



The Student Occupation of Sofia University in 2013: Communication Patterns for Building a Network of Support

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Abstract: The essay offers a case study of the student occupation of Sofia University in October-December 2013, which occurred as a continuation of the political turmoil of the same year in Bulgaria. Throughout the year 2013 Bulgarians went out in the streets to express their outrage with ‘monopolies’, oligarchic economic structures, political corruption and unresponsive government. The two previous waves of protest are briefly outlined to provide the context of emergence of the student occupation. The text analyses the strategies for building networks of support, borrowing a theoretical framework from Manuel Castells in his study of the social movements from 2011. The present study is grounded on in-depth anthropological interviews with participants and data collected through online ethnography. The conclusions identify the reasons for the difficulties met by the occupying students: while admitting faults in establishing communication patterns, they created more lines of division than common grounds for collective action.

Keywords: Social movements, Bulgaria 2013, protests, student occupation

When in December 2012, the annual award for contribution to human rights ‘Human of the Year’ went to ‘The protester from Orlov most’ we did not know that this was only the beginning. Earlier in June, protesters gathered on Orlov most [Eagles’ Bridge], a central bridge and junction in downtown Sofia, and blocked the traffic in protest against a Forestry Act putting in danger the natural reserve in Vitosha Mountain, near Sofia. The actions were a part of the wave of ecologically motivated protests that stood against illegal cutting of wood in different mountain regions in Bulgaria and against expansive construction on the seaside, which is active since 2006. As a result of the actions of the protesters of Orlov most, the Forestry Act in question was repealed. This was the first huge success of a massive citizens’ movement, and a new burst of protest energy followed in 2013. Thousands of citizens flooded the streets of Sofia and other big cities expressing their indignation with corruption and the arrogance of the ruling class.

Bulgaria in 2013—a brief overview

In 2013, three big waves of protests were staged in the main cities in Bulgaria: the protests from February-March (the so-called February protests, or winter protests); the anti-government demonstrations during the summer months; and the student occupations that started on 23 October from Sofia University and spread over fourteen other universities across the country.

The winter protests were defined by their participants as protests against monopolies—the suppliers of electricity, central heating, water; but most importantly against electricity distribution networks. The central motive was the unaffordable bills for electricity, received during the winter months. In February and March 2013 in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv and other cities, tens of thousands of protesters were on the streets during the day, in the evenings, or on massive Sunday marches.

During the same period, a parallel series of protests starting earlier in January 2013 (or already in late December 2012) defended another cause: the protection of natural reserves in Pirin and the seaside. The environmental cause was championed especially in Sofia, with significantly fewer participants. The actions took place every Tuesday and Thursday during January and February, provoked by a particular government act allowing for more development and construction of ski facilities in the mountain of Pirin.

Image 1. The banner with the slogan ‘Pirin is in trouble, save it now!’ held by the green activists during the demonstration on 24 February 2013.



Source: Valentina Gueorguieva

The last manifestation of this series was on 19 February 2013. The ‘greens’ were present at the Sunday demonstration on 24 February, and stood alongside the march against monopolies, with a huge green banner in protection of Pirin (*‘Pirin e v beda, spasete go sega!’* [Pirin is in trouble, save it now!]). After this action, ‘the greens’ retreated from the streets, and did not participate in the following Sunday marches in March 2013.

Varna was the most active city during the winter protests, reaching 50 thousand on certain days. They were undoubtedly prompted by the economic difficulties of the population of the coastal sea, whose major income comes from tourism during the summer months. But a local specificity has to be underlined—the city is controlled by a group of three important local businessmen, known as TIM, who hold a monopoly on tourism and related services, on transport and infrastructure, on local media. The same group was related to the organized crime in the past and allegedly has a strong influence on the local authorities, namely the Municipal Council of Varna and its mayor (Hristova and Krastev 2014).

On 20 February 2013, Plamen Goranov, an environmentalist and former activist of the anti-fracking movement, set himself on fire in front of the municipality in Varna. He demanded the resignation of the Municipal Council of Varna. (Five more men immolated themselves during February–March 2013.) On the same day, in Sofia, prime-minister Boyko Borissov resigned a couple of months before the end of his term, in response to outbreaks of violence by the police against the protesters of Sofia during the previous night, 19 February 2013 (a couple of people were lightly injured). Early parliamentary elections were scheduled for 12 May 2013. Regardless of the resignation, the mass demonstrations continued till mid-March.

In short, during in the winter of 2013 Bulgaria saw a culmination of parallel protests over a number of different causes. The result was a disintegration into several diverging movements and the loss of energy of the revolt. Some of the movements retreated from the streets, others formed political parties¹ and as a consequence lost the confidence of their supporters.

The early elections on 12 May 2013 were won by the party of Boyko Borissov, who nevertheless did not achieve the desired majority of 121 MPs (out of 240 MPs in the Bulgarian parliament) and was not willing to form a government. This led to a further deepening of the political crisis, and a couple of small protests took place at the end of May, with the appointment of the new, Socialist led government headed by Plamen Oresharski, a financial expert. The second big wave of protests started on 14 June 2013. It became known under the hashtag #ДАHCwithme (where DANS is the acronym that stands for the name of the National Security Agency in Bulgarian, and in Cyrillic it is spelled the same as the English word ‘dance’). The manifestations went on a daily basis until the beginning of August, when the Parliament dissolved for a one–month recess. In September they re-appeared on the streets of Sofia in smaller numbers and weakening strength.

¹ One of the leaders, Yanaki Ganchev, formed a party called ‘Citizens’ Movement Orlov Most—for the Change’. The party tried to enter a broader coalition with nationalist parties, but did not succeed in the negotiations and did not present themselves at the elections of 12 May 2013. Another party, ‘Democratic Citizens’ Initiative’, was formed by other three leaders of the February protests—Yanko Petrov, Anguel Slavchev and Doncho Dudev. They won 15,482 votes at the elections of 12 May 2013 (equivalent to 0.437 percent). Data from the Central Election Commission, <http://results.cik.bg/pi2013/rezultati/index.html> (accessed 8 March 2015).

The incident that re-ignited the anger of the masses was the appointment of a media mogul, Delyan Peevski, suspected of having links with criminal circles, as director of the State Agency for National Security. The nomination was seen by the citizen as an intolerable act of lobbyism, connecting the government with the corporate interests of big business alliances and mafia bosses. With the progress of collective actions, claims increased in number: the resignation of the government, changes in the Electoral Code, the limitation and the criminalization of the presence of elements of oligarchy in the current government, ‘the dismantling of the State based on the plutocratic model’ (Kharlamov 2013).

Image 2. A protester holding a banner ‘I do not want GERB back, I want future!’ Photo taken on 19 June 2013.



Source: Valentina Gueorguieva

During the summer 2013 protests, Orlov most—a key traffic intersection in the centre of Sofia—was blocked every evening for a period of about two months. Protesters reclaimed the street and performed various actions on the spot: informal gatherings, artistic performances, sports games and different kind of leisure activities, games for families with children, and an assembly—a form of political debate and instrument for taking decisions about the collective actions, adopted from the global Occupy movement. It was initiated by the activists of the movement for direct democracy, and attracted from 10 to 50 participants.

While a big group of participants stayed on the bridge during the whole evening, the major part of the protesters continued their march, passing by the headquarters of all the big political parties. They would follow the same route of almost 7 km every evening. Protesters expressed their anger against the political elites, and at the same time blocked the traffic in the central part of Sofia for hours. There was no violence during these marches, no public or private property was destroyed. In August, when Parliament's summer recess began, the number of protesters went down and the daily manifestation gradually lost their initial energy.

On 23 October 2013, a group of students from the Sofia University who chose the name '*Ranobudnite Studenti*' [The early rising students] occupied the largest lecture hall in the central building of the university, demanding the resignation of the government and the dissolution of the 42nd Parliament. A few days later, they took the whole central building of the Sofia University and chained its doors, proclaiming a full occupation for an 'indefinite' term. The wave of occupations spread out to other universities in Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, and gained the support of the professors and the citizenry.

But the nodal point remained the main building of the Sofia University, where representatives of other occupations came in to discuss their joint actions. Later on 'The early rising students' (hereafter only *Ranobudnite*) established a whole structure of working groups, special logistics and other services, press centre, artistic unit, and the Staff [*Shtab* in Bulgarian]—the coordinating and governing unit. The faces of the initiators, who formed the Staff, became familiar through their media appearances. They were recognized as leaders of the student occupations.

The protesting students allied themselves with the summer anti-government movement and were seeking support outside the universities, from the larger population. Their main actions were performed outside the university campuses—on the streets of Sofia, in collaboration with other protestors.

Two popular marches took place in Sofia on 1 and 10 November 2013, with students and their professors leading marches of ten thousand participants or more. The actions of the students re-ignited a sparkle in the #DANSwithme protests, with a couple of more massive gatherings on 12 November, and in December 2013. During the night of 17 to 18 November the students voted a controversial decision to dismantle the full occupation of the central building of the Sofia University, and resign in the ceremonial hall—the Aula—in what they called a symbolic occupation. Their efforts were directed at more outward oriented actions, such as the marches on 14 and 26 December 2013, supported again by masses of the population of Sofia, and by the self-organized Bulgarian emigrants, coming home for Christmas.

By the end of January 2014 the occupations in all the universities lost energy and support, and the headquarters at the Sofia University announced the end of the occupation. The goal—the resignation of the government of Plamen Oresharski—was not achieved. In February and March, the protest activities of #DANSwithme died away.

In the summer of 2014, the government announced its plans to resign and dissolve the 42nd Parliament on 6 August 2014. Early parliamentary elections were scheduled for 5 October 2014, and won by the political party GERB [‘Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria’], but they obtained a smaller number of places in the parliament, than in the May 2013 early elections. The party’s leader and ex-prime-minister Boyko Borissov formed a government and took office on 7 November 2014.

However, the resignation of Plamen Oresharski did not come as a result of the protest actions from the previous year. It came when no one expected it anymore. The official motive given to the public was the poor performance of the ruling party in the elections for European Parliament in May 2014, and some misunderstandings with the coalition partner that came as a result. The anti-government movement from 2013 lost its protest energy and died of its own ‘natural’ death, leaving a couple of offspring organizations: the Protest Network [*Protestna mreza* in Bulgarian], which later gave birth to the political party ‘DEOS’ (‘Dvizhenie za evropeysko obedinenie i solidarnost’/‘Movement for European Unification and Solidarity’) and the foundation ‘Chitalishte.to’ with more cultural and educational activities in the agenda; as well as the group ‘Ranobudnite studenti’. The latter emerged from the members of the Staff of the student occupation, but lost the popular support (and a couple of its core members after internal bickering), and is now active only as Facebook group, summoning occasionally for street protests. All three organizations set as their goal to exercise control over the decisions of the incumbents. They proclaim themselves as civil vigilante groups, undertaking legal claims or street protest actions whenever they see an act of government that they deem intolerable. As the official proclamation of the Protest Network states: ‘PN is designed to be a corrective for any government’ (Bulgarian Protest Network 2013).

The communication patterns of ‘Ranobudnite studenti’

This text focuses on the activities of ‘Ranobudnite studenti’—the group of students who initiated the occupation and who later became its leaders and representatives. They sought popular support and had a certain influence on their followers mainly through their Facebook page. How did they gain support and how did they mobilize for collective action? What were the communicative strategies they built and how did they capitalize the influence they had? What were the reasons for the loss of trust and why did the supporting groups revoke consent and retreated from collective actions? The online communication patterns of the student occupation will be analyzed in order to find answers to these questions.

It will be argued that Ranobudnite were aiming to build a network of support through a communication process by which they related to society at large. The characteristics of the communication processes used by social movements for deliberation and coordination of action have been largely studied and reflected upon in various contexts (Castells 2010, Juris

2009, Gerbaudo 2012). For the purposes of the argument drawn here, two essential elements of this analysis will be borrowed, as formulated by Manuel Castells (2012). The first one is the development of a *networked space of autonomous communication* which combines the digital space, where participants share their experiences and coordinate action free from the institutionally controlled media, with an urban public space where the free communities of protesters are created. Such public places for deliberation are reclaimed by means of occupations of squares and/or symbolic buildings, like Tahrih Square, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park or the central building of Sofia University. In short, ‘social movements need to carve out a new public space that is not limited to the Internet, but makes itself visible in the places of social life’ (Castells 2012: 10).

The second element is the *lived experience of social change*—the new society—rising from the protest community. It is characteristic of the social movements from 2011 (the Spanish M15 movement, but also Occupy Wall Street) that they do not raise demands or create political parties to express their interests. From this point of view, they are seen as ineffective since they do not lead to the satisfaction of a raised demand. If there is no satisfaction to a particular claim, then the movement is a failure. But unlike the movements in the spirit of what Pierre Rosanvallon calls ‘counter-democracy’ which take on against a particular legal act or government decision and can have tangible results when the bill in question is withdrawn (Rosanvallon 2006: 21), the activists from M15 and OWS did not succumb to this ‘productivist vision of social change’, and did not raise demands that could have material satisfaction. ‘Thus, even if some reforms were proposed, it was more of a pedagogic exercise to connect with the population at large than a real hope of changing the political system’ (Castells 2012: 137). The ultimate product, as protesters saw it, was a new society which could not result from a set of programmatic goals, nor from a preconceived blueprint. Their goal was ‘the material production of social change (...) from the networked experiences of the actors in the movement’ (ibid.: 144). If there were any results at all, it was the hope for another world, the example of social life in the occupied spaces as the germ or ‘the new society’ in a nutshell. ‘This hope was born from the material verification that another life is possible in the makeshift community rising from the protest’ (ibid.: 170).

This same second element, outlined by Castells in his optimistic interpretation of the social movements from 2011, puts the highest value in the experience of protesters creating new forms of sociality. The same motive has become a guiding line in the participants’ accounts about the actions of Ranobudnite. Thus one of the leaders of the student occupation Ivaylo Dinev, in a recently published memoir, states that in the occupied building of the university a new autonomous student republic was created, a parallel state prefiguring the new society (Dinev 2014, critiques of his thesis were addressed by Smilova 2014, Gueorguieva 2014, Zlatkov 2014).

Therefore, if the goal of the protesting students was to reach social change through such direct experience of a new social organization by the actors in the movement, then communication networks were very important and special communicative strategies had to be designed. The channels used, the messages propagated, the events covered as well as the emotions attached to them had to be representative of the structure and form of the new society whose material production was happening in the experience of the occupation.

Was this goal achieved? How was the ‘networked experience of the new society’ enacted through the communication process of Ranobudnite?

Who are ‘Ranobudnite studenti’?

On 18 October 2013, three students from Sofia University entered the plenary hall of the house of Parliament during the regular sitting of the 42nd National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, with an authorization to observe the debates from the gallery. Instead of sitting and watching, they hastily unfolded a banner, hidden under their clothes, fully visible by MPs and journalists. The banner read ‘Aren’t you ashamed?’ These three students are Ivaylo Dinev, Angel Zlatkov and Rumen Stoev. They formed the core that would later initiate the occupation of Hall 272.

A couple of days after this event in Parliament, they performed another action with banners. They hang down banners in different colours from the upper floors of neighbouring buildings in Studentski Grad, the quarter of Sofia where student boarding houses are concentrated. Each banner had only one huge letter, and the configuration read ‘*Ostavka*’ [Resignation], the most repeated slogan of the summer protests. This time, they needed more time to prepare and engaged a slightly bigger group of organizers. Since they had to get up very early in order to prepare the action, they chose the name ‘Ranobudnite studenti’ [‘The early rising students’], suggested by Mila Stancheva. They used this name to register an e-mail account and send out photos of the action to the media. Both events were widely covered and met very positively by media audiences online (in the comments under the publications, but also on social networking sites), and the citizenry at large.

Image 3. The action ‘*Ostavka*’ [‘Resignation’] in Studentski Grad.



Source: Ranobudnite studenti (Facebook, https://scontent-vie.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-xpa1/v/t1.0-9/1375937_228239200673455_1260742076_n.jpg?oh=cd0c4d5a38f3a5385454c350d102eea3&oe=558029D1)

Inspired by this success, they started to think about something bigger, and recalled an idea that they had in the previous years, when they organized protests against the augmentation of tuition fees—to occupy a lecture hall. They needed a bigger group of participants and started to mobilize support. Some distributed flyers in the university urging for action, but not specifying its form, or date and time (Ranguelov 2014). Others started talking to friends, and to friends of friends, and formed a closed group on Facebook called ‘*Studentska zavera*’² [‘Students conspiracy’] (Ranguelov 2014, Dinev 2014: 28). Finally, they chose a date and planned a meeting in the inner court of the central building of Sofia University. The meeting was not announced publicly, but was spread to friends whom the initial small group could trust, with the request to call some more of their friends who are trustworthy (Russev 2014, Guencheva 2014).

The decision not to announce the action publicly was motivated by precaution: they feared that if the university administration learns about the planned occupation, it would take the necessary precautions to frustrate the action. Therefore they held the plan in secret. This had two unfavorable consequences: first, the size of the supporting group was restricted, they were only about 30; and, second, the protagonists did not know each other beforehand and had to start building relations of trust between themselves in the course of action (Golev 2013). They never managed to overcome these two problems—the range of support and trust.

Support and trust

The action—the occupation of the biggest lecture hall 272—was performed with success in the morning of 23 October 2013. The regularly scheduled lectures were cancelled and the hall remained open for all those who wished to join, to discuss, to see what is going on and why. The news spread quickly around the campus, students and professors came to express support or stay and join the group. The first general assembly of the occupiers was held in the same evening. A schedule of public lectures or speeches was established for the next day. The rules of the occupation were drafted and approved by the vote of the assembly.

During the same day, the public Facebook page of the community ‘Ranobudnite studenti’ was created to disseminate the declaration of the occupation, and announce the following activities. Its launch was immediately followed by a number of enthusiastic comments, the number of likes grew rapidly, attesting the positive reaction and an increasing support. The main focus of indignation expressed in the declaration was the return of Delyan Peevski—the controversial figure whose appointment ignited the #DANSwithme movement during the

² The word ‘zavera’ is not commonly used in contemporary Bulgarian. It contains implications of past times, its connotations relate back to the period of National Revival in the nineteenth century, a time of conspirative actions against the Ottoman Empire and of national heroes. No doubt, it was selected by Ranobudnite for its relatedness to this romanticized period. The expression ‘Ranobudnite studenti’ [The early rising students] is rather neutral, but on the occasion of 1 November, the day of the intellectual leaders of the National Revival (in Bulgarian ‘buditeli’, those who bring awakening of the national consciousness) - a day that was commemorated with one of the massive marches of the students and their professors in the streets of Sofia - the pseudonym ‘Ranobudnite’ also received interpretation that connects it to the rhetoric of this period of national history. The use of nationalist rhetoric and nationalist ideology by Ranobudnite was so common and at the same time ambiguous, that it might become topic of a separate study.

summer—in the 42nd National Assembly as regular Member of Parliament. Students insisted to receive answers regarding his appointment, as well as the decision of the Supreme Court of Justice to let him take his place in the highest national state institution after four months of protests against him. According to the declaration, he was the ‘personification of the Bulgarian oligarchy’ and a symbol of the ‘insolence of self-sufficient Bulgarian political elite in recent years’ (Ranobudnite Studenti 2013, 23 October).

The first official declaration in support of the actions of the group came from the General Assembly of the Faculty of Philosophy. Held two days later, on 25 October 2013, the assembly of professors, employees and representatives of the Student Council of the biggest faculty in Sofia University, voted almost unanimously a declaration in support of the students occupying Hall 272 and the questions they asked. The text explicitly rejected any attempt at using the autonomous space of the academia for fights between political parties, and backed up the students’ fair civic demand to receive explanations regarding the controversial acts of the higher officials, insisting on the public character of appointments at public service, such as the State Agency for National Security (‘Declaration of the General Assembly of the Faculty of Philosophy’ / ‘Deklaratzia na Obshtoto Subranie na Filososki Fakultet’ 2013). More than 190 professors voted in favor of the declaration.

In the evening of the same day, the students decided to expand the occupation and take the whole central building of the Sofia University. At this point, they chained the entrances and installed checkpoints allowing only students with official documents to enter the building. A new declaration was read from the stairs in front of the building. The word ‘resignation’ was already present in this text, which stated the following objectives of the occupation:

1. Immediate resignation of the current government led by Plamen Oresharski; 2. as quickly as possible scheduling of new parliamentary elections; 3. intolerance of the public body to widespread criminal lawlessness in the highest levels of government; 4. Bulgaria to become a civilized rule of law; 5. and the promotion of justice and knowledge as a high social values. (‘Students Occupy Sofia University’ 2013, original grammar and orthography are preserved)

The goals stated in the second declaration overlap with the demands of the #DANSwithme movement. The text was spread fast through the communication network of the movement, including the sites NOresharski!, Protestnamrezha, etc. It found a place on the pages of the major dailies, the video from the reading of the declaration was in the news of the national TV channels.

A second declaration of supporting professors was initiated by the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology in collaboration with colleagues from the Department of Political Science. It was open for all academics from all universities in Bulgaria and collected more than 600 signatures. Apart from being an official document certifying support, it was the occasion for the establishment of a group for collective action—the professors in support of Ranobudnite studenti. It did not raise demands independently, but planned and performed a number of actions in support of the occupation.

Popular support from the broader society followed. A declaration posted on the web-sites of a theatre in Sofia, and oral expressions of encouragement were pronounced from the stage

after the end of the play. The #DANSwithme protest was summoned in the evening of 27 October in front of the central building of the University. About three thousand Sofia residents blocked the traffic and voiced their enthusiasm for the cause and the actions of the occupying students. On the next day the number of the occupied universities started to grow, reaching 15 by 5 November 2013 (a full list can be found in the Declaration of the national headquarters of the occupied universities, *Ranobudnite studenti 2013*, 5 November).

The wave of enthusiasm continued to grow during the next weeks, and reached its peak during the two big protest marches, organized by the students and their professors: on 1 November, the day of the intellectual leaders of the national Enlightenment [*Buditeli* in Bulgarian], marked, in particular, by the educational institutions; and on 10 November, the commemoration of the fall of the regime and the beginning of the so-called ‘transition’. On both dates, about ten thousand protesters marched on the streets of Sofia backing up the students and their cause.

The regular monthly public opinion polls performed by different polling agencies also showed significant levels of support. Data from Gallup International show a second peak in the protest activities during the first week of November (after the first peak during the summer). Their monthly ‘Political and economic index’ from November shows ‘an escalation in the social tension, due to the new protest activities’, with 49 percent of the respondents supporting the protests against the government of Plamen Oresharski (Gallup International 2013, November). Their data from December do not confirm the trend to escalation, and show a fall of tension, as they put it, with 44 percent of the respondents supporting the anti-government protests (Gallup International, December 2013). ‘In the first days of November, some ten days after it started, the [student] occupation was supported by nearly half of adult Bulgarians.’ (Politicheskiat Protzes 2014: 162).

The data from a national representative study, conducted by another agency for social research, Mediana, in the period 14-18 November 2013, show that only 37 percent of their respondents approve the demand for resignation of the government, but 46.5 percent approve the actions of the students against this same government (35.3 percent do not approve and 18.2 percent do not have an opinion, Mediana 2013).

The highest values of public support for the protest actions are given by Alpha Research in a separate opinion poll dedicated to the student protests. The levels of support are about 60 percent, higher in Sofia and small towns (64-67 percent), and slightly lower in bigger cities (59 percent) and villages (56 percent). The age distribution shows significant disparities, with 77 percent of the age group between 18 and 30 years supporting the student occupations, and only 47 percent of the respondents above 61 years expressing support (the survey is conducted in the last week of October, Alpha Research 2013).

The polls from December—the next period of survey, show a decrease, according to all the sociological agencies. This reflects also the intensity of the activities. While the peaceful marches from 1 and 10 November 2013 were met with broad approval, the next action—a blockade of Parliament on the 12 November provoked different reactions. First of all, though it claimed to be peaceful, its purpose was to obstruct the ways out of Parliament and thus oblige the MPs to remain in the building. Similar blockades were already attempted during the summer protests and proved to be ineffective. Furthermore, the only episode of violence

during the whole history of the #DANSwithme movement occurred precisely during such a blockade, on 23 July (the 40th day of protests). The proponents of non-violent action did not meet the decision for the blockade on 12 November with encouragement and retreated from action.

Students discussed their tactics in the occupied Hall 272 during the whole night of 11 to 12 November, and adopted a quasi-military order of discipline for the blockade, which was not communicated to the other protesters 'for security reasons'. The police forces were averted and prepared for the blockade by calling policemen from other cities to enlarge the security zone around Parliament building (a tactic that has already proven to be effective during previous protests). The police forces outnumbered the protestors. Helmets and shields were not used to push back the students, unlike the summer blockade. There were no official data about wounded protesters.

Some incidents of violence did occur however. A couple of students were slightly injured; one of them obtained a medical certificate. These minor incidents were carefully mediated in images and videos disseminated through the communication network of Ranobudnite, but provoked controversial reactions. Most of the commentators found this overmediatization of violence exaggerated. Others accused the Staff of Ranobudnite of lack of determination over their decision to retreat (and give orders to all the students to retreat) from the square after 18.30 hrs, when bigger masses of protesters gathered in their support after the end of the working day, with the excuse that they had received some information about the infiltration of violent 'provocateurs'.

This is the moment when public opinion started to split, provoked by the controversial actions on 12 November. Also, some internal confrontations within the members of the Staff became visible in the uncoordinated public announcements of different student leaders in the mass media. The comments on the Facebook profile of Ranobudnite Studenti lost the initial momentum and started to sound more critical, patronizing, and explicitly disapproving. The blockade from the 12 November was the beginning of the end. The levels of encouragement from the broader society started to go down.

In the night of 17 November, the General Assembly in Hall 272 voted the decision to terminate the full occupation of the central building and take the ceremonial Aula of the Sofia University for a 'symbolic' occupation. The decision was controversial, the occupiers split in two camps. Their respective positions were irreconcilable. The first decision approved by the vote of the majority, was to continue with the full and effective occupation. The members of the Staff opposed this decision and menaced with resignation if their position (to terminate the full occupation) was not confirmed by the vote (Russev 2014). The decision was re-voted. The more determinate group (called the 'radical wing') who were in favor of the full occupation, left the scene in utter disappointment after the rejection of their position by the final vote (Guencheva 2014). The split appeared to be irremediable. The issues of trust between the core activists that existed from the beginning and were never resolved, led to very strong feelings of dissent and eventually the collapse of collective actions.

The problem of trust was felt right from the beginning. First of all, the students had to build relations of trust between people who do not know each other before the occupation (Golev 2014, Tabakov 2014). This process was not facilitated by the common actions, nor

was it particularly addressed by the leading figures. The problem seemed to aggravate with the advancement of time and after one incident in particular. An audio recording from one of the first closed meetings of the Staff was made public on social networking sites. As a consequence, the leaders decided to install a restrictive rule—members of the Staff were obliged to enter the small room designated for their closed meetings without mobile phones and recording devices. The latter were left on a chair in front of the door and could be seen by everybody in the occupation (Dinev 2014, Kulekov 2013: minute 5:08). Though in their interpretation it was a sign of transparency, this rule clearly indicates the levels of mistrust between the members of Staff. A spirit of suspicion and of constant threat of leaks took the occupied building, carefully protected from intruders. It is not very probable that—without a network of trust—the occupiers could build a strong community of action and consensual politics.

Secondly, in the course of actions they came to realize that they do not share the same political views (Dinev 2014, Ranguelov 2014, Kunev and Boris N. 2014). Some were supporters of the party of Boyko Borissov, others embraced the Reformist Bloc—a coalition of old opposition parties that was formed during the summer protests. There were also left-wing activists, but by no means supporters of the rather conservative Bulgarian Socialist Party (in power). The majority of occupying students insisted that the occupation is a citizens' protest and should not be affiliated with any political party. But the ideological differences were clearly visible. Therefore, in search of common grounds for collective action, the students reunited under the demand for resignation. A similar move took place earlier in the midst of *Protestna Mrezha*, the structure that emerged from the summer protest. Though they also united under the overarching cry '*Ostavka*' ['Resignation'], the students kept their different visions of the desired change after the resignation. Eventually, their ideological differences obliged them to take different paths.

Publicizing an enclosure

A second set of problems resulted from the decision to take the whole building and transform it into 'the Citadel' [*Tzitadelata* in Bulgarian] as they called it, to make it an enclosure. After 25 October 2013, when Ranobudnite took the whole central building of Sofia University and chained its doors, the building was closed for 'outsiders'. The protesting students installed a special organization of checkpoints, guarded by an internal security service. Lectures and seminars were cancelled, the administration was not allowed to enter the building, the supporting professors were allowed to enter only during the days, and not in the evenings, when the general assemblies of the students took place. The public discussions and screening of the occupying students, their working groups pinpointing problems in the existing institutions as well as possible solutions and visions of change were open only to the occupying students themselves.

The university was no longer a public space. Those who wished to experience the new forms of sociality created by the occupation, had to present a valid document of student status and pass through checkpoints.

An excuse was found for the closing of doors in the name of security, after the occupation became a subject of aggressive attack from a group of about 10 to 15 opponents, led by an MP from the Bulgarian Socialist Party. But the attack was in the morning of 27 October, while the entrances to the building were chained and padlocked in the night of 25 October, two days earlier. During the whole period of the full occupation this was a strategy: rumors of prepared future attacks were repeatedly circulated and published on the Facebook page of Ranobudnite, in order to summon more students inside the building and supporters outside it to protect the occupation from further attacks. The threat of attacks was used to call for help. But since there were no further attacks, such kind of appeals were judged not trustworthy. This strategy was not effective.

The decision to concentrate all the efforts in the central building led to another difficulty—not enough support from other students in the Sofia University was enlisted. The occupiers closed themselves in the space they had already taken, and made very few attempts to convince their colleagues from other campuses to collaborate. Only a couple of rooms were occupied for a day or two in the other buildings. Support from the broader society was ensured, but not from the other students in the same university. When initiatives arose from different groups of students in other buildings to occupy spaces, they were invited to abandon their place and join the headquarters, under the leadership of the already established Staff (Pashova 2014, Valkova 2014, Chenkov 2014, Tabakov 2014).

This fault at securing wider support from within the university led to a sort of depopulation of the occupation. With the advancements of time, the exhaustion stroke, first of all, in the lines of occupiers engaged in the internal security service—those who stood at the checkpoints and had to face the discontent of administration whose work in the building was disturbed, and the anger of other opponents of the occupation (Russev 2014). This was the major motive for the proposition to terminate the full occupation (Zlatkov 2014).

A separate set of tactics had to be created in order to communicate with the larger audience what was happening within ‘the Citadel’. Media were only allowed inside the building after a special authorization of the General Assembly. There was a special press unit who operated the Facebook page and produced the press releases (there were very few such releases apart from the declarations). News about the life in ‘the autonomous students republic’ (Dinev 2014) were made public only in the media appearances of the leaders of the group. These appearances were numerous, but incoherent, as different representatives of the core group were professing divergent political points of view.

Although there were special mechanisms designed to control the information coming out from within the occupation, human curiosity and the taste for sensation of the traditional media outlets is insatiable. One of the weekly tabloids managed to obtain a recording of the live discussions of the assembly from the night before the blockade of Parliament (12 November), and published a detailed description of the discussion of tactics in the issue from 14 November, two days after the action (Markova and Stamenova 2013). Because of the belated time of publication, the information did not constitute a threat to the unfolding of the operation. But it was considered a ‘leak’ by the occupiers, and became a reason for even stronger control on the publicity of the occupation.

With the strategy of the enclosure, the student occupation incurred upon itself considerable difficulties in communicating its daily activities, and opened the floor for easy hits at discrediting the occupation at public, with such ‘leaks’. But besides the communicative difficulties, it cut off a part of the university community and instead of creating collectivity, it became an isolated group.

Political statements and smear attack

More lines of division were created by a video, produced and disseminated by Ranobudnite through their communication channels, and by their declarations regarding the political parties (their political statements). The first one provoked controversial reactions in the group of supporting professors, the second—in the broader society.

Although smear campaigning is usually a tactic of the yellow journalism, Ranobudnite decided to use this tactic against an unexpected target—their professors. They attacked the reputation of two professors from the Faculty of History, who were known as opponents of the occupation. The students managed to film the professors with a hidden camera while consuming alcohol at their workplace. The video was published on 28 November 2013 under the title ‘*Moral na gradus*’/ ‘Drunk morals’, and created a storm of reactions, both in traditional media outlets and alternative media. It remains the most viewed video in the YouTube channel ‘Ranobudnite studenti’ (2013, 28 November) with almost 90,000 views³. The accusations against the professors were that they disregard the rules, installed by the regime of occupation, and demonstrated an attitude of arrogance towards the students on night duty from the occupation who asked them to leave the building. As a reaction to the attitude of the professors, those were filmed and ridiculed. The unexpected result was that this became the most wide-spread message of Ranobudnite.

The opinions in the group of professors supporting the occupation were polar. On the one side, were those who accused the students for this act. Some left the group immediately and their reaction was read as silent indignation, their support could not be retrieved. Others spoke in reproof of the students, explaining that alcohol consumption, although prohibited on campus (with the exception of university restaurants), is a habitual practice in some faculties and departments on special occasions such as Christmas parties or career advancement of colleagues. Filming and making public such informal gatherings was an act of disrespect done in bad faith, they claimed. Their standpoint can be summarized as ‘No one is innocent’. Therefore they expressed solidarity with their discredited colleagues and withdrew their support from the students. On the other side of the division, the defenders of the students insisted on the ill language of one of the professors, who called the students ‘fools’ and treated them with pronounced superiority. There were also those who took the stand ‘We will always support the students, even when they make mistakes’. But the end result was that the professors’ support was weakened and it had become impossible to attract more colleagues for the next collective actions.

³ For comparison, the street-art actions of the students from the National Academy for Film and Theater Arts have about 7-8,000 views, the most popular ‘Performance PROTEST’ has 17,000.

Another line of division separated the students from their supporters outside the university. The occupation, just like the winter and the summer protests, was formed by people with different political standpoints. From this point of view, the groups of protesters were heterogeneous, and none of the protest mobilizations managed to construct a body of collective identity. Unlike the previous protests, the student occupation did not handle this inherent ideological split with success. For example, the #DANSwithme movement soon realized that it was impossible to find a solution to this intrinsic problem. It was an inborn trait for the Protest Network, and its structure was conceived accordingly—it was a network of different groups who stand on different positions but share the same goal. They united under the overarching cry ‘*Ostavka*’ / ‘Resignation’, restraining themselves from discussing future problems that will inevitably create separation. The definition of the organization as an instrument of citizens’ control to every government in rule corresponded to this pluralistic conception.

Ranobudnite also started as a group without clearly stated ideology. But they took a negative stand—they were constantly rejecting alleged accusations of relations with political parties. In their attempts to address such accusations, they published a series of positions detaching themselves from all political parties, one after another. They were trying to demonstrate their impartiality by taking a negative stance. But they did not realize that expressing a negative position is also a political statement and that by taking this position they profess an ideology (or rather stand against an ideology). That also led to a loss of supporters.

Image 4. ‘No parties’, a banner in the occupied building of the Sofia University



Source: Ranobudnite Studenti (Facebook, https://fbcdn-sphotos-d-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-xap1/v/t1.0-9/1376493_230508800446495_1046928363_n.jpg?oh=56b96c9a4d27a441fd826c950005e29a&oe=5574772B&__gda__=1438395138_280381117d1942a1101f8f53a646f1f0)

The first demarcation from a political party was provoked by a Facebook post of ex-prime minister Boyko Borissov who made an attempt to capitalize on the protest energy of the students march on 10 November, stating that people are ready for a political change and wait for their future leaders. The students reacted with a statement on their profile from 14 November, declaring that they are not waiting for politicians to take the lead of their protest, and reject the possibility of an alliance with the political party GERB or any other formation (the original Facebook post was later removed from the profile; Dinev 2014: 108, 'Ranobudnite kam Boyko Borissov' 2013, 13 November). The statement was met with disappointment by the GERB supporters.

The second position in the same line was published on 18 January 2014, when a representative of the Bulgarian Socialist Party—Iliyana Iotova—stated that she met and discussed possibilities with members of the group of Ranobudnite in an interview on a national TV channel. The group denied this allegation and insisted that decisions for meetings with political figures are taken exclusively by their General Assembly (Ranobudnite Studenti 2014, 18 January). They also accused Iotova of propagating incorrect statements. The reactions to the post were positive. All comments express negative attitude toward the Socialist politician.

A week later, on 23 January 2014, the next statement published was against the nationalist party Ataka, a partner in the ruling coalition. The statement expresses indignation regarding the anti-European position of the party, and reinforces the position of Bulgaria as a member of the European Union. A second post from the following day addresses apologies to the French diplomatic mission in Bulgaria, whose representative was verbally attacked by the Ataka leader in the previous days (Ranobudnite Studenti 2014, 24 January). Only a small part of the comments under the post are encouraging. A second part accuses the students of taking an obedient position to Europe, betraying national values. Another part of commentators stated that the students were not in the position to offer excuses and that this act was inadequate.

The most controversial post is from 28 January 2014, when Ranobudnite denied the information that they were taking part in an on-going discussion with the Reformist Bloc (Ranobudnite Studenti 2014, 28 January). The post has only 203 likes and 90 comments, all of which negative. Some invite the students to stop with the negative declarations and formulate what is their own political position and what they are fighting for, after all. Others affirm that this act is rash and stupid, while claiming that they will no longer support students' actions. It becomes clear that a very big section in the supporting group of Ranobudnite are also supporters of the Reformist Bloc. In the other comments, there were a lot of accusations, insults, even hate speech. The first slogan of Ranobudnite—'Aren't you ashamed!'—was used in some other comments, but this time addressed to the occupiers.

The reactions at the political statements of Ranobudnite show that—at least in the final phase—their supporters were coming mainly from the followers of GERB and the Reformist Bloc, the two political parties describing themselves as right-centrist or conservative. The parties in the Reformist Bloc are associated most of all with the democratic changes after 1989. Therefore, anti-communism is a very strong part of their rhetoric, as well as pro-European and pro-NATO orientation that they share with GERB. By choosing to be politically impartial, the students had to demarcate themselves from these two parties and, hence, lost a major part of their supporters. Though they intended to be the necessary corrective to the

political elites in power, regardless of their colour, without popular support they could not perform this function.

Conclusions: a black-and-white Bulgaria

Although they started with a popular cause and received considerable support, the student occupation of the Sofia University and its leaders failed in the communication process with their supporters. They were not able to achieve their objectives, no matter how those were defined: be it the resignation of the government of Plamen Oresharski, or the material production of a new society. The faults in the communication process can be put into three categories, or communication patterns: the securing of support and the establishment of relations of trust; the disclosing of information about the inner life of the occupation to the wider public; and the political statements of the occupation.

In the first place, although occupiers received encouragement and help from professors, from other universities, from the #DANSwithme movement and the society in general, they made little attempt to strengthen the support from their colleagues from within the university. By separating the academic space into ‘the Citadel’, where the revolutionary actions were planned and the experience of a new solidarity took place, and the outer world of regular classes and exams, they limited the possibilities of receiving more help and to raise the numbers of occupiers, necessary to sustain the structures of the occupation. Secondly, they never managed to build relations of trust between themselves, even among the core group of the initiators who formed the Staff. Their incoherent claims, expressed during the public appearances in media, contributed to the spirit of disorganization, discord and suspicion inside the occupied building.

The division of the academic life into an occupied zone and a zone of life-as-usual, free from occupation, led to further difficulties. First of all, the occupied zone was no longer a public space. Unlike the summer protests, when the space in the traffic intersection at Orlov Most was ‘occupied’ by the peaceful protesters and transformed into a place of debates and/or leisure activities, the central building of the Sofia University during the occupation was enclosed. Therefore, the experience of social change could not come from an intersection of the alternative communication channels of the protesters with an occupied public space, but had to rely only on the communication process. The latter did not manage (or was not sufficient) to create solidarity or retranslate the spirit of change from within the occupation.

Finally, the strategy to reject any connection to political parties and coalitions, proved to be unsuccessful. Student representatives from the occupation left Ranobudnite to join political parties. Those who remained in the group lost the supporters who were in favour of traditional party politics. It seems that in the Bulgarian case we are reaching the same conclusion that became evident after the M15 movement and the global Occupy movement. If a movement ‘clearly places itself outside institutional politics’ (Castells 2012: 193), it also challenges the traditional view that change can be produced through particular legal and political steps, in an agenda brought to life by a political party. According to this traditional view

there are no other ways of seeking accountability from political representatives, different from replacing one politician with another, or one ruling party with another, through the mechanism of elections. This view was challenged by organizations emerging from the protest, such as the Protest Network and Ranobudnite. Citizens' control was the predominant motive of the actions of these organizations.

But in order to exercise such control, Ranobudnite needed a vast network of support. They failed to build it also because they failed to recognize the political orientation of their supporters. While these students believed that not showing openly their party affiliation (of some of the members of the core group) would grant them with more support from all parts of the political spectrum, they failed to realize that the major part of their supporters came from the followers of right-wing parties (GERB and the Reformist Bloc). Also, they failed to realize that negative positioning regarding these parties is also read as a statement of political orientation by their audiences. Hence they lost a significant fraction of supporters.

The occupation did not manage to obtain the resignation of government, nor did it succeed in the effort to give a taste of the desired social change. From the point of view of the goals it set itself, it was a failure. But if there is something to regret about after the end of the protest year, this is not the failure of the occupation. What is regrettable is the divisions that were created in society in the course of collective actions, and afterwards in the debates about its interpretations in 2014. 'Bulgaria has become black and white' one of the activists professed as a result of these actions (Golev 2013). The society is divided into those who approve and those who disapprove the occupation, those who vote for GERB and those who vote for BSP, communists and anti-communists, pro-Russians and pro-Europeans; those who support party politics and those who abstain from vote, those who choose 'the lesser evil' and those who remain irreconcilable. And the space for debate between the polar positions was exhausted. Arguments have been raised and rejected repeatedly, but solutions could not be found. There is no common ground. It is a black-and-white Bulgaria.

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