was seen, by the NGOs, as highly explosive, and fears of a smaller-scale re-run of the Yugoslavian – and, in particular, the Bosnian – break-up were rife.

Political parties did little to assuage matters on the ground. For example, in 1995 the Socialists ran an election campaign on a purely Christian-versus-Turk platform, calling Kardjali their “battle of Stalingrad”. For the municipal elections of 1999, the Socialists and their arch-enemies, the UDF, tried to form an ethnicity-based coalition – provisionally named “Us”, (as opposed to “Them”), in order to overcome the Turk vote.

Convinced that civil society provided the only feasible safety net in this situation, Sofia-based NGOs moved into Kardjali around 1994-5. Following Ernst Gellner^{vii}, the CSP, the Open Society Foundation and others were convinced that, if communities did not identify themselves as civic, but stayed closed and ethnicity-centered, no stable democracy was possible.

In 1994-5, these NGOs established the Kardjali Foundation and began financing a local newspaper, Reporter Dnes. The intention was to bridge the gaps between the ethnic groups. These attempts failed as the Foundation attracted only the local Christian Bulgarian elite, and the newspaper veered towards an anti-Muslim editorial line. Thereupon followed the establishment of NGOs for the various ethnicities, with the idea of building bridges between them on a civic-activeness basis. This also failed, because of the gravity pull of the political parties. Quite simply, the Kardjali NGOs were quick to identify with their respective political parties (Bulgarians with the Socialists, Turks with the MRF), thereby reinforcing, rather than bridging, the division lines.

The solution was finally found in the second half of the 1990s, with the help of influential political figures (Yashar Shaban, a local MRF leader and Dimitar Ignatov, a UDF notable) who, disillusioned with partisan life, abandoned politics and moved into the field of civil society, bringing to bear their vast and sometimes bitter experience. The solution hit upon was to mix ethnic groups in every single NGO that was being set up. There were no longer to be Turk, Bulgarian or Gypsy NGOs that would, hopefully, work together in some distant future. Every NGO set up after 1996-7 was, deliberately, an ethnic cocktail. To de-emphasize ethnicity further, in 1998 these NGOs came together in an umbrella organization – the Kardjali NGO Centre. The Centre managed to acquire a derelict house, in the centre of the city, from the municipality, renovated it and opened to the public.

The ethnic mix and the high media profile of the Kardjali NGO Centre ensured that local communities, long isolated from the life of the mainstream (the region was cordoned off from the rest of the country until 1989, both because it was seen as volatile and because it bordered on Turkey, a NATO country at a time when Bulgaria was in the Warsaw Pact), for the first time came across agendas that were neither ethnically, nor politically divisive. By the end of the decade the Centre was becoming the engine of development of the region, being the only place where divisions did not hinder common efforts. The Centre was involved in setting up GP clinics in outlying villages, renovating schools, re-training miners from the disappearing mining industry and running a public education programme, in the local and national media, to re-define the image of the region from an ethnic powder-keg, expected to go the way of Bosnia, to a multi-cultural region. In 1998, together with the Regional Governor, the Mayors of six municipalities (three Turk, two – Bulgarian Muslim, one – mixed), regional industry chiefs, environmentalists and representatives of the Ministry of the Environment, the Kardjali NGO Centre established Bulgaria's first Watershed Council along the Varbitsa river. Such Councils were to be recommended by the EU in 2000 as tools of civic participation in development policy. In 1999, the NGO Centre launched, together with the local authorities, a Regional Development Forum, pulling in infrastructure funding both from the national budget and from EU sources.

Ultimately, although unable to destabilize the region, political ill will did prove to be a significant enough factor to periodically undermine the impact of civil society work carried out on the ground. The 1999 municipal elections revealed a significant political side-result of the Centre's civil society work. Electorates were no longer willing to vote on ethnic grounds, preferring to choose between platforms. Ethnic mobilization for the vote failed for the first time as the different communities voted in unpredictable ways. Casting the ballot paper was no

longer seen as an act of re-affirming group identity – but, more prosaically, as a choice between visions of the future offered at the political marketplace.

The great loser was the MRF, which did not hold to a single municipality in what was considered its heartland. It did not take the MRF leadership long to work out that the electoral disaster was due to the implantation of civil society and its mentalities, which undermined ethnic isolation; after all, the MRF leaders were, in the 1980s, themselves leading lights in the “non-formals” movement. Intense mobilization followed, designed to turn Turks back to the ethnic vote and, by the time of the 2003 local elections, the MRF recovered most of its losses.

In the meantime, however, the Kardjali-based civic activists had expanded their operations across the country, to the northern Turk enclave of *Deliorman* (Wild Forest), which had remained untouched by civil society-related activities and continued to exhibit Bosnia-type identities and group behaviour. In the local elections of 2003, the MRF was soundly beaten in the largest northern city of Shumen as ethnic voter mobilization failed.

Feeling – much like the Communists and Socialists in previous years – increasingly tied up in the web of civil society, the MRF leadership was to spend much of 2004 trying to reform the party away from ethnicity and to re-package it as a non-ethnic, centrist party of a Liberal type.

The issue of avoidance of violence in such developments had been settled sometime earlier. By the mid-1990s the agenda-setting NGOs had concluded that ethnicity- or religion-based violence was unlikely to occur. The Christian majority had evolved an uneasy feeling of guilt over the repression of the 1980s, while the Turks – the victims – had drawn a clear enough line between “ordinary Bulgarians” and “the communist regime”. Building on this, and quite without outside help, the two communities produced a new dominant ideology of “getting back to normal”.

The largest-ever research, conducted by a cluster of leading NGOs in 1994, came to the unequivocal conclusion that, “the central place in the values system of all researched communities, irrespective of their ethnic characteristics, is moderation”, followed by security, stability, predictability, justice, the sense of community belonging, law and order, being together^{viii}.

The potential for xenophobic violence was tested in practice in 1992, when Bulgaria was the first state to recognize the independence of Macedonia. This flew in the face of a century of national ideology, according to which Macedonia was an integral part of the Bulgarian nation. The recognition, enacted by President Zhelyu Zhelev (formerly Chairman of the Glasnost Club) and Foreign Minister Stefan Tsvetkov (formerly of Eco-Glasnost), provoked no public ire and this was taken as

further evidence that violence, if indeed on the agenda, would not be connected to xenophobia, irredentism or ethnic intolerance.

And the violence, when it came, didn't. It flashed up along the borderline between communities of citizens on the one hand, and the institutions of central government on the other. That a violent breakdown in relations between the citizens (as communities) and the government was possible, was formulated as a possibility by NGOs as early as 1994, when two researches came out with the same result: that there was a chasm opening between citizens and communities on the one hand, and the institutions of government on the other.

“The government – from the mayor to central government – has become something alien... The state is seen as just one – among many – organized interest that has been constructed for someone else, and not to serve ordinary people.”^{ix}

From the end of 1994 and through 1995, a series of violent conflicts took place between different communities and central government. All of them sprang from the fact that the government acted as an “organized interest”, rather than as the impersonal upholder of law and order. Three cases are worth noting.

Rakitovo, a Gypsy-populated mountain village, had been hard hit by the collapse of the centrally planned economy, which left the locals with no resource but what the mountain provided easiest: timber. At the same time, because it failed to grapple effectively with the issue of property rights, the government had failed to erect a legal framework for the timber industry. Only state-owned timber companies could legally function, but they managed to provide only 15 per cent of the timber needed by the furniture makers and the exporters. There was no legal way for the exporters and the furniture-makers to acquire the missing 85 per cent that they needed, and the Rakitovo Gypsies provided the supply by unleashing illegal (it was at the time difficult for anyone to work out how to do it legally) tree-cutting.

Following complaints by the local Bulgarian minority, the government decided to show strength and sent detachments of the riot police to, effectively, occupy the village and stop the de-forestation. Police entry into the village was done violently, as if during a military exercise – and the local reacted also with violent resistance, until subdued by reinforcements.

Sapareva Banya, a small mountainous municipality of some 18,000 people, faced a different problem. By the end of 1994 the capital Sofia, some 80 km distant, found itself with a severe water shortage because corrupt officials had drained the huge water reservoir of Iskar to run illegally small water-electric plants for their own personal gain. Staring

in the face the prospect of evacuating the nation's capital to avoid epidemics, the government came up with a plan to divert the rivers running through the Sapareva Banya municipality to Sofia – which happened to be the very plan, against which Eco-Glasnost had run the petition of 1989, which in turn had led to the demise of the Communist regime.

The interim government, headed by an economist, Ms Reneta Indjova, sent in army engineers to divert the rivers as a matter of national priority. What she had forgotten was that under then current legislation such construction works were not possible without prior evaluation of environmental impact and a public hearing on-site. The locals picked up on this and demanded that the legal provisions be enforced, the PM went to the site and told them (in words widely quoted by the newspapers): “You can discuss and vote all you want, we are the government and we will go ahead with the construction.”

Negotiations broke down, the locals blockaded the roads, the army engineers called reinforcements, regular army units and riot police arrived and, after a series of stand-offs and scuffles, occupied the town; and the rivers were diverted in complete contravention of the law and at great expense to the taxpayer.

In the third case, the government of the ex-communists, voted into office at the very end of 1994, sacked the bulk of journalists from the state-owned National Radio, using the legal vacuum as regards its status. The official justification was that the journalists, critical of the government, were part of a conspiracy called “Sea Fox”, aiming at a coup d’etat.

In all three cases the government acted with sudden and exemplary violence, either in a legal vacuum or in direct contravention of existing legislation. Media coverage was a tangle of confusion, while the political opposition either failed to oppose the violence, or, when doing so, to formulate clearly the issues involved.

Again, it was the remnants of the 1980s “non-formals” (Eco-Glasnost, the Glasnost Club) and the new NGOs that stepped into this vacuum. They were not yet to be afforded the luxury of limiting their work to one-cause campaigns, or to criticizing government, or even – to producing policy recommendations for various institutions. Hands-on involvement was a continued necessity. All the more so that the organizers of the resistance in all three incidents made a specific effort to keep away from partisan politics – to situate all agendas squarely on the ground of rights and legality, in order to avoid accusations of partisan affiliation.

To the former “non-formals” in the NGO world, the task at hand did not seem so very much different from the agenda of the 1980s: to tie up the government in a web of negotiations, regulations and civil society interactions so as to tame it – to convince it that violence was not an acceptable way to achieve its ends.

By 1995 the breakdown of relations between people and government had become particularly worrying. A study revealed the appearance of a consensus, among the citizenry, that whatever the definition of government may or may not be, it could be described easiest as “those untouchables who break the rules.”^x Such dramatic loss of legitimacy bode ill, it was felt, in a turbulent region where states were unraveling and societies disintegrating with relative ease.

Over the subject of journalistic independence, the NGOs came together and formed an umbrella organization called Free Speech Forum, with the specific mission of defending the media from government interference. This was later to evolve into the powerful Media Coalition, currently acting as government watch-dog and participant in media-related legislation. Human rights NGOs raised the issue of representation and “rules of the game” over the Rakitovo case, and were later successful in including some of the local Gypsy community leaders into the work of various government bodies overseeing minority matters. The issue of police violence in its turn attracted the attention of NGOs specializing in the reform of organizations, who began working with local police stations and central police authorities on topics to do with relations with the community, containment of violence and interaction with the public. Out of this were to come programmes for community policing, minority representation on the police force and, as a side-product, prison reform. Environmentalists mobilized around issues of legality connected to ecology and began a long dialogue with the government, which was, by 1999-2000, to see them included (but not very effective when faced with administrative ill will) into the legislative and monitoring process regarding surface and coastal waters.

Two NGOs – the Centre for Social Practices (CSP) and the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) – concentrated on regulating relations between citizens and institutions of government by way of conflict resolution and mediation. In an unprecedented project, the aggressors and the aggrieved against were brought to the same table, six months after the violence, to work out what went wrong and plan for avoiding such situations in the future. Out of this came a set of conflict-resolution procedures, first implemented in Rakitovo and Sapareva Banya, which laid the groundwork for the various forms of community-municipality partnerships of the early 21st century.

The perceived need for mediation produced a richer harvest. As far back as 1993-4, a study funded by the German-based Friedrich Ebert Stiftung had found that citizens and institutions of government in Bulgaria simply did not understand each other, let alone – trust. At best, institutions saw citizens as helpless and somewhat mentally deficient children, while the citizens saw the administrations as helpless and inefficient. At worst, citizens saw the “bureaucracy” as the enemy, and a legitimate target of

(potential) violence; while institutions dismissed citizens as ill-willed trouble-makers.

Given such stereotypes, no meaningful dialogue was possible, even with the best of intentions and under the most optimistic of scenarios. There was an obvious need for someone to begin translating government-speak to citizens and citizen-speak to the government, if any trust was to be achieved and conflicts avoided. This was not done and by 1995 the whole thing had exploded. Recapitulating, Vassil Garnizov (CSP) wrote at the time:

“A characteristic of Bulgaria’s chaotic post-communist society has been the absence of mediators. Not only are mediating figures and institutions non-existent, but also absent is the very idea of mediation between two sides in the pursuit of a greater common good.”^{xi}

The need for mediation between citizens and government gave birth to the institution of Ombudsmen, piloted successfully by the CSP in six municipalities over 1998-2000, leading to the establishment, in partnership with Sofia municipality, of an Ombudsman for Greater Sofia in 2002. By 2001 there were more than 20 municipal Ombudsmen constituted around the country. On the basis of this work, the CSD in turn produced and lobbied a Law on National Ombudsman, ultimately passed at the end of 2003.

Having usefully contributed to the regulation of citizen-government relations in the mid-1990s, and re-affirmed the usefulness of thinking (and acting) in terms of “civil society”, the NGOs were, however, soon to find the limits to their effectiveness. They were to be shown that their “web”, in order to produce the desired result – a peaceful and confident nation, composed of empowered communities within the framework of representative and accountable government – needed a certain minimum of competent governance and economic performance. The combination of a truly irresponsible, loose-canon type of government, and a collapsing economy was, it turned out, capable of sweeping away all civil society-related work; and could lead the nation to the very brink of civil war.

At the end of 1994, the ex-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) was voted into office, by an electorate weary of botched reforms, on a platform of gradual return to socialism. Privatisation and land restitution were to be slowed down even further than they already were, the bulk of industry was to be kept in state hands as a matter of policy, the government was to resume co-ordination of the economy, large-scale subsidies and price controls were to be reinforced. The government was, further, to revive the formerly close links with Moscow and the remaining “socialist” countries in the world, while reconsidering the legal status of the domestic

programmes of Radio Free Europe, Radio France International, Deutsche Welle and the BBC.

The government was particularly and demonstrably hostile to the NGOs, pointing out that they must be agents of foreign interests, being mostly US- and EU-funded. Ministries deemed as particularly “penetrable” by NGOs (such as Education and Environment) acquired special “commissars”, whose job it was to make sure that state policy remained free of NGO influence. Throughout most of 1995-6, state television even ran a daily 5-minute slot, during which public figures would explain the hostile intentions of foreign-funded NGOs in general and, in particular, of the Open Society Foundation, set up by US billionaire George Soros specifically with the task of stimulating civil society.

The not-unexpected outcome of the BSP’s attempt to implement the return to socialism was that, by the summer of 1996, there was a chronic bread and grain crisis and, by the end of the year, money was wiped out, inflation reaching an annual value of 2,000 per cent, up from 39 per cent at the moment of the 1994 elections. The average monthly wage collapsed from the equivalent of 112 US dollars in 1993, to around 12 in January 1997. A run on the banks led to their collapse and the economy, starved of resources, shut down around Christmas of 1996. The population, its wages and savings having disappeared, was thrown back to survival on home-made winter preserves, traditionally produced from private plots as a national pastime.

This sort of thing had not happened even following defeat in the two World Wars and came as a complete shock. The strain of daily survival made irrelevant civil society agendas and community identities, as well as most of the other topics associated with the “non-formals” and the NGOs. At the peak of the crisis, the NGOs were by and large reduced to distributing international humanitarian aid and making sure that government agents did not pilfer it. One of the great casualties of that period was society’s environmental sensitivity. Once at the very heart of the democratic agenda, the ecological problematic has, at the time of writing (August 2004), yet to recover its importance.

Not surprisingly, privation led to anger, anger led to protest and protest led to riot. In December 1996, daily marches began in Sofia. By January 1997 the protests spread to the rest of the country. On 10 January a massive crowd besieged parliament, demanding the resignation of the Socialists. When this did not come, the protestors overcame the police cordon, stormed the building and later withdrew, after the deployment of tear gas, having smashed up some of the furniture and most of the windows. The stand-off continued as the crowd formed its own perimeter around the National Assembly, vowing to starve out the Socialist members inside. The police, receiving reinforcements, counter-attacked in the early hours of the morning and the capital’s hospitals filled with casualties,

among them Philip Dimitrov, the first reforming non-communist Prime Minister (1992-3), with a forehead split by a police baton while trying to mediate.

By the morning, the public had come to the conclusion that the police had used unnecessary physical violence when more subtle means (tear gas, water cannon, negotiation) were available. In any case, having brought the economy to collapse, the Socialists would do best to go.

The old question – How to react to government violence? – raised its head yet again. After a decade of peaceful resistance, massive counter-violence was again (and easily) rejected as an option, as were further attempts to storm public buildings. During the next few days Sofia and the other major cities declared civil disobedience, throwing up barricades across the main thoroughfares. Universities and schools were occupied or on strike. By the end of the month all highways, mountain passes and border crossings were also barricaded, while a general political strike was declared by all trades unions (in contravention to legislation, which explicitly banned this kind of action).

Going the way of its economy, the entire country ground to a halt as the people and the government eyed each other across the upwards of 300 barricades that journalists managed to count by 4 February. Early that afternoon, with most of Bulgaria's urban population out in the frosty streets and manning barricades, the Socialists' nerve collapsed and they backed down. The President appointed a caretaker government and called elections for April.

“Thank goodness,” wrote a year later Borislav Borislavov, Chairman of one of Sofia's student protest committees and organizer of the barricades around Sofia University, “because all through the day of 4 February Bulgaria was on the verge of civil war.”^{xii}

This time, the major decisions about the future were taken by the citizenry without significant help from either political parties or NGOs. A leading media celebrity captured the motivation of the young, who were the most visible group of protesters:

“The motivation of the young was pretty straightforward, somewhat conservative, if you will: ‘We want to live in a market economy.’ This is very funny, one would have thought impossible a youth revolt in support of market forces! The demands were realistic and very simple; and yet people were ready to shed their blood in the name of something very basic – that the government which crashed the entire economy should resign and give the other lot a chance.”^{xiii}

The momentum of the conflict was far too big for the NGOs to do anything with. What they could hope to achieve, once finding themselves on the relatively familiar ground of violence avoidance, was to use the media to provide the kind of explanations of events that would encourage a negotiated, rather than a violent outcome. This they did by inundating the media throughout December, January and February, out-explaining all politicians and ensuring that the Socialists' version of events (mostly to do with international conspiracies) did not get a hearing. For example, on 13 January alone four leaders of reputable NGOs – the Centre for Social Practices (Vassil Garnizov), Centre for Liberal Strategies (Ivan Krastev), Institute for Regional and International Studies (Ognyan Minchev) and the Policy Institute (Emil Georgiev) – managed to publish massive pieces in the four leading daily newspapers, arguing the same point. They warned that the government, having lost all legitimacy, could henceforth rely on pure violence alone: a “police-socialism”, as Krastev aptly called it. This was, they went on, not only undesirable, but also impossible for any length of time.

More importantly, during the turbulent months of the protests the NGOs managed to achieve something that democratic politicians had periodically tried – and failed – since 1991: to sell to the public the concept of “social contract”. The aim of this effort was two-fold: to provide a horizon in which the protests could produce a non-violent result; and also to empower civil society for future such situations by explaining in simple and practical terms the advantages of the social contract kind of approach to problems.

The NGO media campaign to explain events in terms of the social contract began in early November 1996. By the end of January 1997, this terminology was routinely used by the media, the educated public and politicians. A general consensus emerged that the mid-1990s social contract, constructed around lukewarm public support for timid reform, was not only abandoned by the Socialists, but had revealed its own inadequacies; and that a new, updated social contract (“agreement as to the ends of our society”, in Georgiev’s translation into everyday language) was needed around real and rapid reform and membership of EU and NATO.

Once the political machinery kick-started itself following the withdrawal of the Socialists, this line of thought entered into concrete political documents. On 8 May 1997, the newly elected parliament, dominated by the reformist anti-communists of the UDF, voted a “Declaration on national agreement”. In it, the social contract was made explicit in several major policy intentions, all of them to do with rapid reform and the country’s inclusion into the structures of what was once called “the West”. Even the Socialists, stunned by the disaster that had overtaken them, voted for policies that were deliberately designed against them, such as: open access to the archives of the former secret services;

rapid privatization and land return; the end of subsidies and price controls; membership of NATO.

Once digested, thinking in terms of “the social contract” was to remain a stable feature of Bulgarian political culture and public debate. Even the Socialists, when withdrawing from the “Declaration on national agreement” in the late 1990s, protested that this did not mean they were abandoning the “social contract”, it being enshrined, in their version of the world, in the Constitution.

By the end of the 1990s, the public and the political establishment had clearly taken on board the bulk of the NGOs approaches and favoured topics. The mold had set away from the kind of societal and power structure that constantly threatens to explode in large-scale inter-group violence. It was fairly obvious that the usual powder-kegs – ethnic minority issues, representation, access to decision-making and public services – had been de-fused.

At the same time, until the start of the following decade nobody seriously believed that political parties could be trusted not to become loose canons again. As a kind of mopping-up operation, several NGOs, spearheaded by the CLS and the CSP, established, in 1997, a new body, somewhat grandiosely named Political Academy for Central and Eastern Europe (PACE). Its task was to educate and train politicians in the values of democracy and accountable government, in issues of representation, corruption, dialogue with the media and the public at large, policy-making, strategic planning, trust-building and so forth. For some years the Academy enjoyed massive media coverage and prestige, recruiting trainees from as far afield as Macedonia, Serbia, Slovakia and Azerbaijan. It became involved in the “Rock the Vote” campaign in Slovakia in 1998, which mobilized the young and voted out the authoritarian leadership of Meciar. During the presidential elections in Serbia, which ended in the ousting of Slobodan Milosevic, the Academy, in tandem with Serbian NGOs and oppositionists, ran a press centre and a parallel count from Sofia, to ensure back-up in case of massive electoral fraud or information black-outs in Serbia itself.

This kind of activity more or less fizzled out by the end of 2003, for it had become evident that Bulgaria’s politicians (for whom the Academy was primarily designed) no longer needed a close watch in case they went down dangerous roads. In any case, at the turn of the century many of the leading lights of the NGO world had gone into high-level politics, so that one could be reasonably certain that, should any extremist agenda begin to form within the political system, they would know how to contain handle the problem before it reached crisis point.

Another period of self-reflection was necessary, and the civil-society NGOs took stock at the turn of the century. Research quickly provided figures for what the activists more or less knew instinctively. The

Bulgarian NGO community was largely “political”, with more than 60 per cent of all its funding used to implement projects related to citizen empowerment, community development, representation and participation of citizens and groups of citizens. Significant sections of the electorate – the more dynamic socio-demographic groups in particular – were feeling unrepresented by the political parties and were beginning to look to NGOs as their agenda-carriers^{xiv}. Few were surprised (but even fewer – taken in) when, during the parliamentary elections of 2001, some of the smaller parties, abandoned by their voters, tried to re-design themselves as NGOs in order to get into parliament. The real surprise came when, in the 2003 municipal elections, Mayor of Russe – the Danubian city that was the scene of the first pro-democracy demonstrations back in 1987 – became, by a massive margin, the non-partisan candidate nominated and supported by a coalition of local NGOs.

The public, therefore, was seen to continue to expect of the NGOs to represent agendas that were not seen as adequately represented by politicians. Which agendas, however? In society at large, the period of new identity formation and recognition was clearly over. Individuals and communities knew who they were and what they stood for.

The issue was no longer to displace violence, but rather – to eradicate the possibility of large-scale violence and to turn the patchwork-quilt of group identities and agendas, which Bulgarian society had become during the 1990s, into a resource, rather than treat it as risk. A research carried out with the participation of leading journalists of minority origin (Turkish, Gypsy, Gagauz, Bulgarian Muslim, Jewish) concluded thus:

“What is obvious is that (as a society) we do not revel in the diversity of our nation: we tend to see it as a problem placed under control, rather than as a resource for a better life... Diversity is a resource and not a deficiency to be simply tolerated... In order to go beyond the world of forbearance and into the world of true diversity, efforts need to be made by the whole of society, and at all levels of public life. It will involve change of school textbooks, the tenor and voices of the media, modification of the overall national mythology.”^{xv}

A second-wave of issues was coming to the fore, to do with representation (particularly – of vulnerable groups and minorities), fair access (to information, services, health, education and decision-making) and participation in development. Making use of the stabilized situation in the country, classic think-tanks appeared, mostly led by experienced politicians leaving politics for the NGO world: European Institute, Centre for Economic Development, Institute for Security Studies.

The problematic of violence was de-emphasised. From a great danger that needed constant attention, it split up into smaller components –

into the many violences that are to be found in the post-modern world: hooliganism and vandalism, terrorism, crime-related, domestic, gender-related, police-related. Each of these has found NGOs to address the problems and seek solutions, while institutions of government, after a decade and a half of exposure to “civil society” approaches, have taken on board that, if a problem is to be resolved, this is best done by involving hands-on, in a process of negotiation and action planning, all “stakeholders”.

The tools invented by the NGOs to avert violence – dialogue, negotiation, participation, inclusion, organization around an issue, representation, recognition, transparency, co-ownership of results – continued to be used in complement to institutional action. But violence itself disappeared from the radar screen of leading national anxieties.

4. Conclusion

The prospects before any transition to stable democracy and rule of law seem to be heavily dependent on what one researcher has called “the existence of society”.^{xvi} With “society” in place, transitions tend to be fairly rapid, non-violent and successful. This is because they develop as an open process of dialogue, debate and interaction based on a modicum of trust. In situations where suspicion is the rule and closed group identities – “ethnicity”, “religion”, “nation” – shape motivation and behaviour, violence, chaos and disintegration get in the way of market reforms, of multiparty democracy and representative government.

It is fairly obvious that what is meant by “society” in this context is something not unlike the Greek “polis” as described by Aristotle: the capacity of the members of the community to act, publicly and as a group, in addressing issues that are larger than their immediate well-being as private individuals, and also have to do with the common good of the entire “polis” and all its members in equal and just measure.

This is an exercise in constructing a common future and, both in hierarchy of importance and temporally, it comes after issues of identity (“Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going and what do I want?”) have been settled. Identity issues seem to come first because human beings seem unable to construct the future, together with others, before they have acquired enough self-knowledge, self-confidence and recognition to be able to, without fear of disintegration, enter as equals in the public (by definition) process of setting the agenda of the future.

The “I” in question refers to groups and communities, rather than isolated and “unencumbered” individuals. And herein lies the risk of violence in transitions where identities are still new and fragile.

Left in isolation and self-centeredness, identity-forming communities will be tempted to affirm their identities and demand recognition by violence – because they will not recognize the equal rights

to recognition of other groups. The only way to avoid this is to bring them out of their shells – to get them involved in interaction with all others for the greater common good. And yet, how can such communities be part of such interaction, given the fact that their self-identity is still too fragile to bear the burden of equal partnership?

As Gellner has pointed out, when protagonists of reform remain in small intellectual circles, while the rest of the population stays within the world of closed group identities, transition may fail. This kind of situation creates the gap, through which populism, nationalism, xenophobia and civil war enter the transition process. This gap political parties – the usual instruments for violence avoidance – are unable to fill. On the contrary, by trying to mobilize votes, they will tend to reinforce group and community isolation in order to have an easily controlled captive electorate. For political parties to begin doing their job – to become vehicles for power-seeking without recourse to violence, and to structure into coherent policy the various demands of the various groups of the population – “society” needs to be in place first.

It is NGOs, working on the conceptual basis of “civil society” (defined by Alexis de Tocqueville as “the art of citizens to form associations” in order to address their common problems), who can help create “society” out of a mass of group identities and agendas jostling for space and recognition.

Civil society is “learning by doing”: it is involving people to discuss and do things together for the common good, irrespective of group identity. Involvement in this process is the way to ensure that, while communities and groups form and re-form their separate identities, on the larger arena (the settlement of common affairs) they behave like members of a common “polis”, and whose concerns, in this capacity, are with the (common) future rather than the (separate) past.

Civil society is an open and public act, much like living in a fish tank. This not only provides the transparency that leads to trust (in both the process and as regards the other participants), but also encourages agendas to go public, rather than to go violent.

Consequently, looking at any transition situation – whether it be Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine or Kazakhstan – the first question that anyone, wishing to avoid a spiraling into violence, must ask is: “Is there society here?” If the answer is in the negative, then the second question must be: “Are there civil society NGOs here?” If not, then it may not be worth anyone’s while to continue with questions such as: “Is there multiparty democracy here? Accountable government and independent media?” and so forth.

Notes

ⁱ Kuranov, Deyan et al. *The changes...* Sofia: Centre for Social Practices / Centre for Liberal Strategies, 1998, 335 (in Bulgarian).

ⁱⁱ Kuranov et al. *The changes...*, 338

ⁱⁱⁱ Kuranov et al. *The changes...*, 339

^{iv} Evgenii Dainov, *Political debate and the transition in Bulgaria* (Sofia: Foundation Bulgarian Science and Culture, 2000), 362 (in Bulgarian)

^v *Ibid*, 379-380

^{vi} Plamen Makariev, "Dialogue as the prospect for the domestic ethno-cultural situation," in *Aspects of the ethno-cultural situation in Bulgaria* (Sofia: ACCESS Association, 1994), 38. (in Bulgarian)

^{vii} *Daedalus* (Summer 1993)

^{viii} Vassil Garnizov, Deyan Kuranov, Evgenii Dainov, Ivan Krastev, Svetoslav Slavov, Tsvetozar Tomov, "Political stability and societal modernization," in *Aspects*, 327-328.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 383-384

^x Kuranov et al. *The changes...*, 435.

^{xi} Vassil Garnizov, "The violence, the nostalgia and the guilt," in Evgenii Dainov, Vassil Garnizov and Svetoslav Zanev. *The government and the people: conflicts in Bulgarian society in the middle of the 1990s* (Sofia: Centre for Social Practices / New Bulgarian University, 1998), 90.

^{xii} Evgenii Dainov, Mihail Nedelchev, teodora Gandova, Svetlana Lomeva, Maria Bakalova, Mira Yanova, Zornitsa Velchev, *The awakening: a chronicle of the Bulgarian civic uprising of January-February 1997* (Sofia: Democracy Network Program, 1998), 111.

^{xiii} *Ibid*, 132.

^{xiv} *Civil society and sustainable development: non-government organizations and development in the new century* (Sofia: Centre for Social Practices / USAID / ISC, 2001), 27-28.

^{xv} *Their Voices: the presence of minority communities in the Bulgarian media*, ed. Maria Pancheva (Sofia: EuropeAid Cooperation Office / Centre for Social Practices, 2002), 7-9.

^{xvi} Hakan Wiberg, "Former Yugoslavia: nations above all," in *Transformations of post-communist states*, ed. Wojciech Kosteci, Katarzyna Zukrowska and Bogdan J. Goralczyk (London: Macmillan press ltd, 2000), 216-217.