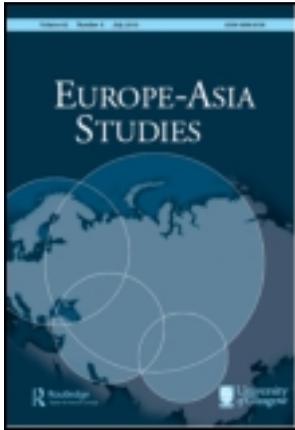


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Mundane Citizenship: New Media and Civil Society in Bulgaria

MARIA BAKARDJIEVA

Abstract

This essay examines the new forms of civic and political engagement that the increasing accessibility of internet-based media has precipitated in the Bulgarian context. It discusses the results of three case studies which focus respectively on online forum discussions of a significant political event; a campaign of eco-protests; and the activism emerging from a website and forum dedicated to motherhood. The essay argues that new media have brought civic and political issues and the possibility to deliberate and act on them into the everyday lives of Bulgarians. As a result, the voice of Bulgarian civil society has grown stronger and has been able to penetrate the sphere of formal politics, sometimes with important consequences.

MUNDANE CITIZENSHIP IS A CONCEPT I WOULD like to introduce at the outset with the objective of capturing a set of forms of civic engagement that have arisen in a ‘mediapolis’ (Silverstone 2007) where citizens’ competence at intermeshing reception and participation across a variety of media formats has grown significantly (Couldry 2009). These new forms have shown the potential to strengthen, enrich and expand ‘the public connection’ (Couldry *et al.* 2007), or the awareness of ordinary people about what goes on in their larger public world and their sense of enrolment and agency in that world. To use a somewhat graphic metaphor, new media have taken numerous people out of their deep and isolated private abodes and enabled them to respond, speak and act with regard to social and political issues, even if most of the time in elementary and inconspicuous gestures. Thus the two defining characteristics of mundane citizenship are: first, that it is intertwined with the routine activities and concerns of everyday living; and second, that it is crucially enabled by new media of communication. By introducing this category I do not mean to argue that empowering and activating citizenship is what new media do by design or necessity. The abundant literature concerning the effects of the internet on democracy has demonstrated that there are both bright and shadowy sides to this relationship. As a host of new communication technologies, the internet has been taken up by activists, organisations and politically engaged individuals in inventive and productive ways (Bentivegna 2006; Dahlberg 2007; Dahlgren 2009; Nielsen 2010). At the same time, it also lends itself to

alienation and manipulation that can undermine the prospects of democratic civic and political participation among users (Chadwick 2006; Sunstein 2007). ‘Mundane citizenship’ is a working caption for a range of novel phenomena observed in my empirical research that I interpret as a set of new possibilities, as new ways of operating that place civic participation deep into the heart of everyday life.¹ I set out to investigate what it is possible to achieve with new media in the terrain of citizenship rather than to present a statistically measured account of what is real.² Elsewhere (Bakardjieva 2009) I have referred to this approach as the ‘method of openings’. Through this method I will inquire into the circumstances of actual civic engagement facilitated by new media and what can be learned from them.

Citizenship is of course a broad category that has been the subject of a wide variety of conceptualisations and definitions.³ The liberal tradition in political thought defines citizenship as a set of essential rights and freedoms that individuals possess as members of a liberal-democratic state. As such, individuals should be guaranteed the freedom to pursue their own understanding of the good life within a legislative framework that precludes harm to others. This tradition insists on clear and strictly imposed limits on the state’s capacity to intervene in the private lives of citizens. The citizen thus emerges as a client of the state and consumer of the protective and enabling services that it has to offer. Against this prevailing background of understanding, the communitarian view of citizenship emphasises a cultural dimension of citizenship which represents a pillar of individual and group identity. Its premise is that community holds ontological primacy over the individual. Partaking in a moral and cultural order of shared values and meanings compels individuals to embrace the common good and to prioritise it over their private needs and interests. A third model—the republican conception of citizenship—emphasises the agency of citizens and their active participation in the political community. Republicanism promotes ‘civic virtue’, which includes the ability of the individual to set aside his or her personal interests in the name of the public good as well as the individual’s active and devoted participation in public life. Classical republicanism has framed public life as the higher honourable ground on which human activity unfolds and puts down the private as far less worthy and significant. With a boundary so pointed and morally charged, the definition of the public as opposed to the private has become a sensitive matter and contested ground. Feminists, for example, have criticised republicanism for ascribing low status to women and their responsibility for sustaining the virtues of the private world. Another important move undertaken by feminist activists and scholars has been the one that calls for rethinking the very boundary between the public and the private as suggested by the formula ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch 1970).

The theory of radical democracy, for its part, criticises republicanism for its elitist and overly elevated take on citizenship. Republicanism, this criticism goes, fails to recognise the realities of inequality and diversity in late modern capitalist society and

¹This research comprises three case studies focused on new media use for civic engagement conducted in Bulgaria between 2007 and 2010. These cases constitute the empirical foundation of the discussion that will be presented in the following sections of this essay.

²See Lefebvre (1991, p. 9) on the critique of the real with the possible.

³For a detailed discussion see Isin and Turner (2002) and Dahlgren (2009).

the impossibility of all citizens being able to acquire civic competences and to actively involve themselves in the affairs of the *polis*. Moreover, the very idea of a public good is highly contested and close to impossible to agree upon among the members of such a complex political community. For that reason, the recognition of private and group rights and interests which may oppose and challenge the hegemonic understanding of the public good is a necessary condition for a contemporary pluralist democracy. For proponents of the radical-democratic view, citizenship is an aspect of individual identity borne through the numerous acts of positioning that individuals perform *vis-à-vis* their surrounding public world. Such acts gain a political edge when people identify themselves with collective entities along the friend–enemy axis (Mouffe 1993, 2005).

Mundane citizenship can be defined from the perspective of the radical-democratic model as subject-positioning and identity work within a dynamic context of intersecting and shifting public discourses and flexible collectives centred on social and political issues. Mundane citizenship is firmly rooted in private experiences, needs and concerns, but it sheds this shell through collective identification and movement from private to interpersonal, group and public discourse. Its mundane nature distinguishes it from the elevated standard put forward by republicanism both in terms of its practical manifestations, which can be unglamorous and even trivial, and its primary residence in the private sphere. Public discourses as they are received, oriented to and made personally meaningful within the private abode of their audiences are a major carrier of this private–public interaction. The multiple and subtle planes of meaning and negotiation at which mundane citizenship manifests itself lie in stark contrast to the formal institutional operation of liberal citizenship. Although it fundamentally relies on collective identities, mundane citizenship has a much more open, fluid and even dissentious nature than the communitarian ideal allows. At the same time it carries in itself elements that have been associated with all these models of citizenship and can look like each one of them in its various manifestations.

Mundane citizenship can be better understood when three interrelated levels of political engagement and action are acknowledged. First, this is the level of politics proper, or as Beck (1997) describes it, the officially recognised and institutionalised political and corporate system. Secondly, politics has a further mode of operation that Beck calls ‘subpolitics’ where agents coming from outside the official political institutions appear ‘on the stage of social design’, including different professional groups and organisations, citizens’ issue-centred initiatives and social movements, and finally, individuals (Beck 1997, p. 103). As far as individuals are concerned, especially with respect to the developments unfolding within their private worlds, I have argued that a third layer of politics, and respectively citizenship, has to be taken into account, the level of subactivism (Bakardjieva 2009). Subactivism comprises small-scale, often individual and private decisions, discourses or actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference and never appear on the stage of social design, but on the contrary, remain submerged in everyday life. It involves a variety of inconspicuous processes such as identity construction through subject positioning *vis-à-vis* social and political discourses and relations, the distinction between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ and identification with collective formations, the discursive re-enactment of debates and clashes with political frames of reference in the private sphere (everyday political talk),

as well as practical actions and choices regarding matters of daily living that have wider social and political significance.

Subactivism is the hidden dimension of citizenship that provides a foundation for overt engagement at the levels of subpolitics and politics. It does not guarantee or necessarily transform into actions undertaken by citizens at those levels, but predetermines the possibility for such actions. That is why a central question for the investigation of citizenship as a complex phenomenon is what factors and conditions need to be in place for subactivism to break out of the confines of the private sphere and to percolate into the more visible and institutionalised spheres of activity characterising subpolitics and formal politics. The argument that follows will be woven around empirical evidence suggesting that a key factor for this leap to occur is the imaginative employment by citizens of new media and the novel communication practices growing and consolidating around these media. The main goal will be to identify the diverse 'modes of operation or the schemata for action' (de Certeau 1984, p. xii) in which these practices organise themselves in a particular social and political context.

New media and mundane citizenship in the Bulgarian context

The research site for examining the relationship between new media and mundane citizenship in this project was Bulgaria, a relatively new democracy and a recent member of the European Union. While internet access and use in Bulgaria has grown at a steady rate in the past 10 years, due to the low average household income the country lags behind in European rankings (European Commission, Eurostat 2009). The percentage of the population that regularly uses the internet in Bulgaria was 30.7 in 2009 (National Statistical Institute 2009). It is a fact that large portions of the Bulgarian population have neither the means nor the knowledge or motivation to connect to the internet. At the same time, the young and the educated have eagerly embraced the medium and score highly on measures of intensity and innovativeness of internet use (National Statistical Institute 2009; Bakardjieva 2007). Already by 2006, the annually published e-Bulgaria Report (ARC Fund 2006) registered palpable growth in the number of Bulgarian blogs and the rising profile of several online communities and forums. In that period, the shift from use practices based mainly on email, browsing and interpersonal chat to Web 2.0 type activities began to take place. Thus, the potential of the new media to support civic engagement started to present itself to Bulgarian citizens. The following discussion focuses on concrete instances in recent Bulgarian history where this potential has been vividly demonstrated.

The research project on which this essay is based employed the method of a qualitative case study (Creswell 1998). It involved the discovery and delimitation of cases where mundane citizenship (as per the definition above) could be observed and its relationship with new media closely examined. The specific techniques of data collection included structured reading of media publications, discourse analysis of key texts and informal and formal interviews with informants who had participated in civic action. These informants were selected to represent diverse viewpoints and profiles so that a fuller picture of the events under consideration could be captured. Three individual cases were thus defined and examined in depth: the public discussion

of the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union which occurred on 1 January 2007 in mainstream media and popular online forums; the campaign of civic protests that erupted around a 2007 court decision stripping Strandja Mountain of its status as a protected natural reserve; and a series of civic initiatives undertaken by the site bg-mamma over an extended period of time.⁴

In Bulgaria, examples of subactivism facilitated by new media can be found in the context of online forums such as those offering news media audiences the opportunity to post comments on individual journalistic articles. Another type of discussion forum that attracts a mass following is hosted by larger internet portals such as dir.bg where participants themselves could open topics and subtopics with or without links to journalistic news items. The investigation of the role of internet-based media as tools for mundane citizenship can usefully start out with a close analysis of the nature and contribution of such forums. This is the objective of the analysis of the first case concerning Bulgaria's accession to the EU. Later on, Bulgarian civic society saw the employment of new media such as blogs and online forums in raising attention to particular social and political issues and the organisation of civic campaigns, sometimes with significant results. The case of the 'save Strandja' protests illustrates this different mode of operation of mundane citizenship. Strandja, a mountain in the south-east of Bulgaria, was about to lose its status as a protected natural territory by virtue of a decision by the Supreme Administrative Court. Environmentalists and young people took part in civic protests, which resulted in the reversal of the court's decision. Parallel to that, over several years the online community hosted on the site bg-mamma increased its popularity and public visibility. On a number of occasions it showed an ability to make its voice heard with respect to controversial social issues and to elicit responses and action from formal political institutions. In all three cases the citizenship of the participants involved remained fundamentally immersed in their everyday private lives and related to topical concerns arising in the course of these lives. Subactivism expressed in identifying with subject positions, echoing and reframing public discourses and building interpersonal allegiances remained the beginning and the end of the story in some of the cases. In others, however, subactivism spilled out of its 'private container' to grow into collective mobilisation and action that affected decision making at the highest stages of 'social design', those of government and parliament.

Talking Bulgaria's way into the European Union

The first case study is constructed around the lively debate marking the historic event of the official accession of Bulgaria to the European Union on 1 January 2007. It focuses on this 'critical discourse moment', as Gamson (1992) has recommended, in order to trace the commentaries that appeared in various public forums 'by sponsors of different frames, journalists and other observers' (p. 26). Within that colourful multitude of positions and alternative conceptual frames, the analysis seeks to sift out and weigh the contributions of ordinary Bulgarians. To what extent were the interpretations and reframings generated by such citizens in online forums visible and

⁴See <http://www.bg-mamma.com>, accessed 2 December 2010.

consequential for the public debate? What did they have to say about the nature of the forums themselves?

To address these questions, the main source of data was journalistic publications and forum contributions on the issue of Bulgaria's membership in the European Union during the period in which that issue was on the top of the public agenda—immediately preceding and following the date of the formal accession. The forums selected for the study were hosted respectively by the daily newspaper *Sega*; the online publication *Mediapool*; and the web portal *dir.bg*.⁵ All of them were among the most popular of such forums with long-standing communities of users. Among the journalistic publications addressing EU accession on these news sites, those with the largest number of comments by forum participants were selected for examination. In this manner, smaller and more concrete, but lively and thematically and stylistically rich discourse moments and events were isolated within the larger critical discourse moment marked by the accession as a political event. These textual units (publications and the 'tails' of comments that followed them or threads organised around accession-related topics) were subjected to close reading with several objectives in mind: to identify and classify the diverse interpretative frames that different participants propose, or in other words, the different contexts and meanings associated with Bulgaria's acceptance into the European Union; to trace the interplay between these frames and identify the different discursive acts that they were subjected to; to identify the discursive repertoires or styles adopted by participants in the online forums and the rules and norms, if any, that organise discourse production; and to identify roles adopted by participants in the forums and types of relationships arising among them.

One of the most striking observations that emerged from this examination was the resemblance between the online forums and carnival, a cultural institution famously analysed by Bakhtin (1984). Without a doubt, performance in the forums proved to be much closer to the tradition of popular festive forms represented by the carnival than to any models of rational-critical political debate along Habermasian lines.⁶ The observed online discussion forums reproduced many of the defining features of the carnival such as suspension of hierarchical differences, not only among participants, but also with respect to the authoritative institutions and voices dominating the accession discourse. Authorities were characteristically dethroned and symbolically kicked around, mocked and castigated. As is typical of the carnival square, prevailing behavioural norms and rules were disregarded, which resulted in a plethora of mock fights, clashes, insults, vulgarity and earthiness. Participants performed discursive actions hidden, or rather defined, by symbolic masks that often were chosen to suggest their strongly stereotyped positions and attitudes. In true carnival style, opposing views clashed to produce eruptions of debate and firm differentiation of participants along friend-enemy lines. Particularly visible were the lines drawn between forum members on the one hand, and journalists considered biased and 'bought' by political

⁵See <http://www.segabg.com/>; <http://www.mediapool.bg/>; and <http://clubs.dir.bg>, all accessed 2 December 2010.

⁶See Jankowski and Van Selm (2000) and Kaposi (2006) regarding online deliberation, and Kuntsman (2009) for a view on the carnivalesque properties of online forums; Gardiner (2004) discusses Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and carnival as an alternative to the Habermasian rational-critical public sphere.

interests on the other. The following comment targets the critical views on the accession expressed by a prominent political commentator who enjoyed high status and recognition in socialist times as well as later, in the era of the new democratic press.

Buffoon: Jimmy-boy [refers to the well-known journalist whose article the discussion is trailing] has poured out his proletarian grief. Big tragedy for the Russian pipers [disciples] and the reddies [refers to the red colour, symbol of communism]—Bulgaria joined Europe instead of joining Russia! A-ah, it is so hard to resist pulling the *Makarovets* [a Russian hand gun] from under the pillow and firing out of grief . . .⁷

As much as this comment may voice its author's true feelings and beliefs, and undoubtedly employs deeply insulting labels, it also carries a devious playfulness that is probably evident to all forum participants regardless of their political colour ('reddies' included). This playfulness is revealed to the outside observer only later on in the string of exchanges when Buffoon turns around to explain to another 'forumist', as regular participants call themselves:

Buffoon: Psycho, my dear, how can I resist pulling the tails of the reddies? Just to cheer them up a bit, I thought. Look at the Euro-pessimism that has overcome them. It is worse than a hangover 🍷🍷.⁸

Along another firm line of distinction, that between forum participants as 'ordinary people' and the economic and political elites pushing and extolling the EU accession, arises another authority-challenging practice: the inveterate grounding of interpretations in the earthly conditions of everyday life of the majority of Bulgarians.

UFI: And now what? Same old . . . Even if they remove all borders, the hard-working Bulgarian like me won't have enough dough to afford a trip. If he ever does it, it will be with great sacrifices. How does this EU thing benefit me? It does me harm, if anything. Gas is more expensive, and from there the prices of all consumer goods go up, electricity is at European prices, but what about my salary . . .? Officially, the average salary in Bulgaria is 360 leva [about \$240 per month] . . . How can you balance a family budget with this amount of money, even if both spouses work? . . . What borders are they talking to me about? What the heck?⁹

Along with the categorical and even vicious friend–enemy identification that animates most of the discussions, some of the voices of the forum clearly favoured a more tolerant and rational–critical debate. Such voices periodically attempted to calm the waters by introducing a wider and more reflexive perspective:

Archbishop Nikiphor: There should be joy [at Bulgaria's acceptance into the European Union], but we should also be realistic: the EU is still not inside Bulgarians—as an appreciation of [social] order and respect for society. Until this internal EU emerges, we will

⁷Posted on *Sega* forum, available at: <http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenu.asp?issueid=2519§ionid=5&id=0001101>, accessed 27 June 2012.

⁸Posted on *Sega* forum, available at: <http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenu.asp?issueid=2519§ionid=5&id=0001101>, accessed 27 June 2012.

⁹Posted on *Sega* forum, available at: http://forum.segabg.com/topic.asp?whichpage=2&topic_id=112695, accessed 27 June 2012.

be a different kind of Europeans. A European is a state of the spirit, not a political *status quo*. Don't get too upset with Dmitri [the journalist] . . . Everybody has the right to his or her own opinion, be it one or another. The good thing is that we have a forum in which to express it, whatever it is.¹⁰

While it can be justly argued that such statements and calls for balance and tolerance appear rarely in the forum discussions, the fact remains that they are often made by some of the most respected participants and that all forum members and visitors are exposed to them. Even if one can imagine that the hottest and most extreme discussants would not be moved by such appeals, what the forum does is to open their eyes to the existence of opposite and alternative views among other representatives of the breed of 'ordinary Bulgarians' that can be held and proclaimed with the same passion and conviction as their own. This rampant, loud and irreducible diversity of social languages and views turns the forums into provocative environments for making sense of political events and developments in an open and inclusive way. In the forums, consensus is rarely achieved, but instead conflict is clarified and sharpened, a necessary moment, as Mansbridge (1999) has argued, for achieving equal recognition of opposing interests and views. Too often in the pursuit of rational consensus through formal deliberation the hegemonic definitions of the common good are reaffirmed and oppositional demands silenced. In contrast, to paraphrase Bakhtin, the carnival environment allows thought and speech to be placed under such conditions that the world can expose its other side: the side that is hidden from view that nobody talks about, that does not fit the words and forms of prevailing philosophy. The role of the carnival is that it opens up a space for positions permitting a look at the other side of established values, so that new bearings can be found (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 271–72).

Such bearings were actively and even frantically sought in the major historic moment of Bulgaria's accession into the European Union, a moment when a tremendous load of existing schemas forming the cultural stock of knowledge had to be revised and reshaped. Citizens had to identify with new positions offered in public discourses that spanned the whole range of possibilities between seeing themselves as proud and equal new Europeans, or as cheated and exploited pariahs in an imperial relationship with foreign powers. The various framings of the accession offered in institutionally- and professionally-produced discourses constructed subject positions to be adopted by Bulgarians, but forum participants did not slot themselves into any of them quietly and uncritically. Their debate questioned the received media and political framings of the event, refined, expanded, challenged or undermined these frames. By doing this, forum members were injecting numerous alternatives into the public debate, alternatives stemming from the specific social vantage point occupied by each one of them and from their situated knowledges. The forum gave these citizens the chance to rise above the inaudible rumblings generated around their private kitchen tables (Bakardjieva 2008) and to give their views visibility and legitimacy, but most importantly, to find support, or for that matter, meet with open challenge. Thus ordinary citizens were temporarily and within a limited field assuming the roles and

¹⁰Posted on *Sega* forum, available at: <http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenew.asp?issueid=2519§ionid=5&id=0001101>, accessed 27 June 2012.

responsibilities of public figures, negotiators and opinion leaders. Additional investigation could show whether and to what extent the musings of forum participants were heeded by journalists, public relations specialists and policy makers and if the turbulent discursive activity of forums influenced these actors in changing anything in their thinking and operation. While forums provided a supportive common ground to ordinary Bulgarians to reflect and make sense of the new dimensions of their European citizenship, they did little more than making the working of subactivism overt and shareable. The kind of civic agency that they supported remained purely verbal, disorganised and largely inconsequential for the larger community. Despite their passion and volume, discussion forums were easy to ignore and hardly ever influenced institutional politics.¹¹

Saving Strandja: the triple helix of the mediapolis

The second case study to be presented here exemplifies a different mode of operation of mundane citizenship where the voices of citizens transmitted by a range of traditional and new media managed to come together to make a definitive and powerful collective statement and with that to effect actual changes on the 'stage of social design'. This case centres around a memorable sequence of events in the summer of 2007 when, by a decision of the Supreme Administrative Court, the biggest Bulgarian natural reserve, Strandja Mountain, located in the south-east of the country, was due to lose its protected territory status. Under pressure from entrepreneurs interested in developing resort sites in the strip of the mountain bordering the Black Sea, the administration of one of the municipalities located in the territory had challenged the legal act granting the mountain its natural reserve status. While the lawsuit unfolded and the court decision was still pending, numerous environmentalist NGOs had worked to put up expert counter-arguments intended to defend the mountain as a natural reserve and to draw public attention to the issue. According to the accounts of the NGO representatives and other activists interviewed,¹² they had employed a wide range of techniques to engage the Bulgarian public including petitions, letters by prominent intellectuals, folklore concerts and children's painting competitions. Environmentalists had put forward a draft legislation to amend the act, an amendment to the act regulating the protected natural territories that would change fundamentally the approach to creating and maintaining natural reserves in the country. Despite all these efforts, the issue did not make it onto the front pages and central news programmes and remained at the margins of public attention.

In this context, the decision by the Supreme Administrative Court to cancel Strandja Mountain's status, and thus protection, as a natural reserve was announced on 29 June 2007. This decision immediately found its way into online news sites, initially without much interpretation or discussion. It left environmental activists

¹¹For a detailed discussion of this study and the relation between online forums and earlier forms of everyday political talk in Bulgaria, see Bakardjieva (2008).

¹²Interview with Jordanka Dineva, coordinator, Bulgarian Foundation Biodiversity, 27 October 2009, Sofia and interview with Yanina Taneva, PR consultant, 26 May 2010, Sofia–Calgary, via Skype.

numb and helpless in the face of the tremendous disaster they believed awaited Strandja. Their means to react to this turn of events however were quite limited and already exhausted. As one activist explained,¹³ none of the officially registered NGOs wanted to take it upon themselves to step up the campaign and call for street protests because that would reflect poorly on their image, legitimacy and further ability to interact with the authorities. At that moment a few environmentally concerned citizens with only weak connections to the formal NGOs took the initiative into their own hands by creating a site named *savestrandja.net* which announced a time and place for a civic protest. The site also gave instructions regarding the signs and slogans that participants should carry in order to indicate their cause and position. In this way, a common symbolism quickly began to emerge and began to glue together numerous fragmented groups of concerned people. Crucially, the link to the site and its message spread around the already popular online discussion forums, social networks and chats. Attention was also drawn to the site by many of the popular blogs whose authors not only transmitted the appeal, but added their insight to the public understanding of the controversy translating the legal and ecological arguments into ordinary language.

When the first protest—small, but centrally placed—erupted in a city square (29 June 2007, see Figure 1) the dynamic of public attention changed significantly, in no small degree thanks to the reports in popular blogs.

The bloggers were the first to publicise detailed accounts of the event accompanied by pictures and commentary thus leading the way in conceptually framing what was going on. References to blog posts about the protest floated across the Bulgarian internet space, exponentially increasing their exposure. Traditional media followed, sometimes taking cues from the blogs and the forums that kept their sights focused on the events. Incidentally, a couple of journalists themselves wrote blogs and reported both there and in mainstream publications, thus bringing the new and the traditional media unprecedentedly close to one another.¹⁴

This virtuous circuit of increasing public visibility which, as I have argued elsewhere (Bakardjieva 2010), was fuelled by the energy of the emergent triple helix of online media, traditional media and city square, commanded the attention of political players and forced them into action. As the wave of protests and its reflection in the media of all kinds grew, three different parties represented in the national parliament embraced the amendment proposed by environmental NGOs earlier in the process and introduced it for discussion in the Parliamentary Commission on Environmental Protection and on Water Resources. Within two weeks the amendment had passed its first reading and was transformed into formal legislation by 19 July 2007.

A detailed political analysis of this set of developments is certainly necessary in order to answer the question of exactly what factors led to this phenomenal victory for civil society over commercial and administrative players. The extent to which it was

¹³Interview with Jordanka Dineva, coordinator, Bulgarian Foundation Biodiversity, 27 October 2009, Sofia.

¹⁴See for example the news item by Simeon Pateev published in *Dnevnik*, 3 July 2007, available at: http://www.dnevnik.bg/dnevnikplus/2007/07/03/355654_protesti_i_aresti/, and the postings on the blog <http://nabludatel.blogspot.com> written by the same author (accessed 2 December 2010).



FIGURE 1. SPONTANEOUS PROTEST IN SOFIA ON 29 JUNE 2007.

Source: Simion Pateev, available at: <http://nabludatel.blogspot.com>, accessed 2 December 2010 (used with the author's permission).

actually a victory with substantive repercussions for the preservation of the Strandja Black Sea coast as a natural reserve is still being questioned by some observers.¹⁵ I leave the final verdict to political experts and prefer to focus my discussion on the practices of mundane citizenship that manifested themselves in the context of these events. The most important of these practices included the prominent contribution of bloggers who acted as translators, interpreters and amplifiers of the civic concerns, especially thanks to their ability to interact with readers and to be at the head of traditional media in reporting the action in the street.¹⁶ The online discussion forums proved to be fertile soil for the calls for attention to the issue and for organising the response. Further on, social networks based on dedicated sites or simply organisational email lists and interpersonal contacts helped in spreading the announcements and with the consolidation of the demands. Of critical significance was the materialisation of citizens' bodies out of all these virtual enclaves into the physical spaces of the city from where their demands reached the television screens and

¹⁵Interview with Ivan Bedrov, editor of the newspaper *Pari*, 16 August 2010, Sofia.

¹⁶Two prominent blogs that closely followed the events and emerged as foci of attention, discussion and organisation were Optimiced.com (<http://www.optimiced.com/bg/2007/06/30/civic-protest-to-protect-strandja-park/>) and NABLUDATEL (<http://nabludatel.blogspot.com/2007/07/20.html>); both sites accessed 2 December 2010.

newspaper pages read by the multitude of non-networked Bulgarians. With the ensuing decisive turn of public opinion in favour of the legal protection of Strandja as a natural reserve, politicians were pushed into legislative action, which finally sealed the deal in a way favourable for environmentalists.

Apart from the emergence of bloggers as public opinion leaders, the 'save Strandja' protests demonstrated the key role of new media in forging a connection between environmental NGOs and the online citizenry. The blogs and forums, as one of my informants observed, put the masses of supporters behind the otherwise meagre and expertise-focused environmental organisations. At the same time, the knowledge and leadership provided by these NGOs, the capacity for which had been attained throughout their long-term organisation-building and project work, provided the ideas around which otherwise unengaged citizens could unite their efforts. This can be seen as a clear moment of bridging together the subactivism of ordinary people nurtured mainly within their private spheres and interpersonal networks with the subpolitical stratum inhabited by NGOs and dedicated activists. All in all, the Strandja protests serve as an example of the potential of mundane citizenship to pierce through the other layers of the political system in critical moments when vital issues of the *polis* are at stake. In Bulgaria, specifically, these protests remained in the public memory also as a manifestation of the capability of ordinary citizens to rise above complacency and to tell the political and economic elites 'enough is enough'. Some commentators in Bulgaria (Popov 2007) saw them as a sign of the arrival of a new generation, empowered by new media among other things, that refuses to put up with the corruption practices that had thrived in the country for many years. Others agree that the protests were inspired not so much by environmentalist but by anti-corruption sentiments.¹⁷ Whatever the case may be, the materiality and efficiency of mundane citizenship as a political force was proven beyond doubt in the Strandja events.

Mothers in arms: the commanding voice of bg-mamma

The third mode of operation of mundane citizenship discerned in the framework of this project transpires in the case of a prominent online community that has acquired significant visibility and weight as a factor in Bulgarian social and political life. The site *bg-mamma* was created in 2002 to host the useful information accumulated in the course of discussions occurring in a forum devoted to maternity within the Bulgarian online portal *dir.bg*.¹⁸ Gradually, it provided a plethora of its own forums organised around different topics related to pregnancy, maternity, child-rearing, type of family experience and others.¹⁹ The common bond created by the maternity experience provided a powerful glue for the community that arose around the site.

Over the years, the site and its forums have registered remarkable growth not only in the numbers of participants, postings, themes and hits, but also in their internal

¹⁷Interview with Ivan Bedrov, editor of the newspaper *Pari*, 16 August 2010, Sofia. Many in the Bulgarian public saw the decision of the Supreme Administrative Court as serving the interests of commercial developers and having been 'bought' by them.

¹⁸ARC Fund (2006), and interview with site owner Julian Kuzmanov, 26 October 2009, Sofia.

¹⁹See for example: Babies: <http://www.bg-mamma.com/index.php?board=97.0>; Future Mothers: <http://www.bg-mamma.com/?board=1.0> (accessed 2 December 2010).

structural organisation. Technologically, the site was updated at a moderate pace in order to maintain its easy and intuitive interface as well as to slowly expand the kinds of functions and features that would make it a hospitable place for ever more internet-savvy young women. It pioneered a business model based on commercial advertising as a source of funding and yet, at the same time, sustained a firm commitment to a community-service value system.²⁰ Unique for the site's internal regulatory mechanism are a set of rules of conduct spelled out explicitly and which are mandatory for new users to accept before they can receive access to the site. Central among them are the commandments prohibiting unsolicited commercial and political promotion and advertising.²¹

Even more noteworthy is the way in which these rules are enforced in the daily operation of the site. A dedicated team of moderators closely monitor the content and tone of the discussions and intervene every time they see a deterioration of the exchanges into profanity, insult or gibberish. They have the authorisation to ban users from the site temporarily or even permanently when the offence has been severe. These moderators are volunteers who invest substantial amounts of their personal time in their role. Some of them construe it as an opportunity to pursue personally important causes (for example breastfeeding in the case of one interviewed moderator)²² and as a kind of community service that gives them the respect of others and a sense of fulfilment. Moderators also admit that the performance of this function in the forum has allowed them to grow both in terms of interpersonal and communicative skills as well as with respect to knowledge and social capital. These returns, they point out,²³ have sometimes led to palpable professional and personal gains in their offline lives.

There is more to be learned from the system through which content production and discussion in the site are regulated, but one of the main outcomes to highlight is that users flock to the site with ever greater interest and devotion. Many of them participate for years, long after the initial problem or curiosity that first led them to the site has been forgotten. Thus the site has developed circles of topical discussion around more advanced stages of the motherly and even grand-motherly career. It also offers a range of forums with thematically open free content (e.g. the Gossip-shop) where mere socialising occurs and all kinds of current and long-standing social and political issues are tackled. In the course of this activity regular users have made friendships and established friendship-like relationships with others whom they sometimes know only by their nickname, but whom they deeply respect and trust. Overall, a spirit of community and solidarity has established itself on the site. Members' sense of belonging to a collective entity has often led them to turn to the bg-mamma forums for support for a cherished civic cause. In such instances, the subactivism of individual site members has managed to catalyse the emergence of collectivities of significant size and energy, ready and willing to mobilise for civic action. Consequently, bg-mamma has won a name and image for itself as a formidable force to be reckoned with by different

²⁰Interviews with Julian Kuzmanov, site owner, 26 October 2009, Sofia; and with bg-mamma moderators Reza, 13 July 2010 and Vache, 14 August 2010 (pseudonyms used in forum).

²¹Forum rules, available at: <http://www.bg-mamma.com/index.php?topic=23714.0>, accessed 2 December 2010.

²²Interview with Boo (pseudonym used in the forum), bg-mamma moderator, 16 July 2010, Plovdiv.

²³Interviews with Boo, 16 July 2010, Plovdiv and Reza, 13 July 2010, Sofia, bg-mamma moderators.

types of economic and political players. On one occasion the site was blamed for almost crashing a Bulgarian bank by circulating rumours about its bankruptcy that immediately triggered the massive withdrawal of investments by bank clients. This story was never proven to be true, but it can still serve as an indication of the perceived power and potential influence of the bg-mamma community.

More factually correct and well recognised are the numerous civic initiatives of bg-mamma members, many of which produced important changes in the Bulgarian state's social policy. Several social movements, for example the Movement of Bulgarian Mothers (*Dvizhenie na balgarskite mayki*) and Civic Alliance Smile with Me (*Grazhdansko sdruzhenie 'Usmihni se s men'*), have emerged from the site and have established themselves as key representatives of civil society taking part in policy making in their specific areas.²⁴ Thanks to well staged protests by mothers with their baby carriages on the official Day of the Child (1 June) in 2005, the plodding parliamentary discussions regarding the increase of maternal benefits were sped up and eventually produced legislation ensuring better state support for maternity and children. A forceful initiative triggered by a BBC documentary on the living conditions in a home for abandoned children with disabilities in Northern Bulgaria was undertaken in 2006–2007. Like in the Strandja case, it was informed by the expertise accumulated by NGO representatives working in that area. The mothers from bg-mamma carried out not only charitable activities to supply that home and similar ones with necessary materials, but also exerted pressure on central and local administrations which brought about inspections and changes in the homes' staff and management. Most importantly, the bg-mamma members, many of whom were mothers with disabled children, headed a sustained campaign to turn around government policy concerning children with disability, to fundamentally change the philosophy on which this policy was built and to get public opinion to realise and support the need for change. Once again, as in the case of Strandja, not only petitions and protests, but a wide media engagement was achieved. Although, no instantaneous improvement of the situation or abrupt shift in the government's approach was possible in this instance, the conversation was opened and the respective administrative bodies set on the path of new policy development.

Most recently, mothers from bg-mamma spearheaded a protest against planned liberalisation of the legislation regulating the growth and consumption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Bulgaria. Once information concerning the drafted changes in the law started to crop up in different news outlets, some participants in the forum fired up a mobilisation campaign determined to stop these changes and, as they themselves put it, to protect their children and Bulgarian nature from the threat of scientific innovations with insufficiently understood long-term effects (petition prepared by bg-mamma).²⁵ As a typical example of mundane citizenship, this struggle stemmed out of the private commitment some mothers had made to feed their children with natural and local produce as a way to secure for them a healthy lifestyle. From a

²⁴Interview with Teodora Piralkova, bg-mamma activist, Chair of National Alliance Smile With Me, 6 July 2010, Sofia.

²⁵See petition text, available at: http://www.grazhdani.eu/text_peticija_gmo.html, accessed 2 December 2010.

personal choice of the individual family and household, in the face of political decisions that reflected on the private lives of the whole nation, this commitment transformed into a fiercely contested political issue.

As often happens in the popular–political imagination (but also in actual practice), government representatives involved in the legislative process were suspected by the mothers of selling out the national interest to American corporations and playing by the tune of foreign political figures transmitting these corporate demands. In response, the full palette of techniques of popular resistance was employed: mothers stood in the January cold of 2010, petition and children in hand, waiting for the prime minister to present their demands directly to him; personal connections were sought with Bulgarian scientists and members of the parliamentary committee working on the amendment; and notably, journalists who regularly covered environmental issues were recruited into the movement and their detailed understanding of how the legislative process works proved essential to the staging of the right moves at the right time.²⁶ These journalists also played the role of the movement’s Trojan horse in the parliament building and some of them blogged and posted information on the bg-mamma site live as they sat and observed the committee’s deliberations.²⁷

Some of the most engaged bg-mamma members grew into real activists for the period of the protests, writing and editing pamphlets and petitions, chasing politicians, sitting in parliamentary committee meetings as well as in meetings of the *ad-hoc* civic alliance with environmental and professional organisations (including the Bulgarian Association for Bio-products (*Bulgarska asotsiatsiya za bio-produkti*) and the Bulgarian Association of Professional Chefs (*Bulgarska asotsiatsiya na gotvachite*)). Although, by doing this, they had moved out of their daily routines and into a sphere of political activity, they remained based in their own kitchens. There, they composed texts late at night, on their own personal computer so that no other household members could touch it for days or weeks. Their civic zeal was intermingled with a sense of guilt in relation to their young children who had not eaten a home-made meal for a while.²⁸ Although not all bg-mamma members supporting the action were involved to the same degree, a majority of them acted, in the words of one informant, as bees collecting information, digging out phone numbers of politicians and specialists, searching their interpersonal networks for links to people to lobby, preparing postcards with their children that insisted on the preservation of the natural fruits of the Bulgarian land.²⁹

Once again, valuable lessons can be learned from the organisation of that particular campaign which ended with a victory for the civic alliance led by bg-mamma’s activists. The proposed text that was intended to open Bulgaria to GMOs was turned down by the parliamentary committee and never entered the parliament floor. Without taking a position on the disputed issue of whether this resolution was right or overly protectionist and to what extent it is enforceable and sustainable in the long

²⁶Interview with Nadalina Aneva, reporter at the newspaper *Sega*, 13 August 2010, Sofia.

²⁷Interview with Boycho Popov, reporter, *BNews*, 2 July 2010, Sofia.

²⁸Interview with *IIO* (pseudonym chosen by respondent), bg-mamma member, 29 June 2010, Sofia.

²⁹See a bg-mamma theme focused on organising one of the civic protests against GMOs, available at: <http://archives.bg-mamma.com/archive/index.php?topic=482706.msg14518839#msg14518839>, accessed 2 December 2010.

term, Bulgarian civil society indisputably witnessed the power of mundane citizenship to transform into a major force operating at all three levels of politics and making a real difference, even if only within a very particular scope.

What distinguishes the case of bg-mamma's civic initiatives from the ones described in the previous cases was their emergence, not in an amorphous and spontaneous wave of civic energy ('save Strandja', or in a multivocal, dissentious and inconclusive argument among 'wild publics' (Gardiner 2004), but in a firm base of a relatively stable online community. Certainly, in its day-to-day operation bg-mamma does not represent an idyllic community. It is not comprised of regular, long-term friendly relationships among members. It pulsates and changes; it hosts as many quarrels as agreements. Nevertheless, it subscribes to a set of ethical norms that help establish a reliable moral entity, the members of which have a reasonable expectation that their views will be valued and their personal worth and dignity respected, enough to believe that they can find support for not only solving their private problems with baby food and nappies, but also for their civic concerns and passions. The faith in this kind of fluid, but nevertheless reliable, ethical community helped elevate gestures of subactivism above their private base into the realm of subpolitics and politics proper.

Conclusion

Mundane citizenship enabled by new media manifests the power of ordinary people who are not political operators or dedicated members of formal NGOs and social movements, to engage, participate and sometimes change developments on the large political stage of social design. The internet has allowed users to navigate public discourses and to identify with positions constructed in them, to challenge, change and reframe these positions from the comfort of their own homes and working offices as a matter of course in their daily life. The internet, most typically through open online forums, has brought Bulgarian users together with like-minded individuals on issues of social and political controversy, but even more importantly, it has brought them together with people of radically different ideological backgrounds and convictions. In that process, forum participants have had the opportunity to practise 'everyday political talk' (Mansbridge 1999) in an open setting, which has led to a growing awareness of diversity, the overcoming of pluralistic ignorance, clarifying and sharpening of conflict and building collectivities with friends. The internet has also offered subjects access to remote and often anonymous institutions of power, the most obvious example being the mass media and their representatives who can now be challenged in their agenda-setting and issue-framing privileges. Holders of state and economic power have in turn become the object of criticism, derision and castigation, even if only symbolically, sometimes to an extent that has commanded their and their officers' attention. Taken a step further in terms of community identification and loyalty to common causes, internet discussion sites, forums and blogs have supported collective organisation of civic action in the real world that has led to actual social change.

The discovery of such a diverse set of practices of mundane citizenship in the Bulgarian context is good news for Bulgarian democracy. For years on end observers and analysts have complained that the heavy cultural and political inheritance of totalitarianism has skewed the value system of Bulgarians and has deprived them of

the ability to look beyond their private interests and care for the well-being of the larger community (Howard 2003; Paunov 2009). This preoccupation with individual survival, often at the expense of the common good, has been seen as a barrier to the development of true civic engagement and activism. Civil society organisations and NGOs in Bulgaria have been typically donor driven, funded by external sponsors, elitist and largely disconnected from the general population (Tancau 2007; Andreeva *et al.* 2005). Yet at the same time, Bulgarians have learned some important lessons during the period of transition. They saw a new political class grow out of former colleagues and kin, that is, from a place very close to their everyday lives, and subsequently experienced the deep effects of the decisions made by these political elites in the course of the economic reform. In that sense, the world of formal political institutions in a new democracy like Bulgaria is conceptually much closer to people's daily thoughts and struggles than in long-standing democracies where the political establishment is far removed (through a long history of class selection, professionalisation and institutional differentiation) from the everyday world.

The new media arrived in this cultural context and helped people draw links between concrete daily concerns, on the one hand, and political discourses and decisions, on the other: between the lofty statements of political leaders and journalists regarding a major political move and the personal experiences and worries of people at home; between a court resolution and the evident destruction of Bulgarian natural treasures such as the Strandja Black Sea coast; between the regulation of GMO proliferation and the health and quality of life of future generations. The new technical networks and communication forms in the hands of Bulgarians afforded the proverbial 'doing something about it' that previous generations have missed. They allowed new social bonds with other ordinary people to be found online, as the recounted cases show. The new media, importantly, helped connect the otherwise isolated and expertise-focused NGOs working in different areas with the energy of a mass of people ready to take over the city squares or stand in the cold for hours to indicate their demands. Finally, one can hope that the recounted events may have sensitised political leaders to the fact that new-media equipped citizens represent a significant factor to be reckoned with when decisions are made. The will of numerous ordinary people to participate first-hand in the legislative process around issues of concern was also registered in the course of some of the cases.

While it may be still too early to draw grand conclusions about the revolutionary potential of new media in the hands of active citizens, there are certainly multiple practical lessons to be learned by examining the mechanics and dynamics of successful manifestations of civic agency such as these. The models of interaction between bodies occupying different levels of the *polis* that emerge from such cases could be usefully seen as best practices to be consolidated and spread around. These are also practices to be defended from cooptation and distortion on the part of corporate interests that are bound to notice the transformative power of mundane citizenship. Thus, it remains an imperative task for academics, activists and engaged citizens alike to carefully study the instances highlighting the arrival of new possibilities for civic agency and to reflexively incorporate them into their future work.

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