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The Migration Waves and the Public Opinion in Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the attitude of the Bulgarian population towards immigrants, which is expressed in its protest activities, in the media, in scientific debates and other public appearances of celebrities. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the main Bulgarian parties' attitudes towards the problems with immigrants.

Key words: protest, immigrant, public opinion

In the article there will be analyzed two aspects of the problem. First, the attitude of the Bulgarian people towards immigrants and second, the kind of evolution which is present in the thinking of Bulgarian political elite.

The first problem concerns the attitude of the Bulgarian population towards the immigrants, which is expressed in its protest activities, in the media, scientific debates and other public appearances of celebrities.

Real problems arise which is caused by the swelling number of immigrants. Therefore, the increasing tension of large masses of Bulgarian population is not accidental. One of the peculiarities of the protests against immigrants is the rapid organization of their opponents in different villages. Such speed is specific of smaller protests on other occasions. Another feature is the successful unification of people with different professional, political, ethnic and other characteristics. In protest activities on other occasions, this rally proved much more difficult to achieve, but as for immigrants, the locals tend to quickly forget their other differences. Their common fears unite them.

The protests against the immigrants are fierce even in villages where there are no Muslims, no risk of manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism, but instead there is unemployment, economic fears and hence, a high degree of intolerance towards people who walk into the role of competitors for jobs or for the resources of the social system. A similar pattern occurs in Western countries. For example, in Germany anti-migrant sentiments are the strongest not necessarily where there are many Muslims, but where there are the biggest problems with finding jobs and providing income. “The strong negativity to the new wave of migration came from Eastern European countries in European unit because they had to occupy unknown place. They began to build fences – Bulgaria and then Hungary. Moreover, they see the newcomers as natural competitors for the jobs for their own nationals as countries in Eastern Europe can’t provide them workplaces” [Chukov 2015: 24].

In protests against immigrants, people who worked themselves into a frenzy of rage because of high unemployment, poverty and petty crime are the most active. In addition, in Europe [Chetverikova 2015: 24], the fears of the population which are connected with the development of the informal economy or the illegal human trafficking grow up. All of these factors stimulate the feeling that the refugees and the economic migrants are a threat to the locals’ already severe life. That was a sufficient driver of their quick mobilization and organization in recent years. The strong negativity develops in the following directions – economic concerns, fears of diseases and infections, fears of distortion of the Christian identity of most Bulgarians and the public order.

The civic activism against immigrants is characterized by certain requirements of the citizens as for the government policy. These requirements are not based on more radical solving the problems of the population in countries that send immigrants to naturally decrease the amount of those willing to emigrate from those countries. But they would refer to the Bulgarian authorities’ policy, namely more equitable international relations, non-interference of Western countries in the life of other countries and nations, reduction of the greed, both on the part of transnational corporations and foreign investors. This would require a left internal and external government policy, less aggressive policy of “the golden billion”.

The demands of the Bulgarian protesters are largely selfish and superficial, with a high degree of inhumanity. But the worst is that it is characterized by hopelessness. The Bulgarian protesters stand behind proposals for a temporary, partial and palliative solution to these problems, namely building enclosures, limiting the rights of immigrants outside the camps, requesting the European Union to take care of them, etc. Usually, the controversy is to transfer the burden of people in one village or region to people from other villages and regions. But there are no protests in which protesters put the fundamental question about the reasons for the migration of these people and the responsibility of Bulgaria for this phenomenon. There are no hints of self-criticism on the part of the protesters in terms of supporting the particular Bulgarian governments as for the country’s involvement in aggressive wars and

policies or sending Bulgarian soldiers to the ranger missions around the world which might contribute to complicating the life of troubled regions.

In their desire to motivate better and to justify their aggressive attitude and behavior towards the immigrants, the protesters usually succumb to manipulation and treat these people like coming to erode the foundations of our “Christian” civilization. They do not realize that it is impossible for anyone to get so many people, including pregnant women and families with little children, to decide on taking a risky journey only to sow the plague of Islam in Europe. These people do not take into account that Islam itself contains both aggressive and peaceful elements. Which of them will come to the fore depends on the particular social situation of particular Muslims, on the specific economic and social situation.

According to a nationally representative survey of the sociological agency Alpha Research [2015], conducted on 5–7 September 2015, many Bulgarians (63%) believe that the refugee wave is a danger for their country. The vast majority of the respondents (89%) think that Bulgarian state have to fight with the people smugglers, and 82% support strengthening the border fence. The results indicate that there is strong support for restrictive measures.

At the same time, the study indicated greater acceptance of social measures to improve the work of social institutions to ensure better conditions for refugees – 75%. 44.5% of respondents were in favour of the need for coordination between a Bulgarian and European refugee policy. 11% demand a complete closure of borders. A completely opposite option – to accept refugees without restrictions – was approved by 3.7% of the respondents.

Absolutely not supported is the release of additional money from the state budget for refugees. According to survey results, 63% of the respondents support quotas to distributions of the migrants and 34% are opposed.

The survey registered growth of the fears, extreme sensitivity to political speeches and solutions, radicalization of public opinion, but within the institutional alternatives. The refugees continue to be perceived as “mass”. A study for the years 2012 and 2013 indicate the refugees were rather unknown, misunderstood, with a negative image in Bulgarian public opinion. The main concerns about the refugees have been associated with rising crime, diseases and infections.

The people with higher education, from the middle generation, are more likely to support European solutions. Less educated, most adults, but also the teenagers have more pronounced negative attitudes. This is probably under the influence of their greatest fears for the present and the future. They do not have clear ideas about the reasons for unemployment. Or they cannot focus their negative energy on those that cause real unemployment. It is, therefore, easy to direct their emotions and their actions to other, false causes of unemployment and poverty. Bright negative attitude towards immigrants is more obvious when we are talking about people with no direct contact, no experience in relationships with people of different nationality, ethnicity, religion, race [Deneva 2015]. More tolerant towards the immigrants are

the people who live in settlements with no refugee camps and where they are not directly affected or threatened by their presence.

The protesters do not distinguish well enough economic migrants from the people fleeing from wars. Or rather they do not distinguish them properly. In fact, the economic migrants are also driven mostly by unemployment and poverty in their countries, or because of the civil wars, climate changes, or of the external aggression against them, or because of the trends connected with the attitude of transnational corporations. And these are all reasons that largely stem from the behavior of the Western world.

The protesters are usually more likely to reduce immigrants and terrorists (who use migration waves) to a common denominator. They forget that the terrorists, even without these waves, can find ways to enter the countries they are interested in. Comparing terrorist organizations to people fleeing from wars or economic impasse is at least unfair.

In the media and in scientific publications there are some statements of people who advocate for welfare of immigrants. They are against putting all immigrants under a common denominator, against declaring them terrorists and people who have come up with the vile aim to break the identity of Western civilization, to undermine its economic, cultural, religious, etc. foundations.

At least there are honest supporters of the idea that the countries of the “golden billion” take enormous responsibility for the problems of the populations in the countries that the immigrants originally come from. So now these countries have to rethink basic points in this policy to minimize their problems and to reduce the immigration. These are mostly people from the scientific intelligentsia and mostly with a left ideological orientation.

According to Ivan Angelov [2015], the main guideline, which should work to minimize the flow of immigrants, is ceasing the instigation of civil wars, mostly by the US, but with the help of some European countries as well. Another direction is the realization of large-scale programs to support the poorest countries in the Middle East and Africa, because the poverty is more important, deep and lasting reason for the mass exodus of these people. Only the improvement of living conditions in their countries could keep there the millions who want to emigrate. If it does not happen, all enclosures in Europe will not be able to protect it from the rising waves of hungry and desperate people. No law enforcements will be able to stop human trafficking also.

Valeri Naydenov advises those who have inflamed wars in troubled countries, who have thrown most bombs, to accept the most refugees [Naydenov 2015b]. The same author recommends that the statehood in troubled countries should be restored and the Islamic State ought to be destroyed [Naydenov 2015a]. Andrey Raychev suggested Bulgaria and its allies not to finance the Islamic State by buying its oil, for example. “On the one hand, the Islamic State funds itself through the oil that finally we buy. On the other hand, it is financed by countries that claim to be our

allies, especially Saudi Arabia. If this is not stopped it means we fight with ourselves. Overall the immigrant problem in Europe is not created by immigrants but Europe... It's about a lasting trend in Europe to import its proletariat. Almost all people of physical labor in Western Europe are foreigners, and not from the Eastern Europe, just from the Arab countries and Turkey" [*Interview with Andrey Raychev* 2016].

In the network, there are views of people who recommend new forms of involvement of the immigrants in normal activity in the European countries. For example, it is possible through the establishment of the settlements in refugee camps. "On the Old Continent there are enough depopulated areas because of the relocation of the people in the big cities, but also because of the difficult climatic conditions" [*Bejanskite lageri stavat gradove na badeshteto* 2016]. There are a number of places that could recover economically with the help of the migrants. The situation already has provoked architects and designers to introduce migrant housing projects that go well beyond a traditional wagon. Economic adjustment of immigrants means new ideas, ambition for work and proving of part of them. It means work for construction business and other kinds of economic activity, new buyers, etc.

Some experts recommend that the influence of the immigrants on the economic development but also the demographic crisis should be considered [Shcherbakova 2014]. Already there are voices in favor of the potential benefits of admitting some immigrants [Chukov 2015]. It is recommended the selection of the admitted immigrants.

There is a slow increase in the number of public figures – journalists, intellectuals – who raise their voice for understanding and responding to the causes of migration flows. "The sooner Europe understands that we need rapid intervention to solve the problems in the Middle East and Africa, the smaller will be the damages" [Angelov 2015]. But in most cases their calls remain on a fairly abstract level, without stating the specific grounds, states and entities with the greatest responsibility for their action.

Among the majority of people, there remain dominant negative attitudes, fear of immigrants and the tendency to look at them like a competitor, a threat, a hostile. This is a very fertile ground for the emergence and spread of all kinds and variations of xenophobic, nationalist, racist, neo-Nazi beliefs, political ideologies and practices. And the results of the last presidential elections in Bulgaria in November 2016 show that more and more Bulgarians support such ideologies and political subjects. Both of these candidates (for president and vice president), who based their campaigns on the concerns resulting from the phenomenon of migration waves, won a lot of votes [Konstantinov 2016; Simeonov 2016].

The elite is largely interested in maintaining these sentiments of hatred and suspicion toward immigrants because it allows them to solve important domestic and foreign political problems, to control the behavior of the masses. Through the

attitude of the main political parties towards immigrants – their actual policies and their main media messages – the elite attempts to form an appropriate public opinion for their policy.

None of the main Bulgarian political parties supports the serious consideration of Bulgaria's foreign policy, its commitments to NATO, Bulgarian support of the policy of the United States and Western European countries in the North African countries and in a number of countries of the Muslim East. The focus of their policy and suggestions is on a proper distribution of refugees, their possible directing to other countries, Bulgaria's material support from the European Union for taking care of them and other similar measures. Actually, the Bulgarian government supports the USA, the most active countries in the European Union and NATO in their aggressive policy in many of troubled countries. It is hard to say that the government does something substantial in the most important question, namely that it influences the change in the policy of developed countries that instigate civil wars in the regions of the Middle East and North Africa and contribute to the increase of their economic and social problems. On the contrary, at least for now, they support this selfish policy of illegitimate opposition groups in the troubled countries, who, with the help of external forces, want to overthrow legitimate governments in their respective countries and create chaos, economic crisis and migration waves.

The main parties do not make what is necessary for reflection and public discussion about the possible economic use of immigrants, do not think seriously about their more innovative inclusion in economic activity. The nationalist parties increasingly stand for suggestions on and practices towards immigrants (it also concerns other European countries) [Tsurkan 2014: 116]. They actively participate in initiation and organization of protests against immigrants in different regions of the country. They stimulate the people's suspicion and even hatred toward immigrants. This was the behavior in recent years of the so-called "patriotic" political subjects (IMRO, Attack and NFSB). In the last local election, candidates for mayors and municipal councilors of IMRO, especially in Sofia, placed – as the center of their election campaigns – problems that immigrants create for the life of the local population in respective villages or neighborhoods. In the last presidential elections, the population's negative attitude towards immigrants helped the candidates to make the difficult decision to unite, thereby they reached an unexpectedly large electoral result.

In fact, there are no serious contradictions between Bulgarian politics and the influence of the European Union as a factor in forming the public opinion. Generally, the Bulgarian policy is as shortsighted as the European one.

To some degree, the Bulgarian government tries to defend the Bulgarian national interests in this regard, by requiring the EU's understanding and support to cope with the problems caused by the invasion of so many people in the country. But the government does it with even more moderate policy than politicians in Hungary. Furthermore, the protection of national interests involves using palliative, ineffective measures to deal with migratory pressure, rather than coping with the serious

reasons for such a situation. The Bulgarian policy was in line with the dominant pan-European policy in this regard.

There are two main directions of the government policy. The first direction is to reduce the flow of migrants to Bulgaria as far as their number is concerned. The second direction is to increase the aid by the European Union for their support. The main objective of the government is to contribute to the support of Turkey and Greece as the external borders of Europe by the European Union institutions. The aim is that these countries take on a greater burden as far as admitting migrants is concerned, while fewer of them enter the borders of Bulgaria. The aim is the fair distribution among particular states of the European Union and help for poorer states (including Bulgaria).

More and more involvement of armed forces in the fight against illegal migrants is planned. Border fences are built along the borders with Turkey to prevent illegal crossing. But in fact, very little work is being done against people smugglers who get rich on the back of refugees. In other words, the ruling parties contribute to the prosperity of this branch of the informal economy in the country. So work load of ordinary taxpayers, whose taxes these people have to care for, and, at the same time, for the benefit of one class of people who are involved in this illegal business. Increasingly large parts of the Bulgarian population make a living from this business. Even recently, there has been a scandal which concerned a voluntary group of citizens (they pretended to be police officers) and their alleged attempts to repress refugees, in fact to rob them.

Gradually, among the political elite, there appeared voices that criticize this policy which causes migratory waves. But they are on an abstract, ineffective level. Vice president of Bulgaria Margarita Popova argues that “the talks on diplomatic solutions require the big countries to sit at the negotiating table, as we bear part of the blame for what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East. Because this exodus will not stop. That’s the problem” [Popova 2015: 10]. President Plevneliev says that marginalization, poverty, social exclusion cause terrorism and radicalism. But he does not give reasons for the existence of poverty and marginalization. With some approximation to the correct position – unlike the Bulgarian president – Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić recommends that the Western countries should build factories for refugees in their own countries.

It can hardly expect a significant turnaround in perceptions and policies of Bulgarian ruling elite in this respect, because paying attention to the real causes of the situation of those nations would require self-criticism and criticism of the behavior of countries, which together are members of one union or which are Bulgaria’s geopolitical friends. This means calling into question our foreign policy orientation as a whole. And the conditions for such a thing at present and near future seem unlikely to appear.

The crisis situation has exacerbated the contradictions between countries in the European Union – between old and new member states; between poorer and richer; between those who firmly support the USA in its policies towards the troubled countries (Germany, France, UK) and those who have more critical and reserved position.

Europe continues to conceal the truth about the movement of migrants. “Now Europe is the victim of a great migration from Asia and Africa. But it is powerless because it stubbornly refuses to name the real culprits – its own politicians (...) Sarkozy has huge personal contribution to the destruction in Libya, which marked the beginning of the refugee wave. If countries that destroyed Libya, Syria and Iraq, admit evil things, the solution to the refugee problem becomes obvious – as much as bombs thrown, so people can accommodate” [Naydenov 2015b]. In fact, the fault of politicians is that they serve their economic elites and respect the opinions of their peoples. And they all tend for maintaining high levels of prosperity to trample the rights of other nations.

Both in Europe and in Bulgaria, instead of seeking and finding the truth, the focus is on the danger of the Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism and terrorists and all Muslims are loaded with all the blame for the events. The aim is to focus the fears and hatred of public opinion to them, and not to the policy of the developed Western countries [Pinyugina 2014]. So does Turkey, so does the ruling elite in Bulgaria.

“The picture of the three-year-old drowned child Aylan moved the world to tears but did not stop it from glossing over the truth. Why, for instance, all media and politicians called Aylan a »Syrian« and missed it was the child from a Kurdish city of Kobanî. This is a very important detail!

For example, Recep Erdoğan claimed that he was moved to tears by the death of the child and that the West is guilty that Assad had not been overthrown. But we all know that Erdoğan *de facto* is at war with the Kurds in Syria, i.e. with the ethnic group of which the boy was the representative. Moreover, he is from the city of Kobanî, which has long had nothing to do with the power of Assad, nor with Syria” [Naydenov 2015b].

So far, the European Union is placed in selfish and compassionate framework of measures, thinks of ways to distribute the refugee, to make a fund to subsidize the countries of North and Sub-Saharan Africa and other similar measures, but does not review the overall policy towards countries that contributed to those problems. So the Bulgarian policy “butts like a stone” in this dominant and bleak orientation.

CONCLUSIONS

The moods of the majority of Bulgarians are the result of their real and justified economic fears, as well as the manipulative influences from various internal and external factors. They are characterized by a huge dose of selfishness and inhumanity, unwillingness to know better the causes of the processes and trends. These Bulgarians stand for proposals for a temporary, partial and palliative solution to the problems. The influence of other Bulgarians who support promising, but difficult to implement, options for solving the problems is void and there are no conditions for his substantial increase in the near future.

It is hardly to expect a significant reversal in the orientation of the Bulgarian ruling elite in this regard. This would be associated with significant changes in the Bulgarian domestic and foreign policy for which currently there are no sufficient conditions.

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