1989 - THE YEAR OF “A PALACE COUP”
OR A NEW START IN BULGARIAN HISTORY

Iskra Baeva

In Bulgaria, as well as in most East European countries, 1989 is regarded as the year of the Radical Change. In Poland the first half-free elections were held in June 1989; in Hungary “the round table” negotiated the mechanism of political transition; and it was only a day after the demolition of the Berlin wall and a week before the beginning of the “velvet revolution” in Prague, that Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov was forced to retire. Thus, political changes started and they opened the way for deep social transformations. The date of Zhivkov’s retirement – November 10th, 1989, became a turning point, which marked the beginning of Bulgarian transition from society of Soviet type of state socialism to West European type of society, built on the principles of parliamentary democracy and market economy. More than ten years have already passed from that turning point and they give the historians a chance to arrive (by means of state and party archive documents from that period) at more balanced and profound conclusions about the character of 1989 events.

The assessment of the change requires answers to such questions as: When did the liberalization of economic relations start in Bulgaria, that is, when did the gradual transition from state socialism central planning to market relations take place? When did Bulgarian society become emancipated from power and to what extent the belated birth of dissident movement marked the specific character of Bulgarian transition? In what way was Zhivkov’s retirement prepared? To what extent the Soviet factor stimulated or coordinated the plot inside the Communist party? To what extent the new party and state government was prepared and determined to start the transition? To what extent the political alternative in the face of the opposition forces, created on December 7th, 1989, had its own strategy about the transition and whether they were ready to put it in practice? I must admit, that I won’t be able to give detailed answers to all these questions. But the state and party documents, the papers of dissident organizations, the memoirs of the participants in the events give us the possibility to understand the inner mechanism of those events that followed so quickly in 1988-1990. What do these documents reveal?

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In comparison with most Central European socialist countries, in Bulgaria the necessity of deep changes became perceptible rather late. The crisis of 1956 passed away almost without any significant political unrest and the same was true of the decisive year 1968 – of course, only in comparison with what was happening at that time in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The lack of serious conflicts was characteristic of Bulgarian development and Bulgarian authorities were really proud of it[1]. While in the Soviet Union and in Central Europe organized dissident movement, that appeared almost immediately after the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia and later elaborated Charter 77, was growing in number, the US ambassador in Sofia Raymond Garthoff was certain, that there was no such movement in Bulgaria[2]. Todor Zhivkov and his collaborators insisted that Bulgarian conditions were not suitable for dissident movement[3] and foreign observers were convinced that there was no close perspectives for its birth[4]. The first dissident organizations in Bulgaria appeared only in the beginning of 1988 and were much more influenced by the Soviet ‘perestroika’ than by the Central European dissident movement[5].

Still, it would be wrong to consider Bulgarian dissident movement as another mere example of copying “the Soviet example”, for it really brought something new in the history of Bulgarian state socialism. Its appearance revealed that for the first time in postwar Bulgarian history the notion for deep changes was perceptible simultaneously in the structures of communist power and in society. The years 1988-1989 gave birth to two tendencies: the first one was the striving of the Communist leadership (identical with
that of the state) for changes in the economic foundations of the system; and the other was the tendency of organizing public discontent (which by itself is not something new) and the attempts at open expression of alternative opinions. The second tendency found its organized form in the newly born dissident movement, which in the spring of 1989 was trying to get out of the closed intellectual circles and to create something like independent public opinion, separated from that of the official authorities.

The so called “revival process” in Bulgaria made possible the stimulation of the latent social discontent and created the necessary conditions for its organization and for involving larger social groups in it. I won’t discuss the reasons, which led at the end of 1984 to the decision to force Bulgarian Turks to change their traditional Turkish-Arab names with Bulgarian ones. But that was the act, that provoked numerous social consequences. One of its most important results was Bulgaria’s international isolation, which became really painful, when in the spring of 1985 Michail Gorbatchev came to power and withdrew Soviet support for this Bulgarian initiative. Secondly, the forced change of names deteriorated the relations between Bulgarians and Turks, who have been living peacefully together for years, especially in North-Eastern and Southern Bulgaria. Both Bulgarian and Turkish national feelings were stimulated, thus accumulating tension, ready to blow out.

After 1987 this situation was aggravaded by new economic problems. Bulgarian economy suffered strongly by the decreasing Soviet petroleum and other raw materials import – a new policy, introduced by Yurii Andropov during his short rule. This, together with Gorbatchev’s attempts at reforming the relations within COMECON on the basis of equality[6], confronted Bulgaria with serious difficulties. There appeared another new factor – the growing influence of the human rights problem in Eastern Europe, which came out as a result of the all-European process and was included in the decisions of Wien meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe.

In such entirely changed situation, in May 1989 the protests of Bulgarian Muslim population began. Because of the fact, that this happened four and a half years after the start of the so called revival “process”, the authorities were not ready to face such turn in ethnic relations and experienced serious difficulties to cope with it. The newly born dissident movements, on the contrary, decided that the defense of Bulgarian Turks’ rights offered them a chance to come out of their isolation and anonymity. They succeeded in doing this not directly, but using western radio broadcasts - Free Europe, BBC, Deutche Welle, to propagate their views. Dissidents identified themselves with the cause of Bulgarian Turks and were supported by those Bulgarians, who were critical on that policy. But the nationalism, that this policy had awakened in Bulgarian society, led to negative reactions towards them. The situation became even more complicated in May, when the Parliament voted facilities in the mechanism of issuing international passports to Bulgarian Turks, while for Bulgarians this still remained impossible. Thus, mass emigration of Turkish population started and in the summer of 1989 more than three hundred thousand of them left the country, which caused serious difficulties in gathering in the crops. The authorities cynically called this “the great excursion”. Many students and clerks were sent in the countryside to gather in the crops. As a result of the events, that took place in the spring and in the summer of 1989, Bulgarian society was divided. But the division differed from that in Central European socialist countries, where it was according to the principle: WE and THEY, that is, the authorities against society. In Bulgaria people were divided into patriots and traitors to national interests. According to the party-controlled media, the latter included both Turks, who were leaving Bulgaria, and Bulgarian dissidents.

Thus, in the second half of 1989 Bulgarian dissidents became known to larger part of society, but they didn’t succeed to receive mass support, as it happened in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The objective weakness of Bulgarian dissident movement prevented it from playing whatsoever role in the events, which led to Zhivkov’s overthrow and in the period that followed it. The dissidents were paying much attention to their own consolidation as opposition to the authorities, but it didn’t even occur to them that they could have forced these authorities to step back. If we turn to what they narrated later, we shall see that they all have been pleasantly surprised by Zhivkov’s overthrow and that they have been really grateful to Communist party leaders, who have done it[7]. Until November 10th, 1989 Bulgarian dissidents didn’t look to change of power and when the transition started, they were not prepared for it.

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The turn, that took place in 1989, was accomplished mainly as a result of the tendencies in Bulgarian Communist Party leadership. They were at least two. Todor Zhivkov represented the one, which was looking for new economic reforms within the frames of state socialism, aiming at its smooth transformation into market economy. The other tendency was unofficial and took clear forms only in the autumn of 1989. Its aim was to overthrow Zhivkov from power, considering him to be the most important obstacle to the necessary change in party policy, which should follow the model of Gorbatchev’s “perestroika”.

The first tendency was put into practice through the so-called July conception, which Todor Zhivkov set forth in 1987. It marked the turn of Bulgarian Communist Party to profound economic reforms that this party had never undertaken before. Similar reforms have been carried out only in Hungary and Poland, but in these countries they were obtained by the society, while in Bulgaria they were suggested “from above”, that is, by the Party leadership. The so-called July conception envisaged transformation of the economic system into market economy, preserving at the same time the political control of the Communist party, as the envisaged political changes were merely cosmetic. The scale of the changes, as well as their direction, could be better understood, if I point out at least the most important reforms, discussed by Communist party Politburo and Central committee and by the cabinet. Some of them have been even sent to the Parliament, where they had to be voted. Here they are: transformation of state property into joint-stock one, with the participation on the first place of those, working in a given enterprise; organization of production and output sale by firms; drawing foreign investments by means of creating free trade zones; reducing taxation; creating stock exchanges; transformation of social security system by means of insurance funds; reform of public health services and so on. An important administrative reform was carried out - the 28 regions were substituted by 9 districts and the accent was put on the raise of self-government and self-financing of the communities, which should relieve the pressure on state budget.

This was Zhivkov’s last attempt at preserving his own power in the times of “perestroika” in the Soviet Union, initiated by the young and reforming-minded Michail Gorbachev. Thus, for the first time in his career, Zhivkov got in conflict with a Soviet leader, but had no choice, because he understood that he was in a losing position as a result of his close relations with Leonid Brezhnev, who was the incarnation of Soviet standstill, but also because he was well on years. Unlike the other “veterans” – Gustav Husak, Erich Honecker and Nicolae Ceausescu, Zhivkov was struggling not by sabotage of Gorbachev’s new political line, but he was trying to save his power by undertaking reforms that surpassed Gorbachev’s “perestroika”. Thus, he hoped to deprive Gorbachev of substantial reasons to replace Zhivkov’s with a person of the new political generation. The collision between them became inevitable, and when the realization of July conception began with the voting of necessary laws, in the autumn of 1987 in Moscow Gorbachev couldn’t help but sharply criticize Zhivkov. It was really interesting that on October 16th, 1987 the Soviet leader blamed Zhivkov for having tried to suspend the leading role of the Communist party and to put the accent of the reforms on economic mechanisms. Obviously, that was a tactical and not a strategic discussion about the future of Soviet type socialism, because both leaders were ready to give it up in order to preserve their own power as well as the very system.

It is difficult to answer the question what would have happened if Zhivkov had the possibility to continue with the reforms and if he had not been overthrown on November 10th, 1989. Historians prefer to discuss facts, which have already been accomplished. Still, I’m going to run the risk and present my personal view, based on thousands of pages of records, dealing with the discussions of reforms in the highest Communist party circles. According to me, the general direction of these reforms was correct from strategic point of view, for it envisaged destruction of Soviet system of central planning and its replacement by market mechanisms. On the whole, the principles of these reforms did not quite differ from what have been done in Bulgaria and in Eastern Europe during the last decade.

Nevertheless, I don’t think that the reforms, that have been formulated and carried out by Zhivkov, could have been accomplished at that moment and by him personaly. This estimation is based on several reasons: on the first place, these reforms had to be carried out by those people, who have been accustomed to the old system way of action and have not been prepared for such a turn. Secondly, Zhivkov’s conception could not have been realized without help from outside and in 1989 he had support neither from the East nor from the West. Last, but not least, Bulgarian society was not ready to meet such deep economic reform, because it didn’t believe Zhivkov any more and here we can find out the role of the dissidents. On the whole, I’m convinced that this tendency was doomed and its failure was only a question of time.

What remained was the third possibility – the change of Party and state leadership. During the second half of 1989 a sharp struggle was going on between Zhivkov and Gorbachev’s adherents – Andrei Lukanov and Petar Mladenov. Its outcome was clear in advance, because the will of Moscow has always played a decisive role in socialist Bulgaria. So it was not a surprise that this collision between the “national” communists and those, faithful to Moscow, ended in eliminating of those, who disagreed with the Soviet line, in other words – in overthrowing of Zhivkov on November 10th, 1989.

It is much more important to estimate what were the ideas of people, who organized Zhivkov’s overthrow, so that we can understand their vision of Bulgaria’s future development and whether they had real alternative reform program, different from Zhivkov’s as well as from the ideas of the dissidents. Both Lukanov and Mladenov were members of Communist party leadership (the first one was a candidate-member and the other was a member of Politburo) and they were ministers respectively of foreign trade relations and of foreign affairs. They were in constant unofficial contacts with the Soviet leadership and with the Soviet representatives in Bulgaria and as Gorbachev himself admits, he received informal information about everything, which had been going on in Bulgaria. Up to October 1989 Lukanov and Mladenov had never opposed Zhivkov’s reforms. It was not before the end of October that Mladenov began to show himself distant with Zhivkov’s line and on October 24th, 1989 gave his
resignation, sending an open letter, which sharply criticized Zhivkov for his rule, but above all, for the fact that he had involved Bulgaria into a conflict with the Soviet union[19]. At the same time Soviet embassy in Sofia began to show special interest towards those members and ex-members of Communist party leadership, who were dissatisfied with Zhivkov. Lukanov and Mladenov had a number of conversations with members of Politburo and secretaries of party Central committee and tried to persuade them that time had already come to replace Zhivkov with a younger and more acceptable for Gorbachev leader.

The way in which the coup inside the party leadership had been prepared and carried out, is very well documented and commented on, so it is no longer secret for the Bulgarians[20]. At Politburo meeting on November 9th, 1989 a formal proposition for Zhivkov’s resignation has been made and most members of Politburo supported it. Even Dobri Dzhurov and Yordan Yotov, who had been very close to Zhivkov since the Second World War years, put pressure on him to give his resignation. Zhivkov obeyed and the following day - November 10th, the Central committee accepted his resignation. Peter Mladenov was elected to inherit Zhivkov, and Lukanov became his right-hand man. Still, if we observe the first state and party acts of the new leaders, we can easily notice that they proposed nothing more than mere change of Zhivkov’s officials with new ones; rehabilitation of those, who had been repressed; and promises for more freedom, but they were quite far away from the idea of introducing political pluralism and acceleration of economic reforms. The absence of transition conception is also obvious from the activities of the two cabinets, headed by Andrei Lukanov from February till December 1990. What is more, the declarations that prime-minister Lukanov made before the Parliament, clearly revealed, that he understood well the necessity of economic liberalization, but having in mind the high political price of the reforms, Lukanov didn’t dare to start them without the support of the opposition forces around the Union of Democratic Forces. So the start of reforms has been delayed till the beginning of 1991, that is – the delay was almost two years.

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So, how can we determine things, which happened in Bulgaria in the autumn of 1989? Most important of all was the overthrow of Zhivkov, which was accomplished by means of “a palace coup”. But at the same time the changes in the summit were not limited only within the frames of power – they had strong resonance in society and the dissident movement which had transformed into political opposition. Thus “the palace coup” of November 10th, 1989 became only a starting-point of a new stage in Bulgarian history - the period of transformation from Eastern to Western political and economic system, which led also to fundamental changes in the geopolitical position of Bulgaria.

[1] Todor Zhivkov seized each opportunity – especially international meetings of the Eastern block leaders and closed sessions, to point out as Bulgarian specificity the fact that the intelligentsia supported the authorities and that there were no dissident organisations. – Central State Archives (CSA), f. 1-B, op. 68, a. e. 40, l. 88; a. e. 2662, l. 30.


[3] Even when the first dissident organizations appeared, the Communist leadership continued to consider them as a result of outside influence and was convinced that they were not a product of Bulgarian situation. – CSA, f. 1-B, op. 68, a. e. 41-88, l. 30; op. 71, a. e. 118-88, l. 5, 15.

[4] Zbigniew Brzezinski was one of those, who pointed out, that in comparison with Central European socialist countries, in Bulgaria there was no social crisis even in the 80ies. – Brzezinski, Z. Golemiat proval. Sofia, 1991, p. 215.


[6] This principle was much more unfavorable to Bulgaria, because up to it Bulgarian industry had larger possibilities to receive raw materials on considerably lower prices and Bulgarian agriculture was subsidized each year. The new principle was proposed by Hungary and Poland and it envisaged the adoption of US dollar as exchange currency, which should make easier the contacts with world markets.
This tendency was extremely unfavorable to economically backward members of the Council. See also: Gorbatchev, M. Zhizn i reformy. T. 2, 311-312, 368.


[8] This was carried out through a declaration of the Parliament and was discussed by Politburo on November 28th, 1988. - CSA, f. 1-B, op. 68, a. e. 188-88, l. 61-64.


[13] Politburo on August 25th and 29th, 1989 have discussed the documents, concerning the transformation of resource gathering for social security system. - CSA, f. 1-B, op. 68, a. e. 3481, l. 160-199.

[14] Ibidem, l. 200-247. On the same meeting the documents concerning the creation of health insurance funds, have also been discussed. - Ibidem, l. 288-315.


[16] In his memoirs Gorbatchev described his disagreement with the July conception only because it had been precipitate and because it had been introduced from “above”, but he totally agreed with its main idea about the creation of “self-governing socialism”. – Gorbatchev, M. Op. cit., p. 370.

[17] In his memoirs Nikita Tolubeev - Soviet diplomat in Sofia and a friend of Lukanov, gives direct proofs of these informal contacts. He admits that KGB officers in Bulgaria have been engaged in the efforts to overthrow Zhivkov and to replace him with a person, capable to carry out Moscow intentions about the reformation of the Eastern bloc. Abstracts of these memoirs have been published in Bulgarian newspaper “Trud” from November 10th -17th, 1998.


[20] This has been done by professional historians, who have traced down the events, and by participants and witnesses, who have revealed their attitude in their memoirs and analyses. And new memoirs and different points of view are still being published.