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'Red Mafia' Fumbles Economic Ball Opposition Seeks Power Return



First-Hand Account of Revolution in Bulgaria

by Paul Swider

Sofia:- Thursday, 16. January 1997:- Bulgarians are a tolerant, suffering people so their actions this past weekend came as something of a surprise to a world that expects violence only from other Balkan countries.

But the besieging of parliament and the vicious police reaction have been brewing since the fall of Eastern Europe's communist states in 1989. The revolution has yet to come to Bulgaria.

"This is the anger of people who have nothing to lose," said Yordan Sokolov, parliamentary leader of the opposition Union of Democratic Forces.

It's not that Bulgarians didn't deserve a revolution - like the one in neighboring Romania, which they watched with breathless anxiety. Bulgaria's was an oppressive regime: the country is still dotted with the

legacy of concentration camps and mental institutions for the politically incorrect. Some of the inhabitants were worked to death; others still bear the burden of punishments even less relevant now than before.

But in the heady days of 1989, when the Berlin Wall was coming down with the collapse of politburos everywhere, the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party saw a way to survive. The party made a scapegoat of its longtime head, Todor Zhivkov, copying his style as it deposed him, and re-emerged as the Bulgarian Socialist Party. So successful was the apparent transformation and the shifting of blame that the BSP actually won the first elections in 1990. As a token to more severe reformist elements, anti-Communist intellectual Zhelyu Zhelev was appointed to the toothless office of president.

A year later, the Union of Democratic Forces - the motive force behind the recent protests - wrested power from the Socialists in new elections, but only until the pain of transition wasted UDF's unskilled hubris. After two years of turbulent government and amid accusations of UDF corruption, the Socialists retook parliament in 1994. In fact, though, the machinery of government had never been out of their hands.

Communists in New Coats, Called 'Red Mafia'

One of the favorite chants of Sofia's protesters of late has been "Red Mafia." More than simple anger, this suggests the direct connection between the 'economic groups,' which control much of the private Bulgarian economy, and the Socialists, who have been controlling the public. These two have worked together as a money machine for both, at the long-term expense of the people.

One example is the use of private suppliers to sell raw materials to state firms at inflated prices. Other private companies, with similar ownership, would then buy the products at a loss to the state. Subsidized by deficit spending and international loans, the state firms served everyone's interest for a time: the people had jobs at which they did not have to work hard (or sometimes not at all), and private business made money.

Another technique involved the formation of state banks with government seed money from the international institutions. The banks would re-loan that money to other 'connected' firms. No one intended to repay anything, including the government.

And in the case of Bulgaria's nascent privatization, those in power fed sweetheart, insider deals to their business partners outside parliament.

Because these people were not corporate raiders, the workers typically kept their jobs. All of which continued to support the Socialist government.

Government Prints Soft Money -Inflation Skyrockets

The bottom fell out early last year when the government began to run out of currency reserves with which to prop up state firms and banks. International lenders, seeing they'd been burned in the past - Bulgaria defaulted on its commercial debts in 1990 - refused to pony up any more money without conditions. First among these was the closure of insolvent banks, a bumper crop in Bulgaria.

Depositor ire proved to be difficult to cope with so the government responded by refunding those deposits with freshly minted - but unsupported - currency. The exchange rate soared from 70 Bulgarian Lev to the US dollar in April to 700 by year's end. With energy and raw materials priced in hard currency and the domestic agrifood sector in decline, the ensuing inflation brought the average real wage from \$100 a month to below \$30.

The International Monetary Fund, funding rescheduled debt payments, also insisted on the closure of loss-making enterprises. As the Lev tumbled and inflation soared, the IMF has now begun to demand a currency board to control monetary policy.

There have been fears that a lack of hard currency for fuel will force the government to ration electricity this winter. Schools in the north and in the mountains have closed already because there is no heat. Bread shortages began in the summer and have generated isolated riots. A decisive November win for another anti-Communist president, Petar Stoyanov, and the promise of long, cold, hungry winter wrote ill for the BSP.

Government Refuses New Elections - Protesters Beaten

In an attempt to defuse tensions as in 1989, the BSP leader and prime minister resigned in December. The holidays bought a little time but not enough for the Socialists. When, last Friday, the BSP refused to even discuss a parliamentary declaration for new elections, the supporting crowds outside had had all they would take.

After the throng refused to let the Socialist deputies leave parliament without a vote for new elections, the BSP cabinet ordered the police to disperse the protesters. The violence quickly got out of hand as

opposition deputies were beaten and protesters were chased through Sofia's streets for hours.

Public opinion turned in the protesters favor, despite the best attempts of the BSP deputies to paint themselves as victims of a coup attempt. Large marches have followed every day since, in Sofia and in the provinces. But the Socialists still have not given in, promising only to negotiate. The revolution is far from complete.

When Sokolov, the opposition leader, spoke of the anger of people with nothing to lose, he could easily have been referring to the Socialists.

"The people outside the parliament wanted the Socialists to vote for suicide," said Vassil Garnizov of the Bulgarian Center for Social Practices, in an interview with Bulgarian media. "If the Socialists lose power, their own people will eat them."

Garnizov said the economic groups tied to the Socialists demand the party stay in power. There are billions of dollars yet to be reaped from privatization and other state connections, he said. With an opposition government supporting IMF-supported reforms, that money will be fair game for all, not the unique preserve of the former nomenklatura.

"This is what led to the bloodshed," Garnizov said. "This is a circle which had to show it is still powerful."

No party wants to relinquish power but the refurbished communists in Bulgaria are more intransigent than most. Having never been truly out of power, they are not ready to cave in quickly now because they expect the demonstrations to subside and the 'status quo' to reign. Historically, most Bulgarians have agreed.

"Early elections won't help," said Zhivko Georgiev of Gallup Bulgaria. "A new parliament will not be any more competent or hard working."

New Media - Voice of People Isn't Government's

Georgiev echoed the sentiments of disgruntled voters the world over but he did so in an environment that may make a difference in Bulgaria. The independent media to which he made his comments are enjoying an importance they've never before seen. Newspapers have taken up the coverage with new vigor, as have small private cable television stations. But the big winner was Darik Radio, a small private station that gets around government power restrictions by forming a network of affiliates across the country. With reporters in the streets giving blow-by-blow accounts via cellular phones Friday night, the

nation's ears were tuned to Darik. Even the demonstrators began to chant the station's name as they found a tribune to support their cause.

Demonstrations Suspected of Being Orchestrated as Government Ploy

The government issued statements about the "anticonstitutional" demonstrations and how its deputies were in danger inside the parliament. But the public, educated by live broadcasts over free media, did not buy it.

"If anyone lost the truth that night it wasn't us but the BSP," said Nadezhda Mikhailova, an opposition representative. "They used old-style propaganda, making charges against the leaders of the democratic forces ... but it was all cliché because nothing like that was happening on the streets.

"The people want elections, possibly the most democratic way for them to express their will."

Mikhailova and others believe the violence was not only generated by the government but was a deliberate attempt to discredit the opposition and rally nationalist support for the government. She and others said the government thought the public would accept the propaganda, harkening back to a time when information was a state product.

"No one [in the BSP] asked why so many people are in the streets," Mikhailova said, "why so many people are hungry, who and what stretched the nerves of the Bulgarian people to this risky point.

"In my opinion, the BSP had already begun its election campaign."

During that fateful night, Darik also played music by a popular group, Kanaletto, another new champion. The group has recently released a collection of traditional songs dating from the last revolution in Bulgaria. Titled for the exiles who plotted insurgencies against the occupying Ottoman Turks 120 years ago, the album has now become standard fare at all rallies.

Sunday, the government canceled Kanaletto's weekly show on state-run television, claiming 'force majeure.' Darik invited Kanaletto to broadcast Sunday night and the group provided a free outdoor show Monday.

Elsewhere in print is a fictional novel about mafia connections to the Bulgarian government. The book hits so hard and close to home that many are assigning real names and faces to the book's characters. It is one of the most popular books in the country.

Widespread Demonstrations Continue - No Change Seen

And the rallies go on. In one town, the Bulgarian Orthodox clergy hold daily symbolic funeral services for the BSP. In another, protesters associate a mythical evil grandmother-cum-bogeyman with the Socialists, creating a Red Baba Yaga. The Socialists are called leeches, there are strikes and taxi companies offer free rides to those heading for demonstrations. On the Sunday after the violence, more than 100,000 marched back to the parliament to hear speeches. More impressively, the same number followed on successive days.

The public is certainly better informed than it has ever been. Consequently, there are the beginnings of the transparency needed to have fair governance. The voters in the next elections will certainly be more educated than they were even this past year as the media come to grips with their new role.

Still, the revolution is anything but a certainty. Negotiations to date have assured only that there will be elections by year's end, hardly a coup. And though support for a stronger stance continues, Bulgarians wonder how long it will last. A once-common and still oft-heard refrain is that 'nothing will change.'

There were protests in 1990 also, but nothing substantive came of those. This latest round appears to be larger and more sustained but it is still early in the process. Many wonder if Bulgarians have the stamina of their Serbian neighbors, for instance, who have had two months of continuous action. There is strength in numbers but no one knows how long the numbers will last.

"It's one thing to beat 300-400 young people but it's harder to go against 50,000," Garnizov said. "The violence will triumph if the people get tired."

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