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Participatory spaces during mass mobilization: The Bulgarian case

2013 was an unprecedented year for Bulgaria when the effects of the economic crisis and the political corruption lead to three waves of protest from February to the end of the year separating in their particular aims and varieties of activities and protest repertoire as “The Winter”, “The Summer”, and the student occupation. However the existent works deal with the political outcomes as the governmental changes and the profiles of the participants (Gueorguieva, 2017; Znepolski 2016; Krasteva 2014), the topic of the participatory spaces is not so investigated. On the other hand, the protests contain new practices of participatory and direct democracies such as General Assembly, university occupations, National committee, protest horizontal organizations, and online public groups. In this work, I analyze the founded claimed spaces in the three waves, both measuring and comparing the practices and the results of the citizens’ strategies and tactics. In general, the protest movements stood with basic aim for re-establishing of the state and argued with the corruption on institutional level. More interestingly, they constituted organizations and protest physical and online spaces in order to build communication between the huge number of citizens (approximately 150 thousand people in the pick), to gain recognition, to confront with the traditional media information, and to attract people for their causes. Thus, the selected three cases present variety of approaches on the main social dilemma of the collective actions, namely the governing of the commons (Ostrom), in this context, “governing” of the protest/the claimed space. The focus is on the decision-making processes and the internal structures within the spaces as well as the impact of the models of interrelations with the “outer world” institutions and groups. Then, the aim of the paper is twofold: to go in-depth, firstly, in the understanding of the claimed spaces; secondly, to explain the reasons lead citizens to construct these types of spaces. My results show that, however the protests participatory spaces were limited in number and the citizens sooner or later established new social hierarchies inside the movements, some parts of the puzzle indicate the appearance of radical democratic practices, completely new for the contemporary Bulgarian political vision. On the other hand, the use model of explanation could be implied on claimed spaces in different contexts where the citizens face such a dilemma. The main founding put in the core of the analysis is how the new movements deal with the opponents (out of their claimed spaces). They could be: parties, institutions, governments, NGOs, media, anti-protest collectives, football hooligans etc. I claim that the institutions and collectives reacting against the protest/claimed space or identified in advance as “enemies”, effect on the strategies, tactics and decisions employed by citizens deal with the protest/the space. The analysis is based on qualitative approach, including in-depth interviews with protest leaders and rank-and-files activists, participant observation of the three waves (including their initial steps), as well as Social media activities (Facebook pages and groups), audio and video materials. In conclusion, the paper contributes to the understanding of the participatory spaces in post-socialist context and the explanation of the external and internal organizational factors on the dynamics within the claimed spaces in time of mass mobilization and political crisis.