BULGARIAN ONLINE FORUMS AS CARNIVAL

Popular political forms and new media

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Abstract In this paper, Bulgaria's accession to the European Union is taken as an occasion to examine the nature and dynamics of online political forums attached to news media. The model of the carnival is proposed with a view to emphasizing the loose, informal character of these forums and their fundamental connection with Bulgarian popular-political culture and tradition. Employing the model of the carnival in the analysis of the cultural and political role of these forums, it is argued, could cast light on their specific contribution to the deliberative system.

Résumé. Dans cet article, l'entrée de la Bulgarie dans l'Union Européenne est pris comme prétexte pour étudier la nature et la dynamique des forums politiques en ligne, accessibles sur les sites d'actualités Le modèle du carnaval est pris en exemple pour illustrer le caractère relâché et informel de ces forums, ainsi que leur lien fondamental avec la culture et la tradition politico-populaire bulgare. Nous pensons que le modèle du carnaval dans l'analyse du rôle politique et culturel de ces forums pourrait mettre en lumière leur contribution spécifique à un système délibératif.

1. Introduction

This paper sets itself the goal to consider the use of online forums associated with news media in the context of political culture and civic tradition in Bulgaria. More specifically, the paper examines online discussions that took place in such forums around the issue of Bulgaria's accession into the European Union. Online forums make the interpretation of media content by the audience tangible and public, where previously this process has been confined to the realm of private and semi-private life. The forums that are directly linked to traditional media outlets hold a special status among the numerous online spaces dedicated to discussion due to their heightened visibility. They represent an interesting phenomenon at several levels: Firstly, they bridge professional journalistic content introduced in the formal public sphere with the genre of "everyday political talk" (Mansbridge, 1999). Secondly, they overcome to some extent the fragmentation of online discussion into numerous micro enclaves focused on specific topics characteristic of many thematic and issue-oriented

communities. News-media forums are limited, at least formally, to the agenda set by their hosts. At the same time, they get the exposure resulting from the prominence of these hosts' websites instead of being tucked into an obscure corner of cyberspace, which is typically the fate of their independent brethren. That is why my attention in this paper will be directed to several online political forums that are hosted by news-media organizations and by virtue of this are highly visible in the Bulgarian online media environment.

The practice of media organizations to maintain spaces where users can contribute comments following journalistic articles represents a meeting point of old and new media. It carries over the journalistic materials created for the traditional edition into the interactive computer-mediated environment. By the same token, it creates an online extension of the long-standing Bulgarian custom of discussing events reported in the news media around the kitchen table. Online forums introduce significant new elements into this customary activity. They offer a gathering place for anonymous strangers whose encounter and conversations acquire a very different dynamic from that occurring among a familiar group of friends and relatives. They present challenges and alternatives to deeply ingrained personal preconceptions and beliefs. Yet, the presumption of a certain degree of common experience and equity with respect to participants' right to express themselves is a feature shared by the two environments. Both types of activities remain confined to interpersonal, albeit publicly visible in the case of the forums, everyday talk. They fall short of making the transition into the institutional structures of the political or public sphere. Nevertheless, they constitute important streams of the process of citizens' making sense of political developments and facilitate the translation of events unfolding in the formal sphere of politics to the level of the everyday lifeworlds inhabited by participants. Thus, online forums add another dimension to what Mansbridge (1999) calls "the deliberative system," the collection of all types of formal and informal conversations across both public and private spaces through which "people come to understand better what they want and need, individually as well as collectively" (p. 211).

2. Methodology: Data Collection and Analysis

This study examined the publications in three Bulgarian news sites and the discussions in their pertaining forums during the months of December 2006 (immediately preceding the formal accession of Bulgaria into the European Union) and January 2007 (immediately following the event). The news media studied were: a newspaper, *Sega* (www.segabg.com) that has been a Bulgarian pioneer in offering its full content online and creating reader discussion forums; an exclusively web-based news site (www.mediapool.bg) and one of the most popular Bulgarian web portals (www.dir.bg) (For corroboration of the prominent place of these sites in the Bulgarian Internet space see Spassov, 2004, Eftimov, 2004, Daskalova, 2007.) These sites carry discussion forums directly connected to journalistic publications as well as thematically organized independent forums in the case of the web portal *dir.bg*. This study employed discourse analysis to examine the texts appearing on these sites with the goal to capture and compare the different interpretative frames constructed by journalists, on the one hand,

and forum participants, on the other, in their efforts to organize and make sense of the new political experience, namely, Bulgaria's membership in the European Union.

Discourse, in Hall's (1992) definition is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about, i.e. a way of representing – a particular type of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed" (p. 290). Discourses do not simply represent the social world, but play an active role in its shaping. This refers to each of the various types or levels of discourse that have been discerned in the vast and diverse literature on discourse analysis: from the speech acts and utterances produced in interpersonal conversations to the macro discourses defined by Foucault (1972) as the ways in which language works to organize fields of knowledge and practice. According to Gamson (1992):

> Every policy issue has a relevant public discourse – a particular set of ideas and symbols that are used in various public forums to construct meaning about it. This discourse evolves over time, providing interpretations and meanings for newly occurring events. … A wide variety of media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs and provide images for interpreting the world, whether or not the designers are conscious of this intent. (p. 24)

Because discourses on political issues evolve over long periods of time and across numerous social sites, a practical research strategy Gamson (1992) recommends is to focus on "critical discourse moments" that make the discourse on an issue particularly visible. Such moments, produced by constellations of circumstances and/or current events, Gamson believes, "stimulate commentary in various public forums by sponsors of different frames, journalists and other observers" (p. 26).

Following this suggestion, this study selected journalistic publications and forum contributions on the issue of Bulgaria's membership in the European Union during the time period in which that issue was on the top of the public agenda – immediately preceding and following the date of the formal accession. Among the journalistic publications and thematic threads found on the specified news sites during that period, those with the largest number of contributions by forum participants were selected for close investigation. 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. The so defined textual units (publications and the "tails" of comments that followed them or threads organized around accession-related topics) were subjected to close reading with several objectives in mind: 1) 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; 2) to trace the interplay between these frames and identify the different discursive acts that they were subjected to; 3) to identify the discursive repertoires or styles adopted by participants in the online forums and the rules and norms, if any, that organize discourse production; 4) to identify roles adopted by participants in the forums and types of relationships arising among them.

In this paper, the results of the analysis related to (3) discourse repertoires and styles and (4) roles and relationships among participants constitute the main focus. The concrete interpretative frames employed to make sense of the event are not part of the discussion here as they belong to a different problematic which will be explored elsewhere. The specific objective of this paper is to conceptualize the place and contribution of these online deliberative spaces as a relatively new phenomenon within the larger culture and tradition of political discussion in Bulgaria. Based on the data, the paper tests the utility of different theoretical models for understanding the nature and dynamics of the forums.

3. Everyday Talk and Bulgarian Politics: Some Background

Bulgarian culture is intimately familiar with everyday political talk. Classical works of Bulgarian national literature have provided fascinating depictions of the long-standing practice of political discussion by lay people. Probably the most widely known example is the chapter in Ivan Vazov's book *Under the Yoke* (first published in 1890) which portrays the spirited and at the same time naïve and humorous deliberations and squabbles around the hot political issues of Bulgarian national liberation in the late 19th century. Curiously, these debates take place in a coffee house in a small town and involve the men representing the newly emergent merchant and educated classes at the time. The vivid scenes of this early Bulgarian public making use of its reason in the Ganko's coffee house carry a strong, even if somewhat caricature, evocation of the coffee houses and Tischengeseltshafts in which West-European debates among bourgeois men on issues of common concern lay, according to Habermas (1989), the foundation of the rule of public opinion in the 18th century. Debates like the ones transpiring in Ganko's coffee house and the ensuing rebel mobilization and liberation movement may have played a decisive role in the formation of Bulgarian national consciousness. Nevertheless, the fate of the small Balkan country then and in the following centuries has been decided by the machinations of the so called "great powers," the mighty empires of the East and West. Possibly, this is part of the reason why "Ganko's coffee house" has remained in Bulgarian cultural imagery as a metaphor of endearingly passionate, but ill-informed and ultimately feeble and inconsequential lay preoccupation with big political topics and words. Bulgarian language offers numerous words denoting lay political discussion with an openly derisive tinge to them. A remotely interpretable illustration would be the expression "stop scratching your tongues" which would be addressed at people who are arguing around political issues. There is a special word – a distorted form of the word politicking - that is often applied to such behaviour. The person who has that habit is commonly called "политикан," also a derisive derivative of the word "politician."

Despite these negative attitudes to lay discussion of politics encoded in language and literature, everyday political talk in Bulgaria has been rampant and ubiquitous both during socialist times and in the following transition period (see Nikolchina, 2002,

Gospodinov, 2006).[1] Like in other countries of the Eastern Block (see for example Havel, 1989, Falk, 2003, Kenney, 2004) discussion of politics around the kitchen table at both family dinners and social gatherings used to be a wide-spread practice during the socialist period. While properly public forums and outlets such as the media were totally dominated by the official communist ideological discourses, the micro discourses occurring around kitchen tables across society preserved a space for critical thinking and sharing, introduction of alternative views and lively debate. As in the story of Ganko's coffee house, there was no direct connection between the talk produced in these spaces and any institutional decision-making or action. The deliberations among private people were doomed to inconsequentiality, at least in the direct political sense. Yet, it has been pointed out by analysts (Meyer, 2003, but see also Beck, 1997) that such practices unfolding in the small life worlds of East European citizens may have been central to the nurturing of the resistance that made the "velvet revolutions" of Central and Eastern Europe possible once the grip of the communist repressive apparatus lost its firmness regionally and nationally.

Political conversations around the kitchen table in communist societies did not fit the model of rational-critical discourse outlined in Habermas' (1989) theory of the public sphere. They were neither consensus oriented, nor sought to influence the course of action to be undertaken by public bodies. As a matter of fact, they bore the character of "popular festive forms" (Bakhtin, 1984) of a carnivalesque type being steeped in humour, anecdotes, personal stories, mockery of the official order, despoiling of sacred communist symbols and subversion of elevated ideological language. During the excitement of the transition years, with the first series of democratic elections and major social transformations in motion, the kitchen table debates lost their humorous tone. Everyday political talk became earnest and spirited. It served in many ways as the cauldron in which voter choices and civic identities and allegiances had to be hastily precipitated. In this heavily loaded political context, rational-critical debate, rhetoric and emotion were mingled together under the pressure of historical and biographical confusion and sense of emergency.

With the arrival of Internet communication, this kind of talk was carried over online into the forums of Usenet, namely the group *soc.culture.bulgaria*, and some of the early Bulgarian portal sites such as *guvech.bg* (Belogusheva and Toms, 2003). Certainly, only a few Bulgarians took part in these conversations in the 1990s and most of those lived abroad. With the gradual emergence of the so called Bulgarian online space and the slow, but steady rise of the number of Internet users in Bulgaria, the number and diversity of online forums increased significantly. Bulgarian studies show that chats, forums and discussion groups are among the most popular Internet applications. Spassov (2004) cites survey results indicating that 70 percent of Bulgarian Internet users regularly used these applications. A survey by Vitosha Research (2007) puts the usage of chats and discussion groups in 2005 at 59.9 percent of Internet users. An earlier publication by the same agency reports that 5.6 percent of Bulgarian users had used the Internet for reading online news in 2005 (Vitosha Research, 2006). Unfortunately, existing statistics of Bulgarian Internet activities are not fine-grained

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[1] Although there may be a tendency toward a decline in these discussions as individualism and consumerism permeate everyday thought and culture.

enough and lump together personal and group chats and forums of all kinds. This makes it impossible to gauge exactly what percentage of users engages with online political forums. Some general figures about the current state of Internet access and use in Bulgaria indicate that 19 percent of the households in the country have access to the Internet and 30.8 percent of the persons between 16 and 74 years of age have used the Internet in the first three months of 2007 (National Statistical Institute, 2008) compared to 9.6 of the household and 15.9 percent of the persons in 2004. Riding these upward trends in Bulgarian Internet access and use, the audiences of online news media and participation in their forums can be expected to grow as well. Most recently, Alpha Research (April, 2007) has reported that 20 percent of Internet users in the capital, Sofia and 9 percent average for the country read online news on the sites of print media. Furthermore, 12 percent of those users do this daily or weekly (Alpha Research, July 2007). That said, Internet access in Bulgaria is still obstructed by income, education, age and language barriers (Vitosha Research 2007). Thus online forum participants constitute a very small fraction of the Bulgarian population. They include many people who live outside of the country and connect to Bulgarian current events and politics mostly through online news media. Nevertheless, from a cultural perspective, the forums represent an important new space for talking politics and as such deserve analytical attention.

In what follows, I will argue that the online forums for political discussion that constituted the object of examination in this study represent a mixed genre combining features of the different historically evolved discourses identified in this section, including rational-critical debate and the various brands of everyday political talk rehearsed around the kitchen table during communism, transition, and to this day.

4. On the Nature of Online Political Forums: The Public Sphere Meets the Carnival

Online forums for political discussion have been conceptualized under different headings in Internet studies. Most notably, they have been construed as "virtual communities" (Bentivegna, 1998), miniature "public spheres" (Ess, 1996), or an interactive type of web journalism (Deuze, 2003). The main analytical model applied to the forums as a political and communicative phenomenon has been that of the Habermasian model of rational-critical deliberation developed in a number of his works (Habermas, 1989, 1984/1987). With the growth and increasing influence of theories of deliberative democracy, online political forums have been subjected to close examination as possible sites that could make deliberative democracy more inclusive and the skills and practices related to it more widespread (Janssen and Kies, 2005). These efforts have involved an assessment of the quality of deliberation occurring in online political forums against the normative standards of rational-critical deliberation proposed by Habermas and others. In their review of various projects of this kind, Janssen and Kies find that "no conclusive statements on the deliberative quality of online forums can be made. Findings differ enormously, sometimes pointing at traces of true deliberation, often pointing at its absence" (2005, p. 331). They observe further that most of these evaluative studies have employed a deductive approach where a set of

criteria derived from theory has been used to judge online conversational practice. Such an approach, they argue, is problematic because sticking to a predetermined set of normative criteria focused on rational deliberation misses the importance of other communicative forms, and, I would add, may prevent analysis from assessing online political forums on their own merits.

In their observation, Janssen and Kies touch on an important limitation of the Habremasian model of the public sphere as a theoretical construct more generally. The overly rational, formalistic and culturally circumscribed concept of deliberative democracy that emerges from the works of Habermas has been taken to task by feminist, postmodernist and radical-democracy theorists (Benhabib, 1992, Fraser, 1992, Young, 1987, 2003, Gardiner, 2004). These critiques have an important relevance to the research on online political forums because they elaborate on those dimensions of social communication and public life that remain outside the scope of the Habermasian perspective. Gardiner (2004), following Young (1987), speaks about "wild publics," fundamentally different from the cool, disciplined, rational members of the debating circles pictured by Habermas. Gardiner (2004) explains:

> The marketplace and public square in early modern times were witness to a tumultuous intermingling of diverse social groups and widely divergent styles and idioms of language, ranging from the serious to the ironic and the playful… In such contested spaces … existing social hierarchies were often questioned and subverted through carnivalesque strategies of remarkable variety and invention, including the use of parodic and satirical language, grotesque humour, and symbolic degradations and inversions. There never was a "golden age of communicative utopia": the *real* public sphere was always marked by a pluralistic and conflictual heteroglossia (p. 38).

In this connection, Gardiner points to the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin as a source of inspiration in rethinking the public sphere and theories of discursive ethics and dialogic democracy. Particularly, Bakhtin's conceptions of dialogue and the carnival address exactly those aspects of public life that are a blind spot in Habermas' theory. Such a proposition opens up the scope of available ways of conceptualizing online political forums as a mode of public communication in their own right. It suggests that there are alternative notions other than those belonging to the rational-critical discourse family that could be applied to the kind of exchanges that we witness in online forums at an empirical level. There is no longer a need to foist one particular garment over a living phenomenon only to be disappointed that it does not fit well or at all. Equipped with the Bakhtinian (1984) perspective on the carnival alongside with the rational-critical discourse ideal developed by Habermas, I contend, we could start teasing out the specific place and power that online political forums have or could have in contemporary democratic culture. This is not to say that online forums can be expected to be exactly like carnival. There are too many obvious differences between the two phenomena. What I am proposing is to use the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival as a heuristic lens, which could allow us to perceive sides and potentials of the forums that have remained unnoticed.

Interesting parallels could be drawn between the empirical characteristics of the online political forums I studied and the defining attributes of carnival identified by Bakhtin (1984). One key similarity that I believe is especially far-reaching is the informal, free and spontaneous mode of genesis of both phenomena. Bakhtin

emphasizes the "popular character of the carnival and the people's initiative in its celebration" (p. 246). It is an experience and an event "offered not by some exterior source but by the people to themselves," people "are given nothing, but they are left alone" (p. 246). In the case of many (although not all) online political forums, the prime initiative for creating the forum may belong to a media organization, but except for the provision of space and some mild moderation, members are often (admittedly not always) left alone. The forums that I examined for this study belonged to that category to a large extent. The editorial staff of the two news media and the web portal which offered the respective platforms for discussion had abstained from taking it upon themselves to direct, filter or moderate the discussions. Their approach to the forums was categorically hands off – a situation rather different from the formats in which everyday talk and audience participation has been appropriated by traditional media so far (see Livingstone and Lund, 1993). In radio and television talk shows, for example, the host has almost dictatorial power in selecting participants, allowing certain comments and cutting off or silencing others. With letters to the editor in newspapers, this power is both more pronounced and more furtive. Thus, unmoderated forums turn out to be quite unique in their resemblance of the early modern marketplace and public square in which diverse social types and language styles intermingled. To expect that for some reason this encounter will result in a neatly organized rational-critical discourse would be both naïve and inappropriate. On the contrary, performances and figures of speech closer to carnival (see Gardiner's 2004 quote above) are much more likely to occur. Such performances contain clashes, symbolic degradations and noisy negotiations as a natural element. No wonder then that flaming, impropriety and colorful rhetoric have been seen in online forums so frequently, including in the ones I observed.

   Another common feature between carnival (but also the ideal speech situation) and online political forums is the suspension of all hierarchical differences. Forum participants may be coming from very different walks of life bringing differential life experience, economic and educational status, but the anonymity and the equally distributed accessibility of the forum space (at least among those with Internet access, which is a consideration I will suspend for now) help level out these differences even if only on the surface. There are the inevitable preferences and allegiances that will form among members whose backgrounds and styles resonate with one another, but the general principle that everyone can speak up and be heard in equal measure remains intact. The distinction between the forum situation and that of "ideal speech" lies in the fact that no common language and rules of engagement across this substantial diversity are necessarily sought in forums. The carnival and the forum remain an unbridled heteroglossia, which comes as a bitter disappointment to observers expecting that the "superior" rational-critical style and communicative ethics will prevail. This is not to say that communication complying with the rules and ideals of a rational-critical debate never occurs in the forums. This kind of communication represents a set of values and experiences that some members bring to the discussion and pursue with commitment, but it does not exhaust or dominate the stylistic mosaic that defines the forum. It constitutes only one thread of its fabric among many, and most of the time it is almost indistinguishably intertwined with the colorful rhetoric of the carnival. The following selection of quotes exhibits a number of conflicting framings of Bulgaria's accession,

all expressed through irony, sarcasm, posturing and aggressiveness toward alternative positions. Yet, there is also room for serious reflection and commitment to the tolerance that the forum, ironically, embodies by its very existence and inclusive spirit.

> Your Uncle Todor: Treaty with the EU…there will be a new Soviet Union. 😎 We are not used to manage our affairs by ourselves … we need comrades [this is the Russian word for comrades used widely during socialist times; the whole sentence shows traces of Russian grammatical organization]. You choose – with the EU or with the Soviet comrades!

> Buffoon: Jimmy-boy [refers to the well-known journalist whose article the discussion is trailing] has voiced his proletarian grief. Big tragedy for the Russian pipes [refers to disciples, faithfuls] 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 [refers to a Russian hand gun] from under the pillow and shooting out of grief…

Later Buffoon turns to another forum participant by name to explain that his earlier statements have been play and teasing:

> Buffoon: Peycho, 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 hangover.

> 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 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. (Selected quotes from *Sega* online forum)

The suspension of all hierarchical differences goes hand in hand with the suspension of established norms of behaviour, politeness and etiquette. Impropriety, crude language, mockery and abuse whirl around in the carnival crowd and online political forums. References to the body, bodily functions and trivial daily needs placed alongside lofty topics and words populate the language of both.

> Other: Eh, my dear democrat-ies [uses a diminutive form of the word democrats], converted Muslims [uses metonymy referring to the wide-top traditional pants worn by Turkish and Muslim men] and anti-communist-ies [again diminutive form followed by untranslatable pair of phrases playing with the notions of political left and right, one of these phrases also implying homosexuality] from Sofia to the Manhattan [refers to the fact that some forum participants write from abroad], as I read you, I feel sorry for Europe. With such Europeans, its days are numbered. (*Sega* online forum)

> UF1: 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 goods go up, electricity is at European prices, but my salary … Officially, the average salary in Bulgaria is 360 leva [about US $240 per month] … How can you balance a family budget with this money,

even if both spouses work? … What borders are they talking to me about? What the heck? (*Sega* online forum)

According to Bakhtin's analysis, these linguistic practices and their accompanying sketches acted out during carnivals have the effect of a symbolic uncrowning of authority and an affirmation of the embodied nature of social life whose carrier are ordinary people. After all is said and done on the elevated stages of institutional politics, government, and the like, political issues boil down to the survival of the ordinary people, to putting food on the table, to reproduction and standing one's ground as a person. That is why feasts, sexual scenes, battles of confetti, mock disputes and verbal tournaments between maskers make up the flow of carnival (see Bakhtin, p. 247):

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but *organized in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity… (Bakhtin, p. 255).

Similarly, the forum space represents a realm detached from reality, or in Bakhtin's words "a temporary transfer to the utopian world," in which rules and norms are loosened and a unique style of interaction is adopted by many participants. It takes some time and acculturation in the forum for an outside observer to realize that the apparent repulsive lack of civility and sheer craziness of many of the exchanges constitute an expression of this unique style in which seriousness and etiquette are suspended so that relationships and views far removed from the ordinary and the accepted can be freely explored. (In the *dir.bg* forum, for example, one could find a long thread of exchanges between two participants where the first stated that he or she would personally block Bulgaria's accession to the EU, and the second sternly forbade the former to do that.) Certainly, at times when the outside observer sees craziness and bigotry, that is exactly what is going on, but it is apparently a tolerable price to pay for forum participants in order to maintain the unique atmosphere of openness and "everything goes" that allows people to speak their mind, no matter what the content might be. Abuses, symbolic torment and beatings figure in that context as the means through which one attempts to prevail over an adversary:

> Rocky: To our neo-Nazis, restitutes [derogatory slang for people who have benefited from the restitution of previously expropriated properties, consonant with the word prostitute] and possessed extreme-right squirts I wish to remain where they have always been – in history's ass. And to the normal writers in this site, let us congratulate ourselves with entering the EU with its order, culture, its democratic ways and sense of balance, with its care for the ordinary people and all other things that make it wealthy and desirable.
> (*Sega* online forum)

Despite their unseemly form, these are, of course, "phist fights," fights performed with phrases and generally in a linguistic plane resembling silent scream matches in which one vents and makes sure that the opponent, real or constructed for the purpose of the venting, hears everything that burdens one's heart. But this is not, if we follow Bakhtin's (1984) reasoning, simply a socio-psychological mechanism for achieving narrowly subjective relief. In its collective exercise it creates a climate of "extreme

freedom and frankness of thought and speech" (p. 271). "Thought and speech, Bakhtin says referring to the radical cultural break between the middle ages and the looming Renaissance, had to be placed under such conditions that the world could expose its other side: the side that was hidden, that nobody talked about, that did not fit the words and forms of prevailing philosophy. … The aim was to find a position permitting a look at the other side of established values, so that new bearings could be taken" (p. 271-2).

> Slush: I am so happy to see the day on which I become a European! It was such a struggle [to get into] this European Union. Welcome to Europe 1300 years later [refers to the fact that the state of Bulgaria has been founded approximately 1300 years ago] … Bulgaria has been in Europe for all this time… What is this hullabaloo, this artificial acceptance by those who have not figured on the European maps then … This is utmost cynicism! Those whom we are paying 600 million to become members should better calculate how much they owe us for denying us to be Europeans for all these years… (*Sega* online forum)

> During the first several years of our EU membership many people will perish due to starvation, cold, diseases, etc., while our politicians will be milking shamelessly the Euro-funds.(*dir.bg* forum)

By challenging openly and drastically official positions and political correctness, forums today provide a space in which prevailing norms of behaviour and thought are ignored so that new ideas and alternative meanings can be generated to enrich the socially available repertoires of interpretation and action. As Mansbridge (1999) has put it in her extended model of the deliberative system: "Human beings may sometimes need spaces protected from accountability as well as from publicity in order to think most freely about the problems that face them" (p. 222).

A particularly handy and typical attribute participants in both carnivals and forums resort to in order to protect themselves from accountability and individualized publicity are costumes and masks concealing one's off-carnival or off-forum identity, but at the same time fashioning another, symbolic one. In the forums I studied participants appeared as hidden behind, but from another perspective tendentiously exhibiting, nicknames such as Non-believer, Politici@n, Damn, Anakin Skywalker, Buffoon, The Good Person, Realist, Ordinary Fascist, Cruella de Ville, Your Uncle Todor (alluding to the former Bulgarian communist Secretary General who was "dethroned" in November 1989) and others. Participants were most likely switching "nicks" or "masks" depending on the topic or the way their relationships with other members evolved. Some had created graphical symbols to attach to their signatures which further impressed the characteristics of their intended forum personae. By doing so, they were coming closer to the carnival mask in the most substantive sense. Masquerading was also performed by participants linguistically, deliberately engaging in what Bakhtin (1981) has called ventriloquation, "the process whereby one voice speaks through another voice or voice type in a social language" (Wertsch, p. 59). The adopted voice could be that of a public figure, a social type or stereotype, and be recognizable by its accent, register or jargon.

Here my analysis reaches a point where it is compelled to part with Bakhtin and the model of the carnival as it is developed in his work. Apart from obvious dissimilarities between the online forum and the carnival such as the lack of physical

proximity and engagement of the senses among forum participants, the fragmented nature of the private spaces that each of them occupies bodily as opposed to the shared space of the street or square, the need to employ different techniques for attracting attention and expressing views and emotions, another important distinction lies in their social meaning. For Bakhtin, the fundamental philosophical meaning of carnival is the reinforcement of the people's unity and community. Looking at online political forums it can be recognized that constitutive of their fundamental nature is people's irreducible diversity. The abuse leveled at authority is also happening internally between and among forum participants who treat each other as spokespersons for adversarial interests and views. Besides light-hearted mockery, opponents in forums fling at each other heart-felt insults and curses, symbolically thrash and dismember one another hoping to win over the audience and shatter the opponent's belief in his or her truth. Clownish tricks and traps, emotional rants and indecencies figure prominently in the arsenal employed to achieve these goals. In that capacity, the forum mirrors the conflicting ideologies co-existing in a complex modern society and speaks in numerous voices. It is a Tower of Babel of social languages. Even though these voices often speak over each other and at cross purposes, the forum represents their meeting place. Members come to the forum in the hopes of getting their conception of the political world confirmed by like-minded participants, however clashing with rival views and sentiments is also a sought after part of the experience. It is impossible to gauge whether any participants' positions on contested issues change as a result of the encounters in the forum, but in any case these encounters help overcome "pluralistic ignorance" understood non-conventionally as the belief that everyone else shares one's views on the world. This kind of pluralistic ignorance tends to be reinforced when political talk occurs mostly in everyday private, close-circle contexts where people meet with their likes and practice a genre of conversation influenced by everyday sociable and hence friendly and agreeable talk. The meetings in the forum are fundamentally different. Here members run into a variety of social types and personalities which is not contained or controlled by strict entry rules such as "by invitation only," a variety they would not normally experience while moving along their routine daily paths.

This rampant, loud and irreducible diversity of languages and views turns the forums into a provocative environment 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. Way too often in the pursuit of rational consensus through formal deliberation the hegemonic definitions of the common good are reaffirmed and oppositional demands silenced.

The characters populating online political forums are as diverse and colourful as the opinions expressed. There are the "serious" discussants subscribing to the ethics of rational-critical dialogue who strive to present rational arguments for their positions. Alongside these participants others make statements based entirely and unapologetically on emotion, personal and group experiences or unreasoned assumptions. Self-proclaimed experts enter the discursive arena bringing in facts, concepts and theories allegedly stemming from learned, objective and reliable sources.

Partisans of all feathers defend their versions of history, ideology and concrete events. Last, but not least, tricksters and clowns compete in undermining and subverting any pretence of seriousness, often challenging others' views for the sheer sake of being disruptive and scandalous. Interestingly, the forum seems to allow all of them to coexist in a lively if not always friendly discord. Regular participants recognize each other in their respective roles and respond accordingly: acknowledge or insult, ignore, engage or team up with others, but always come back for more.

The speech genres enacted by these different types encompass rational-critical debate, sociable talk, everyday political talk in its variety of styles including the "legendary style" and "cynical chic" (Gamson, 1992, Eliasoph, 1998) as well as popular-festive carnivalesque performance and play. Given the switching of nicknames that goes on, it would be difficult to safely attribute a characteristic speech genre or style to any individual participant, however, there is undeniable consistency of discursive behaviour exhibited by many participants genuinely invested in their online persona. It would be indeed fitting to call this assembly "wild" as Gardiner (2004) has suggested, but if Mansbridge's (1999) arguments are taken into account, it has to be recognized as a "public" and an integral part of the larger deliberative system nevertheless.

5. Online Forums as Carnival: Bulgarian Specifics or Widespread Phenomenon?

There are several reasons to believe that the performances observed in Bulgarian online forums are shaped by the specific conditions characteristic of Bulgarian society. The long tradition of lively discussions on political matters permeating everyday contexts differs sharply from findings made in the USA for example, where Eliasoph (1998) has documented the tendency of "avoiding politics" and closing off spaces for spirited public conversations in everyday life. The need for intense sense-making of the tumultuous developments accompanying the fall of communism and the establishment of new economic, political and cultural order in Bulgaria provided fertile soil for political discussion across a variety of contexts. Additionally, the Bulgarian media system is still in flux and thus open to experimentation including new relatively uncontrolled forms of audience engagement. The ideal of rational-critical deliberation, for its part, is a novel construct to Bulgarian political culture and practice. It is still insufficiently understood and embraced by politicians and citizens alike, while popular-political forms have a well-established presence around kitchen tables and in other informal gatherings.

At the same time, there are indications that Bulgaria is not unique in that respect. Kaposi (2006) has observed very similar dynamics in the Hungarian political discussion forum she studied. One of the main conclusions coming from her ethnography of the virtual deliberation in that forum is that it should be understood as play, and yet counted as a phenomenon with significant contribution to Hungarian political life. Kaposi notes that the discussions she analyzed:

> will not produce consensus, indeed they can increase the amount of disagreement. At the same time, they can eventually help handle moral disagreement among participants,

whose conversation make dissensus [*sic*] informed, enabling the emergence of political community… (p. 157).

With this and other features, the forum, in Kaposi's view, emerges as "an important public arena of politics," for the "collective intelligence it can produce in the on-going process of making sense of Hungarian democracy" (p. 191).

Breaking out of the hold of the deliberative ideal model and employing the model of the carnival in our analysis of online political forums, I believe, would advance the understanding of these forums' actual democratic potential and place in the deliberative system. The Bulgarian cases, as well as the analogues found in the Hungarian study by Kaposi, suggest that further crossnational and crosscultural research is necessary in order to try out the heuristic utility of the model of the carnival alongside other theoretical models in our efforts to grasp the democratic significance of online political forums under different historical, social and cultural circumstances.

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