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## CAPITALISTS, SPIES AND ALIENS: CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN BULGARIA

### Abstract

The paper claims that conspiracy theories in Bulgaria are organized as a milieu rather than as a genre, and that, depending on their intensity, conspiracy theories can perform heterogeneous functions, which range from justification of political claims and popular mobilization to entertainment. Building on that conceptual framework, the paper illustrates the most prominent functional types of Bulgarian conspiracy theories. The higher-intensity theories are exemplified by the narratives of corruption and of the afterlife of the former communist secret services. The lower-intensity theories are illustrated by the fortunately short-lived question if the president of the United States has been abducted by aliens. The impact of the Bulgarian conspiratorial milieu on global theories is represented by the example of the Bulgarian modifications of the traveling narrative of the conspiracy of Jewish bankers. The emancipatory potential of the conspiracy theories is demonstrated by the example of the 2011 anti-GMO protests, motivated by narratives of conspiracy between the government and transnational corporations, which derived their energy from the associated milieu of ecological concerns.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, Bulgaria, milieu, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari

Conspiracy theories are often defined as narratives that explain an unfavorable state of affairs by the covert, concerted, and intentional actions of a powerful group.

Yet the Bulgarian conspiracy theories hardly display distinctive narrative, rhetorical or argumentative patterns. They can be more adequately described as open series of elements, elements too partial, fluid, and fuzzy to make sense by themselves, which are constantly assembled and reassembled in order to be adapted to the ceaseless changes in their environment. Conspiracy theories in Bulgaria are rather more like social media feeds than narratives.

In this paper, I will try to capture their fluid nature by the concept of milieu developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I will claim that conspiracy theories are organized as a milieu composed of strata differing in intensity, effects, and speeds of transformation. I will illustrate the strata that form the conspiratorial milieu in Bulgaria by the most salient conspiracy theories about communist secret services, governmental corruption, Jewish bankers, global corporations, aliens, European Union, and the migrant crisis.

### Secret Services, Corruption, and the Undecidable Conspiracy Theories

The intensity of conspiracy theories is higher, if they are more undecidable. And they are undecidable, if the decision on their veracity is political in the sense that it cannot be grounded

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on factual or moral considerations, and involves taking a side in a power struggle (Mouffe, 2009: 14-15).

Let us take for example the theory that Bulgaria is still governed by the former communist secret service called State Security. It is certainly a theory of conspiracy, but is it a conspiracy theory?

Since the secret service was dissolved in 1990, to claim that it never gave up its power means to claim that it lives an afterlife, and an afterlife cannot be proved by any fact of life. But the ghost of the former secret service is used to justify the political claim that Bulgaria has not been governed properly. So if one decides that the ghost is not real, then one denies a political claim and its justification.

Bulgarian government is grounded on a general consensus over the integration in the European Union, and over the two-decade long, particularly harsh austerity policy that pushed almost half of the population below the poverty line. Since the consensus forecloses any conflict over economic or global policies, the political actors tend to articulate their struggles in moral terms. And the right-wing parties tend to justify their claims for moral superiority by their fight against the ghosts of communism. Therefore, if one decides that the secret power of the former communist secret service is a conspiracy theory, one takes a position against the right-wing parties.

Since the claim that Bulgaria is governed badly is practically unassailable, the political actors who consider anti-communism inadequate or irrelevant tend to articulate their position by endorsing the claim with an alternative justification – that the Bulgarian governmental failures are due to corruption.

Now, are the narratives of corruption conspiracy theories?

The public life of corruption is as ghostly as the afterlife of the former secret services, because in order to explain the national governance, corruption should have a national scale, and the facts are always limited in scale, always about individuals. And if one speaks of corruption beyond the limited facts, one always claims to unmask “a small group of powerful people combining together in secret to plan and carry out an illegal or improper action, particularly one that alters the course of events” (Knight, 2003: 15).

But on the other hand, if a political actor decides that corruption is a conspiracy theory, she would fail to take a stand against corruption. Since political legitimacy is grounded on claims for moral superiority, she would undermine her political legitimacy. And the ruinous effects of that can be illustrated by the 2013 protests, which brought down the government by insisting on its inability to answer the question of who is pulling its strings behind the scenes.

Of course, the right-wing parties also endorsed the narrative of corruption, which they blamed on the communist past. The narrative of corruption has become politically unquestionable, and, in that sense, corruption is tantamount to an undecidable hegemonic theory of conspiracy, or a hegemonic conspiracy theory.

### The Global Conspiracy

Narratives of corruption and communist conspiracy form the central ring of the Bulgarian conspiratorial milieu (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987: 50). The patterns, development and distribution of other conspiracy theories depend on the local conditions set by this central ring, particularly if they are from external origin.

Let us take for example the theory about Jewish conspiracy. Since one of the important sources of legitimacy of the communist party was its opposition to fascism, in the socialist period the theory was virtually expelled from the Bulgarian public sphere. After 1990, it was propagated by an author called Nikola Nikolov, whose biography was a major source of legitimacy for his writings.

Nikolov graduated from the prestigious French college in Sofia, studied medicine, fought in WW2, after the advent of the communist party to power spent several months in prison and in a labor camp for political reasons, then emigrated to the United States, graduated in Central

European studies and arts, and wrote several books on global conspiracy, which were originally published in English, and then translated in Bulgarian after 1989 (Nikolov 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995, 1997).

The argument developed by Nikolov can be boiled down to the following: modern history is a sequence of crises; human nature is founded on the pursuit of happiness; the crises are not natural because they bring about suffering, which is adverse to human nature; therefore the crises are artificial, they are created by a powerful invisible hand.

But if an argument of that kind is not substantiated, it will be of no more consequence than preaching of morality or laments of the lost golden age. So Nikolov tried to support his argument by using knowledge of different types, origins, and regimes of legitimation: general knowledge about events like wars or revolutions, knowledge of historical facts like the full names, dates of birth and ethnicity of all the members of the Central committee, Politburo, and The Committee on the Exceptional Situations of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; trivia about the biographies of historical figures like Rothschild, Napoléon, or Hrushchov; anecdotal knowledge like the story about the alleged release of a Rothschild from Nazi prison arranged personally by Himmler; proverbial knowledge drawn as if from a dictionary of quotations or from books that pretend to sum up the wisdom of the ages, for example "Hatred is death, so do not make yourself a grave", or "If you can eat only half a loaf of bread, the other half belongs to someone else".

In order to make this odd collection of knowledge support his argument, Nikolov construed some of its elements as clues or confessions, for example clues disclosing the power of the Rothschilds over the Nazis, or confessions that Zionists actually considered Marx to be the second modern prophet of Judaism. And the alleged clues and confessions opened up semiotic black holes beneath the signifying chains of historical narratives, trivia, and proverbs, in which darkness the reader was supposed to recognize the face of the sinister group, whose powerful invisible hand brought about the crises that made humanity suffer, the real face of a small minority of no more than 300 Jewish bankers and their families.

Since that sinister face could easily seem just a ghost, an apparition, Nikolov tried to make his argument compelling by claiming that behind the chaotic and depressing facade of history, behind the endlessly meaningless proliferation of binary oppositions on its surface, one could recognize a plot that can be reduced to the following storyline: in order to profit, the bankers need to sell credit, but the need for credit is limited in normal circumstances, therefore the bankers need never-ending states of exception like wars, revolutions, natural or economic disasters; since no one would risk death or poverty for their private interests, the bankers need to conceal the true purpose of the crises they provoke; therefore they manipulate the bulk of the available information, and persecute those who threaten to expose it.

In his first book, Nikolov declared that he was driven by desire to enlighten humanity, to act morally, to expose the crimes of the global elite, to honor the oath of allegiance he took to the Constitutions of the United States and the Constitution of pre-socialist Bulgaria. Yet he also acknowledged personal motivation. Nikolov believed that the life of Bulgarian people and his own life had been shaped by two crises, the coming of the communists to power in 1944, and their downfall in 1989. Nikolov intended to convince the Bulgarian public that those crises were not destiny but rather an act of covert tyranny. And although he did not say that explicitly, to him tyranny aroused hope, which destiny denied, because unlike destiny tyranny can be fought, overthrown, or at least blamed. Due to this, the discursive conversion of destiny into tyranny exerted on Nikolov and perhaps on his readers an effect, which could be most adequately described as self-empowerment. This effect can be exemplified by the ending of the book, in which Nikolov leveled accusations against the secret tyrants of the world, as if standing against them and therefore on their level, or at least no longer beneath them:

Thinking only about yourselves you promote an egoistic activity that contradicts the norms of the others in the society. The essence of life is general well-being and equal rights. The door between you and us is tightly closed and it is an insurmountable barrier between you

and humanity. We are striving to open that door and to dismantle the established barrier not by division but rather as an indivisible part of the society that you also belong to. As a detached part of the society you will be never happy, and you will always live in fear as a minority. What do I see when I look at you? Just a face eliciting egotism and hatred to all the rest, to the humanity and to the whole world. Perhaps you believe that you enjoy some beauty and bliss! Those are fictions and rationalizations, indoctrinations and stimulants. Beauty and bliss appear only if there is love, all else is just a reflection. What is the freedom that you enjoy almost without constraints? Freedom is pursuing any desire in all its forms, accomplishing any intention or purpose. Your sole desire is to accumulate more than you have, or to prevent its loss. Your desire is focused only on goals that are pleasurable to you, while they cause us pain and suffering. There is no freedom in desire, thought and action. They bring pleasure to one, and pain and suffering to others. In the final analysis, the rewards and punishments you administer are so obviously unequal that the great and the mediocre, the noble and the treacherous are all made equal - and all suffer. (Nikolov, 1992)

Nikolov claimed that the global bankers secretly orchestrated the 1917 revolution in order to expropriate the assets of the Russian royal family, and to produce a serious and consistent threat that would make the European governments buy arms. Building on that, he explained the coming of the Bulgarian communist to power by a secret plot to expand the communist threat by means of splitting the world between the Western and the Eastern bloc, which would bring forth an arm's race fueled by the fear and hatred of both blocs to each other. And that in turn allowed Nikolov to describe the breakdown of the East-European communist governments in 1989 as a sinister plan to stop the Soviet leadership to bring an end to the Cold War, with the additional goal of expropriating the wealth accumulated by the socialist countries.

I live in the United States for more than twenty years, and I am grateful for their hospitality. Beautiful country with natural riches. Wonderful people, but sadly, politically naive. The young generation is deliberately corrupted and crippled by all kinds of twisted entertainment and drugs. Beautiful America, watch out! Wake up! It is about time to open your eyes and save yourself. I think that the Soviet Union and China will solve easier their internal and international problems as compared with the United States. Because those two countries are not completely devoured by the financial and economic octopus that has completely suffocated the United States. My only advice to both countries is not to rush in the waters of the United States, because they will inevitably drown. The interior and international policies of the Soviet Union and China seem trustworthy to me, and I think that the world and the United States can be rescued with their help. Let us make the megacapital responsible, let it bring back all that it unlawfully took from humanity. A just redistribution of riches amounting to trillions will make the world flourishing and happy once again. (Nikolov, 1992)

However, Nikolov's account of the crises that shaped the contemporary Bulgarian history produced two contradictions. Firstly, the Bulgarian communist party was represented as both a puppet and an antagonist of the bankers. And secondly, Nikolov believed that both communism and anti-communism were secretly inspired and supported by the global elite.

Nikolov solved the first contradiction by developing the theory that in exchange for the support of the global banking elite, the communists agreed to let groups of criminals spread robbery and violence for 40 days, and the bankers used that period to eliminate their opponents, as well as to deprive the independent Bulgarian capitalists from their wealth.

The second contradiction was solved by the assumption that communism and anti-communism shared a common ground. Since communism and anti-communism were both focused on fighting the enemy – either the capitalists or the communists – both ideologies destroyed social solidarity, and prevented modern societies from restoring their harmony. However, this led Nikolov to believe that any discourse that shared the same ground had been secretly engineered by the banking elite. Therefore, he considered any protest against injustice, any claim to equality, any manifestation of social antagonisms to be a secret plan to undermine

social harmony. In consequence, Nikolov denounced both racism and American civil rights movements, fascism, communism and liberalism, capitalism, socialism and Zionism, the world wars, the Cold War, as well as its unexpected end. In fact, Nikolov denounced modernity.

Since this reproval of modernity implied normative claims that could not be justified by any modern normative discourse, Nikolov tried to ground them on wisdom. Hence the function of the lengthy collection of proverbs, which opened all his books, including one authored by Nikolov himself: "Just like musical instruments, people are differently tuned; but just like musical instruments in an orchestra they can be attuned to each other"(Nikolov, 1992). Nikolov proposed to his readers also a practical test for the righteousness of any government – it should make people feel sovereigns in their homes, and it should follow the principles codified in the Constitution of the United States, "one of the most democratic and just countries in the world" (Nikolov, 1997).

Nikolov's book was cheap, and it was widely bought. But in the years after 1989 the Bulgarian public believed in capitalism, it sought in capitalism salvation from its alleged socialist wretchedness, so it was unwilling to imagine capitalists as villains. A couple of historians made devastating comments about Nikolov's book in the media, and in his later publications he consistently complained at the negative response of the Bulgarian readers, which he believed to be in contrast with the warm reception of his books by the global public, even by Canadian Jewish communities.

However, the early 1990s were a period of enthusiastic hope, to the extent that the bulk of the political actors seriously believed that as the communist party fell from power, in a couple of years Bulgaria would become a happy and prosperous nation. But the post-socialist reforms brought about poverty and injustice, and in the mid-1990-ties Nikolov published several texts claiming that the end of the Cold War was manipulated by the bankers, and that the Bulgarian government was flawed because it was secretly dominated by agents of the former secret service, who were now free to serve directly the interests of the global elite (Nikolov, 1994, 1995). Then in 1997, Nikolov published the only Bulgarian translation of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" (Nikolov, 1997). As the previous books, the protocols were framed by wise proverbs, alleged disclosures by Jews that they did not mean well, three chapters, which explained that the protocols were the doctrine of the Jewish bankers and the Zionist elite, while the ordinary Jews were victims just like Ghoin, and moreover, that ordinary Jews were allegedly intentionally sacrificed by the elders during the Holocaust. Then followed five chapters, which claimed that the Soviet Union was created and manipulated by the elders of Zion, and finally, the lengthy introduction to the protocols was crowned by a photo of orthodox Jews holding signs "Jews are not Zionists, Zionists are not Jews", possibly taken at a peace demonstration in the 1960s.

Soon after the publication of the protocols Nikolov died, and some of his friends suggested that he was poisoned. But of course, how could a true conspiracy theorist die of natural causes? However, this conspiracy theory about the end of a conspiracy theorist brought forth another problem, why he was not poisoned before? Judging on the discussions of his death in online forums, Nikolov's friends and admirers seemed inclined to believe that he was poisoned just then because he dared to translate the protocols, therefore his earlier books were somehow tolerable to the global banking elite or even served its perverse interests, so the protocols were somehow closer to the truth.

Nikolov was succeeded by a couple of writers and journalists – most notably the future leader of the nationalist parliamentary party "Attack" Volen Siderov (2002, 2003, 2004) – that supplemented Nikolov's conspiracy theory with narratives of the corruption of local political or economic actors violating the national interests in favor of the global elite.

Of course, Nikolov did not invent the theory of the conspiracy of Jewish bankers. His invention consisted in linking it to the central ring of the conspiratorial milieu, formed by the popular narratives of anti-communism, corruption, and ruinous post-socialist reforms, which enabled it to appeal to a wider public consumed by the by the question what went wrong.

## Ecology, Health and Justice as Associated Milieus

The conspiratorial milieu in Bulgaria has developed into a number of associated milieus (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987: 51).

The associated milieus can increase the intensity of conspiracy theories, and above a certain threshold they can become undecidable. Take for example the theory that genetically modified food is detrimental. In 2008, the Bulgarian government introduced norms for genetically modified foods that were far more liberal than the EU regulations. The decision provoked protests by users of the site BG-Mamma who claimed that there was a conspiracy between the government and Monsanto, a global corporation with a significant presence in the Bulgarian agriculture. The government tried to brush the protest aside on account that it was based on a conspiracy theory. But in order to disprove it, the government referred to inconclusive and unconvincing expertise, and the officials and experts tried to justify the policy by the need to make the country attractive to global investors. The theory that the deregulation of production and distribution of genetically modified food served the interests of Monsanto became undecidable, and its intensity increased to such an extent, that the protests escalated into the first large-scale Bulgarian act of civil disobedience in a decade (Hristov, 2011).

An year-long monitoring of the conspiracy theories disseminated by Facebook, organized by prof. Ivaylo Dichev in 2016, identified the following associated milieus with significant intensity: shale gas and oil shale, food safety, healthcare, pharmaceutical products, genomic technologies, natural disasters (exemplary studies of conspiracy in Bulgarian see in Dichev, 2017, Dichev, 2012, Dichev, Rone, 2012, Dimitrov, 2012, Dimitrova, 2012, Nikolova, 2012, Rone, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

But before dismissing such concerns, we should take into account that undecidable conspiracy theories are an essential resource for civil activism. In fact, even the 2017 claims for a reform of the legal system made in the name of the civil society, and supported by the European Union, have been driven by the popular theory that the Bulgarian legal system is secretly controlled by the free masons and the order of Knights Templar, which many right-wing political actors believe to be a reincarnation of the former communist secret services.

## Aliens, Chemtrails, and Entertainment

Of course, there are also conspiracy theories of lower intensity disseminated by the media largely because of their curiosity.

An illustrative example is the dissemination of the story that Barack Obama was abducted by aliens, and replaced by a cyborg. The story circulated in the American media for several years, until it reached the websites of *Daily Mail* and *Fox Nation*. Of course, the websites reported only that a growing number of people were asking the question if Obama had not been abducted by aliens, but the question spilled over in the entertainment sections of the Bulgarian news websites that reported it to the amusement of the Bulgarian public, which generally construed the story as an ambivalent evidence about the oddities of the American public (Hristov, 2011).

The monitoring of the conspiracy theories disseminated by Facebook in Bulgarian identified the following low-intensity narratives: chemtrails, reptiles, aliens, Illuminati, Knights Templar, Free Masons, chipping, cloning, manipulation of TV audiences, secret lives of celebrities (Nikolova, 2012, Dimitrov, 2012, Hristov, 2012).

However, unlike theories of corruption or concealed economic interests, conspiracy theories of low intensity are rarely taken seriously, so their reception can be better explained not by concepts as belief, trust, or paranoid style, but rather by the bi-phasic mechanism of enjoyment derived from a temporary alleviation of anxiety, described by Theodor Adorno in the context of the newspaper horoscopes (Adorno, 1994: 95-96).

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<sup>1</sup> The data are accessible via the Facebook group Conspiracy BG.

## The European Union

The European Union enjoys a constant and massive popularity in Bulgaria.

In order to explain that popularity, we need to take into account that in local context the European institutions wield a particular type of power.

Political and legal exercise their power by making decisions, e.g. to adopt a norm, to sanction a violation, to confer an entitlement, to choose a policy. Let us call this type of power *potestas* in the sense, developed by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2005: 78-79). Yet in order to be enforceable, the decisions should be not only legal but also legitimate. The power to grant legitimacy is different from *potestas*, because it intervenes in order to suspend illegitimate decisions of political and legal institutions, or to repair their legitimacy, just as the Roman imperial power systematically overhauled the *potestas* exercised by the public institutions. To put it in other words, the power to legitimize or delegitimize decisions operates in states of exception rather than in normal situations. Let us call that second type of power *auctoritas* (Agamben, 2005: 78-79).

Now, the popularity of the European Union in Bulgaria depends on the fact that in local context its power is articulated as *auctoritas*. To put it simply, the Bulgarian public often finds the decisions of the European public officials distant or disconcerting, but it nevertheless trusts that the European Union would intervene to stop the illegitimate decisions of the Bulgarian authorities, whose *potestas* it distrusts and fears.

So, unsurprisingly, the conspiracy theories about the EU identified by the year-long monitoring of Facebook consist mainly in the fears that the refugee crisis will destabilize the country and the EU, that the TTIP negotiations will override the defense mechanisms against the American policies and products, and that Brexit is a symptom of disintegration of the European Union.

However, even the conspiratorial narratives of the European migration policies, which became particularly salient since 2016, focus on the Bulgarian government rather than on the European authorities. In fact, their fluctuations closely follow the immigration policies of the Bulgarian government, and are quite detached from the European debates.

In the first years of the European migrant crisis, the refugees were a marginal conspiratorial topic. The migrants were mentioned in a couple of publications in right-wing blogs that discussed the claim of a left-wing conspiracy made by the Hungarian prime-minister Victor Orban (Matildamarton, 2016), and in a compilation of two interviews with Croatian military experts translated from Russian, and published in a second-rate Bulgarian newspaper (Glasove, 2015).

Yet the conspiracy theories of the European migration policy boomed in September 2016, when the Bulgarian government made a request for urgent financial support from the European Commission, only two months after issuing an official statement that the current level of migration did not pose serious risks, and despite the official data that the number of incoming migrants was actually decreasing.

The rationale of the conspiracy theories brought about by this unexpected and unexplained change in the Bulgarian immigration policies can be exemplified by the narrative developed by Grigor Lilov, a well-known investigative journalist who had published a number of books on the riches of the Bulgarian political elite, on the shady past of the prime-minister, and on organized crime.

In December 2016, Lilov claimed in an interview that the government has negotiated with the European Union to turn Bulgaria into a migrant relocation center in exchange for financial support (Lilov, 2016). Lilov speculated that the funds provided by the European Commission in the end of 2016 were meant to cover the costs of the accommodation of 40000 migrants who entered the European Union through the Bulgarian border, and accused the Bulgarian government that it lied about the nature of its deal with the European Commission, that it secretly expanded the existing migrant detention centers, and that it planned to build at least

three new centers.

Of course, there were other conspiracy theories of the sudden change in the policies of the Bulgarian government. But the version developed by Lilov turned out to be rather felicitous, because it managed to link the refugee crisis with the central belt of the Bulgarian conspiracy theories, the nexus between corruption and authoritarian power. In fact, Lilov glossed over the alleged secret plan of the European Commission he was claiming to expose, in order to articulate a particular faciality (Deleuze, Guattari, 2014: 115-117), i.e. the authoritarian face of the traitorous Bulgarian elites who “would sell even their children for money”, and who “were in bed with Erdogan, and on the way on delivering a political monster” (Lilov, 2016). And in order to represent the authoritarian face of the elites, Lilov articulated Bulgaria as a desert landscape spinning towards its tragic destruction (Deleuze, Guattari, 2014: 184): “After 27 years of wild transition, we are finally entering its second stage – on the way to normalization of economic, political, social and other relations. But the problem is how long this is going to take, because history can go ahead of us, and close down Bulgaria as a state before the end of this process” (Lilov, 2016).

The theory gained such a wide currency that it was officially rejected by the government, debated by the presidential candidates, and further inflamed by the announcement of a national project intended to provide funding for the municipalities that would permanently settle refugees, as well as by the comment of the prime-minister that if the share of the refugees in the municipalities did not go beyond 7%, it should not be considered a problem. In consequence, the theory became a stock knowledge, which other conspiracy theorists embedded in other narratives about the sinister designs of Turkey (Chukov, 2016), Russia (Yordanov, 2016), or the global institutions (Ivanjiiski, 2016).

Since the theory came to enjoy wide currency, it affected the behavior of social actors that did not find it plausible but merely possible, that did not fully believe in the alleged conspiracy between the national government and the European Commission, but still asked themselves what if it was the case, and tried to take its risk into account. In effect, the theory came to be integrated in responses that were rational in themselves, and that were quite detached from the conspiratorial milieu. That process can be illustrated by the anti-immigration protests in Shiroka Laka widely covered by the national and global media.

In the beginning of February 2017, the governmental Agency for Social Assistance sent two Afghan teenagers to a foster home in the village Shiroka Laka in Rhodope Mountains (BNT, 2017). The Agency did not inform the foster home management or the local authorities. The teenagers arrived escorted by policemen, and they were initially housed in the foster home. In the following days, the inhabitants discussed the actual significance of their arrival in two stormy meetings, and finally decided to protest against their arrival at the village. Fearing that a verbal protest would be inconsequential, they threatened with road blockades.

The protest attracted the attention of the national media, and some of the protesters, petrified in front of the cameras, explained that the local community did not want the migrant boys although they seemed nice, because the people feared that no one could tell what actions the boys could take, and that their accommodation would harm tourism, which was an important source of revenue for the village. However, the protesters articulated more than just frustration, anxiety or anger, because they also claimed the impossible knowledge about a governmental conspiracy. Building on that knowledge, the majority of the protesters believed that if they failed to organize a strong protest, the government would send progressively more migrants, and the village would eventually turn into one of the migrant detention centers that the government supposedly negotiated with the European Commission.

In order to keep the situation under control, the governmental agency promptly transferred the teenagers to the city of Haskovo, but the local authorities once again mounted a strong opposition motivated by the theory that the government was actually trying to establish a migrant detention center, while masking its intentions behind the need to provide accommodation for the teenagers. Being unable to solve the problem, the governmental agency made it dissolve by symbolic actions. One of the teenagers was put to medical tests, declared



19-year old, divested of its legal status of a child at risk, and processed further as the other adult migrants. The other Afghan teenager was sent to a foster home in the area of the nearest migrant detention center, and then ran away (Dnevnik, 2017). However, the media represented the protest as an element of a series of acts of intolerance against migrants. In consequence, the protest produced knowledge about the irrational violence of the Bulgarian population, which the government needed to curb by extending further the prerogatives and resources enjoyed by the police, and of course, by investing even more in the notorious border fence.

#### A Hypothetical Conclusion

Conspiracy theories can be easily diagnosed as a paranoid behavior, or condemned as a threat to democracy, or despised as mass foolishness. But given their wide currency, we need either to abandon the concept of public reason inherited from the Enlightenment, or to understand their rationality.

I believe that in order to do understand the rationality of the Bulgarian conspiracy theories, we need to take into account the fact that they are not insular, that they adapt to and evolve with their environment, we need to study their milieu rather than isolated and deceptively stable conspiratorial narratives. Otherwise the research on conspiracy theories could amount to academically verified representations of the mad beliefs of the people, representations that would seem to invite and justify minor, local, allegedly rational limitations on popular sovereignty, which accumulation could erode it more effectively than any tyranny.

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