

## Deconstructing and Building Walls in Discourses of Tolerance and Protest

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**Abstract:** The text aims to outline the contours of three different discourses (of power, protest, and tolerance), which change their content over time, but the principles on which they are built remain the same. The article will trace the development of the discourses of protest and tolerance in Bulgaria, which are an alternative way of speaking to the ubiquitous narratives of power and create an ideological pluralism that breaks down walls and serves as a corrective to governance. Two transformations will be outlined: Firstly, that of the nationalist discourse, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was transformed from being a protest against the Ottoman government into serving as authority after the Liberation, when it became singular, suppressing the emergence of other discourses, and became a prerequisite for greater attachment to authoritarian models in Bulgaria, represented in a nostalgia for the totalitarian past. The second transformation is in the paradoxical presentation of nationalist discourse as a voice of protest against European policies of breaking down walls, integration, and pluralism, arguing for the rebuilding of walls and enclosure in one's own community, which creates a particular sense of adventure and heroism in nationalist movements in both Bulgaria and Europe and makes them more attractive.

**Keywords:** protest, tolerance, relations of power, nationalism, walls

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## Terminological clarifications

The guiding thesis of this text is that at the heart of the construction and demolition of walls are narratives of reality that create patterns of behaviour, and hence cultural constructions, and that struggle for discursive supremacy, thereby constituting reality. In brief, the characteristic features of the voice of power, protest, and tolerance will be outlined, with the discourse of tolerance proving to be the dividing line in the transition of protest to power discourse and vice versa, of power to protest discourse.

In this paper I will use the terms *discourse* and *narrative* synonymously. Discourse is used in Michel Foucault's sense of the process of forming those truths in which our selves are situated and unfold. Correspondingly, notions of normality and reason are established within discourses, and because they derive from impersonal manifestations of power, each member of society accepts these foundational narratives as truth achieved by himself in the process of his lived experience. Discourses compete over the possibility of "establishing valid versions of reality."<sup>12</sup> They operate with symbolic material that consists not only of written texts or fixed events, but also of certain rules, norms, or behaviours that are not codified. Secondly, it should be noted that the truths defined by discourses cannot, for many reasons, achieve an objective correspondence with the actual passage of time. This is because on the one hand, the historical sources that have reached us cannot reveal all aspects of events and are always subjective in nature, and on the other hand, because of the lack of ability of subsequent generations to empathize with the situation of their ancestors. Historical discursive analysis proceeds from the fact that it is not possible to get entirely behind discourses.<sup>3</sup>

What is fundamental in both terms is that narratives, or discourses, are easily recognizable by all members of the society in which they circulate. They create structural patterns that determine the way individuals think and thus motivate the transition from narrative to action. It is the internalization of the ideational content of the power narrative that leads to the subjugation of the masses. Conversely, narratives of protest lead to the shaping of alternative models of power. They cause upheavals and shifts of social strata if they succeed in becoming dominant.

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<sup>1</sup> Landwehr, Achim. 2008. *Historische Diskursanalyse*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag. 2008, 91.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the German-speaking authors written in brackets are translated by me, M.E.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ендрева, Мария. *Наративите в немската култура по времето на Реформацията (1517-1648)*. София: УИ "Св. Климент Охридски", 2023.

The question of the bearers of these narratives is important. Architecture, music, visual art, cinema, video games, written and spoken artistic and journalistic speech, as well as the content of the media environment in the so-called public space play a major role in the concretization of narratives. The prominent presence of the arts as vehicles of these discourses is not accidental, and the observation can be made that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, art was used to represent power and its assertion, and then increasingly took on the character of an opposition to power, offering a different view of the world that showed the “blind spots”<sup>4</sup> and distortions of reality through the “absolute knowledge”<sup>5</sup> of power discourse.

In Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, an indirect explanation for the importance of narratives (discourses), tellings and stories for reality can be found. According to Luhmann, they can be taken as an elementary operation for understanding it, reducing the complexity of social systems and helping to bring them into a comprehensible perimeter, focusing attention on this and not on other phenomena, so that the individual has a sense of a holistic perception of the world.<sup>6</sup> Luhmann speaks of functional systems, interaction and organizational systems, and social movements. The underlying operation of each system that keeps it alive he calls communication. Through it, the overall system of society, as well as its subsystems, is reproduced. Luhmann understood communication as a construct of three elements – information, message, and understanding. The first two are related to the sender and the third, to the receiver. This is key to the proper construction of operations in the system. If the understanding is not put into a specific general framework of meaning, then the communication fails and the system cannot be reproduced further. And this is where the role of narratives comes in, helping to achieve a common surface to achieve the communication of systems that Luhmann is talking about. These narratives are the tool with which the necessary reduction of complexity is carried out. With their help, the selection of precisely defined information from the infinite amount of data surrounding us is ensured, which aims to direct the population’s thinking in a particular direction. This selection turns it into a message that simplifies reality and allows the individual to master it, and this in turn makes it possible for him to participate in communication. In selection, according to Luhmann, the degree of differentiation is

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<sup>4</sup> Luhmann, Niklas and Peter Fuchs. *Reden und Schweigen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989, 10f.

<sup>5</sup> Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. *Das Kapital lesen I*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rohwolt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Luhmann, Niklas. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998, 406–410.

increased, which in turn is a prerequisite for increasing complexity. In other words, the process of simplification gives rise to increasing specialization and it becomes the cause of the emergence of new systems. This in turn leads to an increase in the cultural level of social organizations which is more complex than the previous levels. “Die Gesellschaft ist kein Nullsummenspiel. Sie entwickelt Komplexität mithilfe von dafür geeigneten Komplexitätsreduktionen.”<sup>7</sup> The degree of differentiation in different functional systems indicates the capabilities and the stage of development of a culture. Through the emergence of different narratives and their development and enrichment with new and novel texts and artifacts, bringing nuances and new aspects, different, higher levels of social organization are created.

### **The discourse of power and its speech**

The first and fundamental discourse in public speech is that of power. It is characterized by the unanimity, the singular, the monopoly of truth and of interpretation, which is its most constitutive feature. The essence of this narrative is that truth comes from power and one must obey it in order to have access to the absolute. The power narrative defies flexibility and dialogicality. Its intransigence is postulated in the thousands of artifacts and texts in which it can be found.<sup>8</sup> It is imperative and suggests that protest, rebellion, and reform do not make life better.<sup>9</sup>

Within this narrative, authority is untouchable. It can use the powers of its subjects, but not vice versa. It is uncompromising, heavy-handed, clumsy and static, one-voiced, guarding the unity of truth and the monopoly of the norm. Changes in it are never made as a result of compromise and dialogue, but out of a need to adjust to new conditions and maintain power. From numerous examples in human history one can trace how power retains its influence by means of wars, internal persecutions and terror, punitive actions, the re-education of the population, the elimination of ideological alternatives, but also by entertaining, educating, and impressing the subjects with splendour and representation. Power in all its manifestations is vigilant to prevent the emergence of parallel subversive discourses. The power narrative helps

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<sup>7</sup> Luhmann, Niklas. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998, 406.

<sup>8</sup> An emblematic example of this is the concept of the ruler of (N. Machiavelli 2007).

<sup>9</sup> cf. Макиавели, Николо. *Владетелят*. Прев. на български от М. Г. Янков. София: Еспас. Ebook edition, 2007, 38 and Berger, Wilhelm. *Macht*. Wien: Facultas.wuv, 2009, 54f.

to marginalise opposition groups and restrict their rights. It is power discourses that build the walls that protest speech and action seeks to dismantle.

### **The protest discourse**

It was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the time of the Reformation, that for the first time in European history the narrative of protest, which had flashed through the various reformist currents over the centuries and faded away again, became permanently present in the public sphere. It cannot be said that the narratives of protest have had comfort in any of the succeeding epochs, but they have always been present, above all through art, which increasingly became a system in its own right and began to oppose that of politics and religion, which most often possess the discourse of power. The characteristics of the protest narrative are associated with offering an alternative, with the disruption of the only centre of power. The narrative of protest is dynamic, it is mobile and does not stay in one frame, it aims to achieve multicentricity, it proposes another model and controls power in order to improve the situation of citizens. Through the texts and personalities that represent it, this discourse has been able to achieve significant successes in rearranging social layers. The existence of a strong protest narrative is a great prerequisite for the intensification of social processes, and as such, it is an inevitable condition and means for achieving greater complexity.

The discourses of protest are those that not only seek to dismantle or at least transform the established structures but also expose the authoritarian narrative as manipulative and distortive of reality. Typical of the discourse of protest is its proclivity towards the valorising of individuals, as it is the only discourse that actually leads to those revolutionary changes which rebuild social structures and remain engraved in history. In turn, the narrative of tolerance, in its corpus of texts, asserts the right of oppositional speech to be heard and argues for the need of liberty and pluralism in democratic societies. This discourse is the one that, in a historical context, works towards the deconstruction of barriers. It supports the integration of the dissenters and the marginalized communities.

### **The discourse of tolerance**

The imposition of the protest discourse is due to the strong appeal for tolerance, which shapes its own discourse, asserting the right to an ever-present alternative protesting voice. The

first enduring manifestations of the toleration narrative can also be seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and to some extent the success of protest reform movements in Europe can be attributed to them. The texts of Sebastian Castellio, of Erasmus of Rotterdam, of Philip Melanchthon, but also of numerous acts of state which were taken to regulate confessional relations mark this discourse and lay the foundation for an ideological line on the unshakability of individual freedom as a factor in the regulation of social relations. At this time, it was also adopted in theories of the nature and structure of the state (Bodin, Puffendorf, Grotius, etc.),<sup>10</sup> which is one of the sure preconditions for its growing importance in the following centuries. It is only thanks to appeals to tolerance in their various forms that the narrative of protest has remained so persistent in Western societies. In the centuries that followed, it succeeded in bringing about major steps towards social equality and greater integration of the individual. The discourse of tolerance has been the real wall-breaker, going inevitably from its origins to our time and supporting the talk of protest. The main narrative emerging from it is that of individualism and human freedom, which remains indelible in further thinking in European cultures. Its centuries-long presence in significant texts of political and social life and of world literature from the Enlightenment and Sturm und Drang onwards, and despite the great difficulties under which the discourse of tolerance has imposed itself and survived in the public sphere, is due to freedoms slowly and hard won. But with its already five centuries of existence, it is the main guarantor of the presence and the narrative of protest in society.

Through their corrective power over authority, the narratives of protest and tolerance which deconstruct barriers are key factors in the development of democratic traditions. Thus, the question of the emergence and the alterations of these two narratives in a historical context becomes an essential one for Bulgarian society.

The birth of a more advanced society, containing ideas of individual freedom and public spheres, as well as narratives of protest, revolt, opposition, and tolerance towards the different, occurs only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bulgaria to the same extent as it did in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany. I will not dwell on the reasons for this delay, but broadly speaking, they are grounded in the disappearance of an autonomous Bulgarian state at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Mergel, Thomas. *Staat und Staatlichkeit in der europäischen Moderne*. Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlag, 2022

## **The three discourses in Bulgaria**

Mass modern public discourse, supported by the printing press, the cultural and political press, was mainly observed after the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a real Bulgarian journalism emerged, debates were held on various questions about the future path of the Bulgarians, and there were schools, different wings, views on the revolution, and the organization of liberation (protest). Here, even without the state, which is the main driving force for the emergence of the various discourses in society, but with a network of schools and community centres (enlightenment centres) throughout the territory of Bulgaria, a public space managed to emerge. The first narrative that develops within it is that of protest, i.e. of liberation and restoration of the state, which merges completely with the narrative of the national. And this, I dare say, is a Bulgarian specificity that influences to this day. It was started by Paisii Hilendarski, and thousands of texts have since been added to it. The national and at the same time liberation narrative is the oldest and most effective Bulgarian narrative, probably with the largest corpus of texts internalized by generations of Bulgarians throughout history since the Liberation.

The emergence of the discourse of tolerance in Bulgaria, which naturally appears alongside the protest narrative, is particularly overdue. Its corpus can be anchored in modern legal acts such as the Tarnovo Constitution, or in statements by Levski, Botev, and other revivalists towards the equality of all peoples, i.e. it can be located in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it basically has the possibility to unfold only after the fall of the Iron Curtain, since in long periods of the Bulgarian Kingdom and during the People's Republic of Bulgaria it was practically silenced by the single-voiced authoritarian discourse of the authorities.

After the liberation of Bulgaria, its development moved only in the direction of modernization and catching up. Impressive are the lightning development of Bulgarian literature and the Europeanization of cultural life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – a century which also included the consolidation of the discourse of power in the country and the emergence of many other institutions and discourses that had been lacking or underdeveloped. The country succeeded – as the Kingdom of Bulgaria, in the socialist period, and in the period after the accession to the EU – in industrializing and building modern structures that would guarantee the creation of a public discourse that is adequate and comparable to the present world. Despite these formal conditions, which Bulgaria has fulfilled for the last 150 years or so, there is a

strong dominance of the national narrative over all others and a very slender narrowness of the narratives of protest and tolerance.

The national liberation discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is one of protest and contains ideas and texts urging the dissolution of the rotten Ottoman structures and the formation of a modern national state. The texts which feed this discourse rely heavily on stories of valour and self-sacrifice. This heroic ideal and the crystalized pantheon of heroes dominate the new conception of Bulgaria and are seen within the discourse of protest as freewheeling and unyielding. However, a very important fact that is often disregarded is that the narrative of protest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century goes from being an oppositional one to an authoritative one after the Liberation. This transition remains a blind spot in history and determines the transfer of positive meanings into negative phenomena. Instead of simply dismantling the restrictions of the Ottoman rule and creating new, liberated structures, the national discourse becomes the narrative of authority and begins constructing barriers, isolating, repressing, and creating competition. Precisely this phase of heroic, romanticized opposition at the time of the Ottoman empire manipulatively justifies the repressive transformation of the nationalist discourse and renders it undisputable in the minds of a large swath of the Bulgarian people.

Thus, this transformation of the national from a narrative of protest against foreign rule to a legitimation of its own power is symptomatic, as the national transforms from a polyphonic to a monophonic discourse that begins to dominate and demand the silencing of all alternatives. The state authorities after the Liberation turned this national discourse into the leading instrument of their rule, referring to the fact that the liberation work was still ongoing (this is understandable in view of the lands which still remained under foreign rule), which resulted in several national catastrophes related to lost wars and the unfulfilled national ideal of integration of all territories inhabited by Bulgarians.

The narrative of nationalism, which for most of the history of contemporary Bulgaria has focused on the ethnic Bulgarian majority, is centred around the values of a collective traditional-patriarchal society and intolerant of all manifestations of polycentricity and otherness. Manifestations of alternativity are assumed to be inauthentic in the narrative of the Bulgarian, sneered at as imported from abroad, and narratives about the value of polyphony and alternative cultures are not particularly developed. The reason for this is rooted in the fact that for the vast majority of our history, no freedom could be won for narratives of protest and tolerance to emerge. The over-centrality of the singular narrative of authority in the national consciousness that precludes dialogicity is too strong for the principles of cultural pluralism to

be internalized and for mechanisms of civic democratic control to be created through oppositional discourse. Without these two narratives firmly present in space, power becomes arbitrary authoritarianism. This is particularly noticeable in moments of highly authoritarian politics, exercising terror against political opponents. The power narrative immediately eliminates any ideological resistance in its infancy, without ever developing an awareness that opposition is a productive and absolutely necessary social phenomenon for improving the condition of society and the lives of individuals.

The great effectiveness of socialist power in silencing alternative voices and homogenizing the thought of an entire people is largely the result of this lack of a tradition of protest discourse and its presence in the public sphere. This topic deserves special research, since in other countries with totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany, there is a vast suppression of alternative discourses about power, but there is also a powerful protest discourse being formed by both exiles and internal migrants. In any case, in favour of the hypothesis of the overpowered authority and the weak presence and voice of any protest in Bulgaria is the fact that in Bulgaria, unlike in other socialist countries, there is almost no dissident movement that emerges from its narrow elitist circles and forms a unified, identifiable protest voice that reaches the broader masses.

In this sense, the real conditions for the development of a narrative of tolerance and protest lie in the creation of public spheres and independent media in the periods before 1944 and immediately after the changes in November 1989, which in light of the centuries-old traditions of other nations proved to be very insufficient. However, it must be said that since the end of the Cold War, there has been tremendous progress in Bulgaria in creating both a free public space and a distinct voice of protest and tolerance, supported by intellectuals, writers, and artists. Bulgarian literature in particular has contributed to this, with writers such as Georgi Gospodinov, Milen Ruskov, Galin Nikiforov, Vasil Georgiev, Gotse Delchev, Teodora Dimova and others introducing new themes and largely deconstructing narratives of the past.

The lack of a centuries-old tradition of narratives of tolerance and pluralism in public culture is a real prerequisite for greater adherence to authoritarian singular power practices in Bulgaria. At the moment they are objectified in nostalgia for the totalitarian past. The ideological narrative of stability and happy life in dictatorship and patriarchal models finds too many adherents in Bulgaria. This nostalgia for some idealized past is a worldwide phenomenon, but in our country it clearly bears the traits of nostalgia for dictatorship as well, which is gaining an increasingly attractive face in hundreds of groups on social networks, a

huge corpus of propaganda publications in the media. The trade in nostalgia is described very well by Georgi Gospodinov in his novel *Vremeubezhishte (Time Shelter)*.<sup>11</sup>

There is a gravitation towards some immanent greatness of the nation. There is a search for grounds for pride, equality, even superiority to other nations, and often the result of these comparisons is grotesque as history is distorted beyond recognition. For even a cursory comparison with foreign traditions and achievements reveals the insubstantiality of nationalist attempts at artificial greatness, which in our age is quite irrelevant and shows the problematic basis for the search for one's own identity.

### **The reversal of roles**

The realisation of the global idea of overcoming borders with the aim of free travel, settlement, and business within the EU, which guarantees personal freedoms, has not always proceeded without problems, but at the end of the day this political project is a crowning achievement of human civilisation, in which polyphony and alternative forms of thinking are not only not forbidden, but encouraged. Here is the unique attempt to change the sound of the power narrative by transforming its singularity into an imperative of polyvoice. Within the European structures, the deconstruction of barriers has become the key message of the EU administration, and the nationalist discourse automatically passes into the position of protest. Thus, in the current situation, we are witnessing the paradoxical transformation of protest from a force of traditionally deconstructing barriers into a force of destructive aspirations towards a singular totalitarian power that wants to rebuild the walls of the past. Here I am referring to the Party Vazrazhdane [Revival] in Bulgaria and all the parties that want a reinstatement of the communist regime, as well as the increasingly popular nationalist parties in Europe such as the National Front in France or Alternative for Germany. Their protest speech against the EU glorifies these narratives built on the friend–enemy opposition, which in the globalised economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be productive as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The protest attitude lends them a great deal of attractiveness, adding the element of adventure, struggle, sacrifice for one's own against another's, etc. We are witnessing an unprecedented fact: for the first time in history, the traditional champions of the removal of the barriers are the defenders of the system (this also happened during COVID). And while intellectuals and prominent

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<sup>11</sup> Господинов, Георги. *Времеубежище. Роман*. София: Жанет 45, 2022.

writers such as Robert Menasse, Yuli Tse, Catherine Roegla, etc., are increasingly in solidarity with Brussels' policies of integration and breaking down barriers and stereotypes, i.e., they more or less appear as defenders of a supranational power, contemporary nationalists are gaining more and more supporters in Europe, using the heroic posture of protesters, offering their supporters the role of fighters for national greatness. "Enough experiments! It's time for a resurgence." This is the slogan of the party Vazrazhdane (meaning resurgence, rebirth), which with its name wants to capture all the positive connotations of the liberation narrative and the birth of the Bulgarian nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This obviously suggests successfully that Bulgaria should return to the beaten path of the past and get out of the integration into the democratic systems in Western Europe, labelled as experiments. Under the allusions to the lofty records of heroism in Bulgarian history, however, the leaders of the party promise the adoption of a law on foreign agents, as well as the return of the People's Court and the camps for national traitors. These narratives of national prosperity linked to authoritarian practices sneak in successfully and are disturbing because, under the veneer of the heroic protest pathos of the past, people do not see the danger in them.

Unlike the productive effects of national ideology in the abolition of absolutism and the establishment of parliamentary democracies, the return to the stale nationalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be interpreted as ideological manipulation. This approach of the nationalist parties in Europe, and in Bulgaria in particular, corresponds well to Ernst Bloch's definition of Nazism as an ideological unsynchronicity (*ideologische Ungleichzeitigkeit*), where old, bygone systems rise in people's minds as a social ideal, but their restoration in the present is impossible, and in practice the images and the stories about them serve as an instrument for the ideological blinding and manipulation of the most defenceless part of the population. This is precisely the distortion of reality achieved by the false discourses of protest, which want to rebuild the walls of the past and are by no means narratives of tolerance.

## **Conclusion**

After the observation of a huge lack of texts and artefacts for the three narratives under consideration – of power, of protest, and of tolerance, which in Western Europe took their contours and first victories during the Reformation – in the Bulgarian context the observation of their very unsustainable character due to the late emergence of a public space is necessary. A link has been suggested between the significant delay in the emergence of the wall-breaking

discourse of tolerance in Bulgaria and the country's strong inclination towards authoritarianism and nostalgia for an ideologically manipulated past that relies on consensus as the main characteristic of power. The shift of nationalist discourse from the discourse of power to that of protest marks our time more and more permanently. The attractiveness of these classical forms of power discourse is due not only to the absence of a long tradition of the discourse of tolerance, but also to the unusual transformation of paradigms that profit from the possession of the heroic posture of protest.

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