

# The White Piano, Or the Dilemma of Creative versus Contestatory (e-)Citizenship

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*Abstract:* The essay discusses the question of ethical/political versus creative/aesthetical aspects of contemporary, social media based protest. It takes as a case study the Bulgarian #Resign movement of the year 2013 as part of the global dynamics of protest. The latter are characterised by the emergence of a global protest vocabulary, including a piano being played in public squares from Gezi to Maidan, where protesters meet and creatively articulate their agenda. The essay applies two research models to the case of the Bulgarian #Resign movement, the *diffusion model* of Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni and the *resonance model* of Jérôme E. Roos and Leonidas Oikonomakis. By doing so it analyses the place, the specifics and the parallels of the Bulgarian protest movement within the global contexts of creative versus contestatory citizenship.

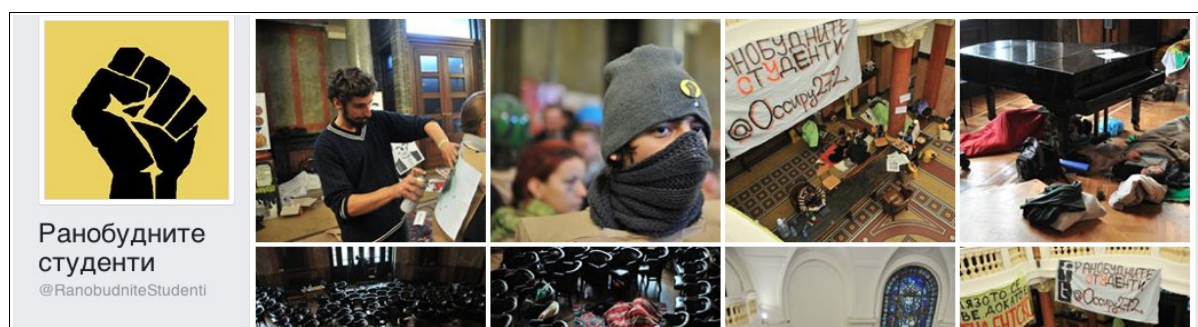
*Keywords:* protest, Bulgaria, #Resign, contestatory citizenship, diffusion model, resonance model

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A white piano became an icon of the anti-government /anti-oligarchy protests in Sofia in 2013. It appeared one summer day in the square in front of the National Assembly. There were no genre restrictions: both professional musicians and ordinary protesters played on it. Often no one did. But it was an important part of the scenery, a visible sign of the theatricalisation and aestheticisation of contestation. The effects were manifold. The most visible one was festive-carnavalesque, intensifying the affective and aesthetic experience of the protests. The second one brought protest-memory up-to-date at a deeper level: rhythm and rock dynamised the post-communist velvet revolution of the 1990s, art stars were emblematic of the democratic changes and personified a new understanding of politics— anarchic and creative, grass-roots, informal, not channelled through parties and organisations, but through art and activism. The third dimension of the ‘white piano’ effect was

related to lifestyle: the summer protests became part of the urban way of life, after work citizens went to the square with friends or to meet friends; piano, music and atmosphere wove the canvas of a liberal protest community.

**Illustration 1.** Protest vocabulary with piano. Screenshot from The Awakened Students' [Ranobudnite studenti] Facebook profile



Source: [https://www.facebook.com/RanobudniteStudenti/photos\\_stream](https://www.facebook.com/RanobudniteStudenti/photos_stream) (28.08.2016)

This civic-urban-affective-aesthetic mix was blown up one day when journalists discovered a white piano also in other protests, in other countries and cities. The piano became a protagonist in passionate political controversies: the critics of the protests used it as a key argument to deny the authenticity of the Bulgarian protests and to represent them as cypcat and imported; the defenders argued that it was a creative element of the citizen mobilisations in public squares.

I have begun with this example in order to raise two theoretical questions. The first is whether the causality and logic of the protests is autochthonous or allochthonous. In Bulgarian political discourse, this question was hotly debated in the dilemma of whether the protests were authentic or imported. Theory also addresses this question and suggests alternative—but not extreme, polar opposite—answers. The theoretical translation of the dilemma is expressed in two models: the *diffusion model* of Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni (2014), and the *resonance model* of Jérôme E. Roos and Leonidas Oikonomakis (2014). I will analyse the arguments of these two models in order to see which of them is more adequate in explaining the Bulgarian protest movements and mobilisations campaigns. The second question is whether the piano distances citizens from the purpose of protests. The purpose of protests is political; the piano evokes the playful, the aesthetic, the theatrical. They crystallise as two poles of the dilemma of activism versus aestheticisation of mobilisations. This dilemma will be conceptualised through the prism of two different types of citizenship: creative and contestatory. The second part of this analysis discusses the questions of which type of citizenship was forged in the streets of Sofia, and which one continued to function even after the citizens moved from the public-square to the virtual agora. The interferences between the two in contestatory movements are briefly sketched out in the next paragraph.

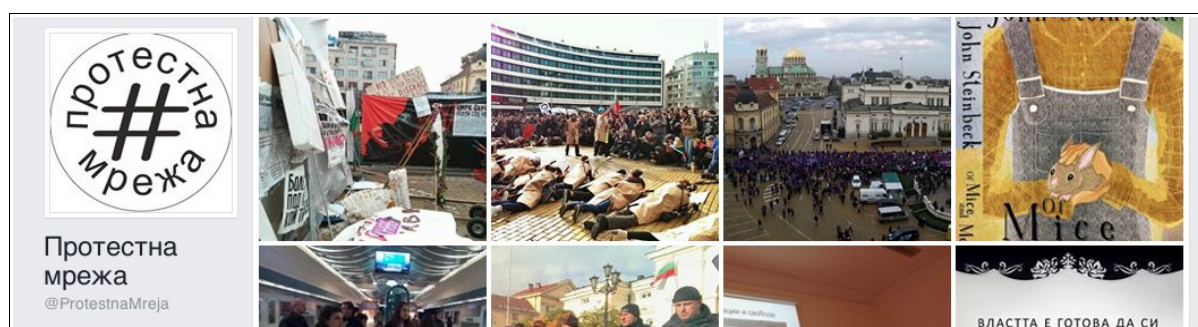
The first theoretical question refers to activity, the second to actors. The first is about the essence of mobilisations, the second is about the new citizenship that is forged in the virtual and the public-square contestatory agora.

## The contestatory agora: virtual and public-square

The Bulgarian protest year 2013 is often heuristically divided into two waves, the anti-monopoly protest of the winter-spring season 2012/2013 and the anti-oligarchy summer protests starting in June which lasted until October, with a late culmination in the students' occupation of Sofia university. The first wave is considered to have been motivated by economical hardships, more precisely the rise of energy costs. Together with a wave of self-immolations unprecedented in Bulgarian history, the spring protests led to the dismissal of the government led by the conservative right-wing party GERB. But only some months later, after the new government was elected, a coalition led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party BSP, indignation flared up anew. The decisive day was 14 June 2013, when the newly elected government appointed Delyan Peevski—a lawyer and media entrepreneur with allegedly murky ties to the underground economy and to the political oligarchy—as head of the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security [Darzhavnata agentsiya 'Natsionalna sigurnost' DANS]. As a result of the new cycle of protest, his candidature was revoked and the Socialist government had to step down.<sup>1</sup> Peevski as well as the politicians who backed his candidature nevertheless continue to influence Bulgarian politics.

Back in June 2013, the intimate connection between the virtual and the public-square agora would go on to be forged, expanded, innovated and transformed, during the whole protest. Paradoxically, the most conspicuous expression of this connection was to be found in an absence—the absence of leadership. The protesters' refusal to line up behind a particular person or small group of leaders made them turn to network forms of coordination and information. Emblematically, the collective subject actor that emerged from the waves of street protests called itself *Protest Network* [Protestna mreža].

**Illustration 2.** The multiple facets of protest. Screenshot from the *Protest Network's* Facebook profile



Source: [https://www.facebook.com/ProtestnaMreja/photos\\_stream](https://www.facebook.com/ProtestnaMreja/photos_stream) (28.08.2016)

The net and operation in networks—online and offline—are the key transformations of the new actors. Although the Bulgarian anti-oligarchy protests of 2013 are a perfect illustration of the performative power of digital speech and of its mobilising role, of the intimate connec-

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Bulgarian protest year 2013 see issue 13 of *Digital Icons* 'Digital Creativity in Times of Crisis: Bulgaria in the Global Context' as well as Gueorguieva (2015), Hallberg (2013), Ivancheva (2013), Junes (2013), Krastev (2013, 2014a, 2014b), Schmidt (2015).

tion of the virtual and the public-square agora, this connection is neither innate nor spontaneous or automatic. In more detailed studies on the development of citizen protests and e-democracy (Krasteva 2016, 2015a, 2015b), I have identified three main stages in the connection of online and offline mobilisations in Bulgaria.

At the initial stage of mobilisations of labour unions, this connection was still weak, the internet was a parallel reality that was unable to decisively intervene in the agenda and leadership of the mobilisations. A characteristic example is the nationwide teachers' strike in 2007—a milestone with regard to the usage of new media for the purpose of mobilisation. The internet community took its first timid steps: although the web was present in their actions, it did not succeed in dethroning or even rivalling the trade union structures. The discourse was ambitious: the largest Bulgarian portal for teachers ([www.teachers.bg](http://www.teachers.bg)) called itself the 'network of teacher-innovators' but remained declarative, with piecemeal results: 'The teachers failed to turn their passive position of using forums and blogs into an active one' (Nikova 2011: 107). The teachers' strike was a mixed genre: its trade-union character and demands were classic, but its forty-day (impressively long) duration for that era, the sharp controversies on internet forums and the emergence of outstanding figures among the teachers independent of the trade union leaders, all carried elements of a nascent contestatory (e-)citizenship.

The second key stage in the connection between the virtual and the public-square agora is when the protests went green. The green mobilisations, concerned with ecological issues and the preservation of natural resorts from touristic usages, inversed the online/offline relationship. If in the case of the teachers' strike the virtual voices were parallel and lent it a polyphonic sound, in that of the environmental protests they began to play first fiddle: 'It seems that the internet will prove to be the new space for civil resistance, something like a new battleground with new guerillas' (Kanev and Krastanova 2009: 14).

This third, mature, stage in the interaction between the protest energy on the net and in the public square began with the sketched above anti-oligarchy protests in 2013. They gave birth to a contestatory humour. The contestatory public square itself donned digital garb, and the street adopted the signs of the e-street: *#DANSwithme*. The slogans were written in digital slang: *#Occupy...* This digital slang is trans-linguistic: Bulgarian, English and digital symbols are mixed without rules, with playful imagination and free creativity. It is an expression and carrier of the rebellious spirit of the internet pioneers, of the desire not to be tamed and subjugated but to innovate, to experiment, to (re)create at all levels, beginning—and ending—with language. The language of the protests, forged in the digital workshops, is eloquent proof that the internet and its users had turned from an assistant into a conductor that determines the rhythm, the sound and the accents: a conductor that leads—and inspires—the orchestra. 'Both previously, and now, the internet means freedom':<sup>2</sup> by its great normative power, the post-communist internet has been akin to the Arab Spring in arousing a vision for—and euphoria about—political change through the new media.<sup>3</sup>

This brief paragraph shows how the two tendencies—of citizen mobilisations and of e-democracy—were parallel at first, but then gradually converged in the Bulgarian mobilisa-

<sup>2</sup> A slogan from the 2012 protests against ACTA.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical view on the potential of the internet and the new media for social and political revolutions see for example Morozov (2011).

tions and were transformed into active two-way flexible interferences. It is precisely this syncretic contestatory activism, mixing online and offline forms in different proportions, that is at the centre of this analysis.

Closing the gap between the virtual and the public-square agora, the Bulgarian mobilisations were in line with the global tendency of forming contestatory citizenship online and offline. The contestatory spirit; radical criticism; ambition to construct a different, non-hierarchical world of networks; and participation and sharing, have been characteristic of the internet since its beginning. The relationship between contestation and the internet is so intimate that it playfully inverts cause and effect: 'If the indignados did not exist, the internet would have created them' (Krasteva 2013a: 23). The digital indignados are an inevitable product and subject of the internet. Their predecessors were the hackers with their taste for freedom and contestation as well as with their digital virtuosity; with the self-confidence that cyberspace is 'their' space. The digital indignados are also the public-square indignados. Contestatory culture is formed and forged in the virtual sphere, on forums and social networks before their outrage and energy floods the public squares. The virtual is before, during, and after the public square. Ante has two temporalities: a longer temporality when the contestatory e-citizen is being constructed, and the turbulent, almost lightning temporality of the launch of protests. The public square exponentially intensifies virtual communications and assigns them additional functions: to organise and mobilise, to persuade and inspire, to discuss and optimise. When the indignados withdraw from the public squares they do not withdraw their outrage and criticism from the public sphere; they expound it in the digital agora. The post-protest is a test for the significance of the messages and the vitality of the actors.

### **The piano: authentic or imported? Or, diffusion or resonance**

The piano is not always white, but we find a piano in different protests. Davide Martello's grand piano is black and we see it amidst the thousands sitting around it in Istanbul at the height of the protests in Gezi Park on 12 June 2013. The music and the atmosphere were so powerful that even the police officers merged with the demonstrators. The musician recalls that he really felt at the time that 'music can change politics. Something that stops violence—something like art, music—I've never seen that before. The policemen took off their [helmets] and were sitting down and talking to the people. It was very peaceful' ('6 Powerful Images...', 2013). The piano in the protest square is a cause of the engaged artist: Davide Martello's aesthetic-civic ambition is to play his moving self-made grand piano in conflict zones around the world. The 'Piano Player of Kiev', playing in front of heavily-armed riot police, has become emblematic of the path from fact to symbol, from the photograph of pianist Markiyan Matsekh playing Chopin and Queen's 'We Are the Champions' in the Maidan on 7 December 2013 (ibid.) to the poster—a stylised image of the creative citizen protesting against the powers-that-be, who are separated from their citizens by heavy security.

The aesthetic-creative aspect of the protest piano will be analysed in the next paragraph. The significant theoretical question here is the connection between the common stage design and the essence of the protests. This common contestatory stage design was mobilised in the Bulgarian political debates as an argument for the copycat, imported, non-authentic character

of the protests. This critical argument inverts cause and protest: the protests erupted as a revolt against the appointment of Delyan Peevski, against backroom politics and the ties between political and media elites. The piano was mobilised in this criticism not as an artistic but as a political phenomenon, illustrating the transnational character of the protests that were alleged to have been prepared and stage-managed from the outside and to have been merely waiting for an occasion to be launched in Bulgaria. Beyond the pathos of the political rhetoric, one can find fundamental theoretical questions: how do protests arise; what is the correlation between cause and occasion; what is the correlation between national diachrony and transborder synchrony in each particular contestation.

The year 2013 was the year of protests in Bulgaria. The year 2013 was summed up by Time magazine through the prism of global protests—from India to Turkey, from Egypt to Chile, from Thailand to Ukraine: ‘The year 2013 saw incessant calls for change, with social media continuing to play a crucial role in mobilizing demonstrators’ (‘2013: The Year...’, 2013).

Two theoretical models compete in explaining the mobilisational waves of protest and democracy movements: the diffusion model and the resonance model. ‘Why was it suddenly kicking off everywhere?’ (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014: 117). This is Paul Mason’s provocative ‘translation’ of the first model. The *diffusion model* of Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni emphasises that both protest visions and protest practices share some characteristics: ‘these mobilisations [are] part of a transnational wave of contention in which activists—but also ideas and tactics, frames and strategies—positioned themselves beyond national borders’ (della Porta and Mattoni 2014: 4). The similarities concern the type of actors, the role of networks and the protest performances:

[T]hey involved massive numbers of protestors who appeared to be autonomous from the usual political actors, and including some grassroots groups active in the past cycles of contention. They also all employed social-networking sites, combined with other web applications and Internet tools, in conjunction with face-to-face gatherings and the deployment of quite radical, contentious performances, amongst them the physical occupation of public spaces. (della Porta and Mattoni 2014: 2)

How can this transnational synchrony of the protest mobilisations be explained? A productive direction of theorisation is the concept of the network society. ‘Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture’ (Castells 2010: 500-501). Manuel Castells’ concept of the network society describes insightfully the environment in which citizens are formed, developed, and empowered. The new social movements

are networked in multiple forms.<...> [They include] social networks online and offline, as well as pre-existing social networks, and networks formed during the actions of the movement. Networks are within the movement, with other movements around the world, with the Internet blogosphere, with the media and with society at large. (Castells 2012: 221)

From its earliest days, the internet has been about networking: not just networks of wires and hubs, but networks of people. Protests, too, are always about networks. Two dimensions of the networked existence of e-citizens are immediately relevant to this analysis: their ever-growing connectivity, their inclusion into various networks of debate and action; the non-hierarchical understanding of authority and influence—the internet flattens pyramids, and hierarchies lose symbolic capital. The new social movements ‘are usually *leaderless movements*. Not because of the lack of would-be leaders, but because of the deep spontaneous distrust of most participants in the movement towards any form of power delegation’ (Castells 2012: 224; emphasis in the original). Networked e-citizens are radical egalitarians.

The second, *resonance model* does not deny the role of networks and of connections between the national and the transborder context, but it hierarchises them in the opposite way, giving priority to the local causes of protests. The resonance of protests between one place and another is translated in terms of inspiration: the occupation of Tahrir Square inspired the Indignados de Puerta del Sol, the Greek protesters have been inspired by the Indignados and the Arab Spring, etc., but crucial for explaining the protests according to the *resonance model* of Jérôme E. Roos and Leonidas Oikonomakis are ‘the deep causes of mobilisation, which always and already lay hidden underneath the social surface in the form of shared structural conditions and pre-existing local movement experience and activist networks’ (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014: 120).

Which of these two models—diffusion or resonance—is more adequate in explaining the Bulgarian protests? Two differences between them will justify the answer to this question. The first is their openly political, not socioeconomic, character. Unlike the anti-capitalist anti-austerity discourse of many mobilisations, the Bulgarian protests of the summer 2013—the so called second wave, following the more socially motivated protests of the beginning of the same year—were against the non-transparent politics and behind-the-scene ways of constituting the elite. The second specific feature of the Bulgarian mobilisations of summer 2013 is their clearly declared right-wing character: their criticism was directed against the left-wing coalition government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. At the same time, the public-square piano was not invented by the Bulgarian protests, it was inspired by global mobilisations to which the Bulgarian ones were akin in terms of stage design as well as of images and imaginaries—occupy, sit-in, etc. The resonance model as a ‘thin’ model of diffusion (Mattoni and della Porta 2014: 285) that mixes in a subtler way the transnational inspiration and the local challenges looks more relevant to the Bulgarian protests, as it conceives ‘the local movements as nodes in a transnational network than as tree-like branches in different countries. Rather than mindless imitators, perhaps we should speak of a multiplicity of movements collectively experimenting with alternative democratic models and learning new lessons in the process’ (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014: 132).

The resonance model resonates better than the diffusion one both with the protesters’ self-confidence in the ‘authenticity’ of their mobilisations and with the author’s approach of studying the emergence of the new post-communist civic agency and the experimentation of the new contestatory citizenship. The ‘labels’ chosen by the two approaches in naming the new mobilisations also differ in their capacity to grasp analytically the Bulgarian protests. ‘Social movements in time of crisis’ (della Porta and Mattoni 2014) has less Bulgarian refer-



ents than the ‘real democracy movement’ (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014) which expresses more adequately the inspiration of the anti-oligarchy protests.

### **Conclusions: Creative versus contestatory citizenship**

The piano illustrates that art is an invariable attribute of the global stage design of protests. Art materialised in the Bulgarian public square in the form of a recreation by a top fashion model of the famous painting of the French Revolution by Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*. Until a year ago, Bulgarian students did not know what a lie-in was, but now they were forming the word ‘resign’ with their bodies. Protest came to be seen as an aesthetic of the urban. ‘Protest is a celebration of civic ingenuity and sense of humour, being in the public square is a very happy experience. This is a wonderful performance, it is the urban culture of artistry,’ notes the Bulgarian philosopher and university professor Kalin Yanakiev (2013). The protest became a lifestyle and a city sight: foreign guests were first taken to the public square, and only then to the prime tourist destinations such as the Boyana church with its medieval wall paintings—like my daughter’s Chinese friend who was fascinated by her first lesson in civic engagement; like the British professor who had never protested together with his own students but who accompanied his Bulgarian friend who had joined the protest with vibrant curiosity, almost straight from the airport.

The interpretations of the aestheticisation of the protests are along three axes: ethics/aesthetics, effectiveness of the protests, creative subjectivity. The first one is critical and ethical, underlining

the substitution of the aesthetical for the ethical. To achieve an effect, small groups <...> do not begin by expressing interests or reproducing moral values; the main thing is to invent an interesting form that will attract attention. The effort of activists shifts from organising the masses on to <...> the carnival, the image, the metaphor. (Ditchev 2011: 20)

The second interpretation is also critical and more instrumental; it assumes that the theatrics distance the protest from its political goal: #Resign. This view examines the carnivalesque element as a ‘wrapping’, but in an explanatory mode that is opposite to Christo’s, the renowned international artist with Bulgarian origins. Whereas Christo’s wrappings conceal in order to reveal, the carnivalesque wrapping conceals in order to conceal the true essence of the protest. Hence the critical pathos.

The third interpretation does not view the aestheticisation of the protests in the context of normativity, or in terms of form and wrapping. It examines the aestheticisation of the protests with regard to the constitution of creative contestatory subjectivity. This interpretation is positive; it perceives creativity, experimentation, lack of inhibition, as an expression and a tool for the formation of social actors defined in the perspective of authenticity, innovativeness, contestation (Krasteva 2013b). We know from Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello that after 1968, political critique developed in two directions: a social one, aimed at transforming power relations; and an ‘artistic’ one, seeking to transform individuals in terms of authenticity and creativity. The virtual is one topos of ‘artistic’ critique (Cardon 2010; Krasteva 2013b); the public square is the other. Both interfere in the consolidation of contestatory cit-



izenship. The cyberculture was inspired by and builds on 1960s counterculture.<sup>4</sup> Rebellious against consumerism, conformism, and materialism, the hippies of the 1960s extolled the utopia of freedom and autonomy, rejected pyramids in favour of networks, and happily sacrificed authority on the altar of new social bonds and solidarity. The internet, social networks, blogs and other digital gadgets have now been added to this mix of contestation, values and utopias, ultimately producing the alchemy of contemporary cyberculture (Cardon 2010; Krasteva 2013a).

The aestheticisation of the protest does not help them to achieve their goals because it softens the political clash and the acuteness of their demands. The piano is not 'effective' in the short term with regard to the outcome of the protest, but it is productive in the long term with regard to the development of contestatory citizenship, which is also creative and capable of thinking differently, of looking for ways out of dead ends, of formulating utopias and political alternatives.

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<sup>4</sup> See Hafner / Lyon (1996), whose history of the internet underlines the web's strong ties to its predecessors in the military and defense industries in the Cold War period.

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