

# NIKOLETA ARNAUDOVA

## SOFIA, BULGARIA

A few months before I was born my mother started thinking of proper names for her future child. One of the first things that came into her mind was “Democracy”. Yes, it certainly would have been an unusual name, taking into account that during her whole life my mother had followed the norms of communism, participating in demonstrations, learning the rules of the Party and maintaining the image of a good, stable member of society. However, even my family, which was never really interested in politics and remained rather neutral, knew that there was something different, another system that many believed to be corrupted and inhumane: capitalism. And then, the year 1989 came. Fervent speeches from that time tell us legends about democracy, opportunities, freedom. However, is this what we actually received after two decades?

Behind every change or transition of social order stand millions of human destinies. To me, the first years of the new democracy are a blurred memory of electricity shortages and empty shops. My father would get up every morning at five o'clock and stand in endless lines in order to get his little daughter milk for her breakfast. My grandmother would sit near the stove with me, because this would be the only warm place during the hours without electricity. This is how my country, Bulgaria, and its people welcomed the new system.

Over the first few years, Bulgarian society was hopeful for the future. We did not let the lack of basic goods destroy our beliefs in the government. Everyone felt insecure, just like the child that goes to school for the first time, ready to learn new things but not knowing if he is strong enough to cope with all the changes. But all I remember are happy people, who joked about the inconveniences and who waited. They waited for the real change to come.

But time passed and nothing much happened. Capitalism was not what the Bulgarians had expected. After all, what is the point of having your own private coffee shop when some newly emerged oligarch would come to you every month and take a significant part of your income? Transitional Bulgaria was a country controlled by underground criminals who had nicknames like “Wolf” and “Nero”. They had heavy mobile phones, traveled in huge cars and were completely unpredictable in their actions. Anyone born in 1989 Bulgaria would see these criminals walk into trendy clubs and restaurants, so boisterous, self-confident and incredibly rude. My generation would listen to warnings from teachers and parents: “Do not go anywhere near these people, they are dangerous.” These oligarchs were surrounded by explosions, murders and terror. And little children like me knew to stay away when someone dressed in black got out of his jeep with a facial expression that looked like a school bully coming to get your lunch money.

These people made everyone more cynical. Instead of democratically expressing its desires and opinions, Bulgaria buckled down and decided to survive once again. My classmates and I would tell each other jokes about the government and the oligarchs, jokes that we had heard from the adults and which we did not fully understand but which made our parents laugh loudly and bitterly. This was the time of over-exaggerations in everything. The majority's favorite music was pop-folk, sung by artificial looking women, made of silicon, peroxide and heavy make-up. The texts of these songs were absurd, a constant cavalcade about money, tragic love and brutal sexual hints. It all seemed like a mockery of the real world. People were governed by the underground mafia and entertained by dollish women that

were only reminiscent of real human beings. This is how I remember Bulgaria in the nineties: loud pop-folk music, angry men in black and, in the middle of this, normal people who laughed through clenched teeth and waited for the good things to start happening.

As the 1989 generation grew up, we developed a common trait: no matter what we say, no matter how cynical we may be, our actions are guided by hope. Many of us choose to go abroad, where things are different and this hope may turn into reality. Others stay in Bulgaria, believing, just like our parents did in 1989, that change might come. However, young people today are aware that we cannot wait for the government to fix everything. We know that it is people who have to strive for a better future because we do not possess the mentality of the previous generations who grew up in the communist reality, where prudence and conformity were the most valuable traits a citizen could have. Those born in 1989 are old enough to remember our acceptance in NATO in 2004. We were those who congratulated each other on Bulgarian EU membership in January 2007. My generation was marked by transition but it was transitional by itself as well.

As we made our first steps, the newly created Republic of Bulgaria was trying to walk by itself, adopting a new constitution and adjusting to new rules. As we became rational individuals, our country was developing its own consciousness. And since the generation of 1989 was bound to be more internationally-oriented than its predecessors, Bulgaria was aiming towards globalisation as well, realising that being a part of a large community demands some sacrifices but brings a lot of profits. My generation refers to itself as both Bulgarian and European. We have realised that after years of excess and extremities in politics, the country and its citizens must aim for balance. We accept nationalism but not chauvinism. We love Bulgaria the most and yet we do not consider other states as foes but as friends. Generation '89 dreams of a balance that we know is possible, but we are not sure how to achieve it. But we'll keep on trying until we obtain it. After all, changes don't bother us; we are the children of transition.

As I was listening to Zhelyu Zhelev, President of Bulgaria from 1990 to 1997, during his speech on Bulgarian transition in front of my university colleagues a few months ago, I kept on thinking whether we really emerged from this period. If so, then why are we constantly reminded of communism? Why do our parents keep mentioning, sometimes with great nostalgia, how much easier life used to be before democratic changes? To me, as long as the ghost of the past hangs over us, we will remain in distant 1989, always insecure about

what will happen from now on. And this is what my contemporaries and I are trying to fight against. It is not that we are repulsed by our past or by the beliefs that older people still have of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. But by rethinking what could have happened we are not moving on, we are not achieving anything. We are tired of useless political discussions and corruption. We do not want to feel ashamed after every monitoring report that the EU gives on us. Not all of us are thieves and illegal immigrants. But this is the image we created for ourselves because we did not raise our voice. However, this is what my generation is trying to correct. All the young people I know went to vote in the last parliamentary elections, even though the rest of the population was still reluctant to participate. But this is a beginning, a little change that would start a bigger process in the development of the national consciousness that Bulgaria seemed to lack during transition.

I would like to sum up twenty years in a few sentences, which is hard, even impossible, so I am not even going to try. However, I can predict what the future would hold for us: more difficulties and more optimism. The "children" of 1989 would be making their first steps as young adults, trying to overcome all the prejudice and rejection a transitional generation might receive. And we will, just like we passed through electricity shortages, underground crimes and fake democracy, until reality starts to reflect our hopes.

 [kilriel@abv.bg](mailto:kilriel@abv.bg)