

## THE COLOUR OF CHANGE: TO THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BULGARIAN COLOUR REVOLUTION

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**Abstract:** The year 2024 marks the 35th anniversary of the landmark 1989–the year in which Todor Zhivkov was removed from the highest positions of power in the Communist Party and state and the Bulgarian Velvet Revolution began. There are political analysts who share the opinion that the Velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe in the 1990s should be classified as early manifestations of the later post-Socialist colour revolutions, taking into account the apparently common Maidan model for undermining the statutory state authority as well as the applied strategy of the managed chaos. In this article, it is my intention to provide academic arguments not only in support of this claim but also to prove that it was Bulgaria where the first *colour revolution* in modern Eastern European history actually took place.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, 1990s, transition, velvet revolution, colour revolution

Rita Klímová, an English translator for numerous well-known dissidents from Czechoslovakia and a prominent dissident herself, coined the term *velvet revolution*. During the years, the term was used internationally to describe not only the events in Czechoslovakia but the overall process of non-violent transition of power in Eastern European countries in the late autumn of 1989. It is also accepted in Bulgarian scientific circles, although rather in its Slovak version–the *gentle revolution*. In an attempt to formulate an appropriate political definition of the events that followed the internal party coup of November 10, 1989, President Zhelyu Zhelev himself avoided the notion of a *gentle revolution*, calling rather for a *peaceful transition* to parliamentary democracy and a market economy (Желев, 2017). In his memoirs, as a direct participant in the events and a member of the Coordination Council of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) and a professional historian, Dimitar Ludzhev, on his part, uses at least three terms in parallel: *velvet/gentle revolution*, *revolution*, and *negotiated transition* to describe the period 1989–1991, supported by relevant documentary information (Люджев, 2012, 2019). Iskra Baeva also writes in a

comparative context about the Bulgarian version of the *gentle revolution*, explicitly specifying that it differs from the Czechoslovak one, for example, because it did not mark the beginning of the changes but came into action after the power had already been legitimised through *democratic elections* (Калинова, Баева, 2010, с. 268). Stepan Polyakov, on the other hand, goes a bit further by unequivocally talking about *Gentle Revolution LTD* (referring to the popular abbreviation for a Limited Liability Company) in the sense of something orderly organised, involving multiple *business* partners, and including foreign mentors and advisors (Поляков, 2005). The unanimous thesis imposed by them is that what was happening then in Bulgaria was identical to the revolutionary wave that overthrew the pro-Soviet-type party-political regimes in the context of Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika and the transformation of the system of state socialism and the Eastern Bloc initiated by him. Without attempting to refute this thesis in principle, I would venture to argue that what happened in 1989–1991 in Bulgaria is to some extent identical only to the events in Romania happening at the same time, as described by Eugeniy Krutikov (Крутиков, 2019) and Vladimir Bereanu (Береану, 2023). And if we accept as authoritative their definition of these events as a *colour revolution*, then it is twice as authoritative to apply it in relation to what was happening then in Bulgaria, where precisely for the first time in modern Eastern European history the protesting squares were painted in a common and clearly distinguishable colour symbol—the blue one.

It should be noted here that defining the political turmoil of the 1990s in Bulgaria as a *colour revolution* is not typical of Bulgarian analytical thought, both in the field of contemporary history and political science. However, the very logic and sequence of events reveal many of the elements of the well-known later *Maidan* model, leading to the conclusion that Bulgaria was used by certain Western centres of political influence as a testing ground for that political engineering, which has as its ultimate goal the permanent expulsion of Soviet/Russian influence from Eastern Europe, the occupation of the vacated geopolitical vacuum by the US, and the structures and institutions for economic and military-political integration of the transatlantic space in the face of NATO and the EEC/EU. The short answer to the question of way Bulgaria was used is that if the model proved to work successfully, it was then to be applied within a much broader geopolitical area, namely, for the overthrow of communism and the long-term undermining of Moscow's position in the entire Eurasian space from the Balkans to the Urals. In this context, Bulgaria was the ideal experimental testing ground, since until very recently it played the role of the most loyal Soviet ally and a kind of centre of the Eastern bloc. A key

point was also the fact that the Bulgarian colour revolution took place in two stages: first from 1989-1991, and a later continuation from 1996-1997, for the purpose of consolidating the externally imposed *civilisational choice* and stabilising the positions of the new pro-Western-oriented ruling elite. But let us look at the facts and the chronology of events.

The change in Bulgaria began at the initiative of the internal opposition within the Bulgarian Communist Party itself. The first political organisation that became the initial initiator of the idea that it was time to change something in the governance of the country, and precisely on the model of Perestroika in the USSR set by Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, was the Club for Support of Glasnost and Reconstruction in Bulgaria, founded on November 3, 1988. It was the political currents for the reconstruction of the system of state socialism, which started in the USSR and affected the entire Eastern bloc, that created the right atmosphere for a purge at the top of power in all European socialist countries, among which Bulgaria was no exception. Thus, on November 10, 1989, the removal of Todor Zhivkov from leadership positions in the party and the state was carried out, after the public accusations of the then foreign minister Petar Mladenov against him that he was responsible for the economic crisis in the country, and after the intervention of the Soviet ambassador Viktor Sharapov, who unequivocally called on Zhivkov to step down from power (Ненов, 2014, с. 20). It is also important to recall that the first protests and rallies in December 1989 were also organised by leftist activists in the immediate context of the preparation of the Extraordinary 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (January 30–February 2, 1990), which had to be convened to adopt the social democratic concept and the line of political pluralism and democratic parliamentary elections (Проданов et al., 2009, с. 98). The centre of this still entirely left-wing movement of the discontented became Sofia University, where on December 7, 1989, representatives of all existing dissident associations and organisations, including the Club for Glasnost and Reconstruction in Bulgaria, the Independent Society for the Defence of Human Rights, the Ecoglasnost movement, the Independent Federation of Labour Podkrepa, the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party, and the Independent Students' Society, signed the political agreement for the establishment of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) with Dr. Zhelyu Zhelev as its first chairman (Спасов, 2001, pp. 84-85). It is noteworthy that most of the founders of the UDF were left-wing opposition formations in their ideological orientation, if one excludes some with openly anti-communist views, such as the Bulgarian Agricultural People's Union Nikola Petkov or the Club of the

Illegally Repressed after 1945. Their more radical, right-wing views would prevail, and the opposition alliance would begin to identify itself with them later towards the end of 1991, when its contacts with Western embassies and intelligence headquarters were beginning to grow, the first wave of street discontent had already passed, the Eastern Bloc was gone, and Washington had already announced the political directive for the future enlargement of NATO and the European Economic Community (EEC) to the East.

The UDF began to develop active socio-political activity immediately after its establishment. The first rally of the members and sympathisers of the opposition union was organised on December 10, 1989, in the ideal centre of Sofia on the square in front of the St. Alexander Nevski cathedral. Already at this rally, quite radical for the then-mass public attitudes, demands were sounded, which are indicative of the external influences in the formulation of the so-called 'blue idea' at this very early stage. In addition to the abolition of the leadership role of the Communist Party in the state government, the demands also included the drafting and adoption of an entirely new constitution, the introduction of the principle of separation of powers, the rehabilitation of all those convicted of political crimes during the period 1944-1989, accountability for those responsible for the country's economic crisis, as well as the organisation of a National Round Table following the Polish example (Здрожевски, 2012, с. 39-56). The rally of December 10, 1989, as well as the mass public meetings that followed, including the candlelight vigils in front of the former Tsar's palace, became the occasion for the convening of the extraordinary plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party on December 11-13, which publicly condemned Todor Zhikov's regime and expelled him from the party structures along with his closest associates. The new party leadership, in the person of Petar Mladenov, undertook to dismantle the Communist command-administrative system, introduce the principles of the free market, and create a socialist state governed by the rule of law. It was decided to proceed with the drafting of a new constitution and a new electoral law, and the parliamentary group of the BCP undertook the obligation to submit to the National Assembly for consideration a proposal to repeal Article 1 on the leadership role of the Communist Party from the constitution still in force. After the plenum, a second impressive rally was organised in the centre of Sofia, this time by BCP members and sympathisers who chanted in support of the new political course taken by the party (Луджев, 2012, с. 272-276).

After successfully testing the mechanism of street pressure, the UDF started expanding its toolkit. When, a few days later, on December 14, 1989,

the parliament considered the issue of repealing Article 1 of the Constitution, the opposition surrounded the National Assembly building with a *human chain*. This was the first time in modern Bulgarian history that a *chain* of protesters, mostly young people and students, representing presumably the young elite of the nation, held each other's hands and walked around the building to express disagreement with the decisions of the political government and try to hinder the normal work of a public institution. The cold weather and the lack of objective information about what exactly was going on in the plenary hall contributed to the desired effect of exacerbating tension. In fact, the information was conveyed by the opposition speakers, Zhelyu Zhelev, Konstantin Trenchev, and Hristofor Sabev, and they did their best to present the complicated legal procedure for the requested constitutional change as a purposeful sabotage by the ruling *Communists*. Logically, this blew up the already hyped-up crowd; shouts like "Resign" and "Down with the Communist Party" echoed throughout the square. The protesters made an attempt to break into the parliament building, which caused the National Assembly Chairman Stanko Todorov, President Petar Mladenov, and Defence Minister Dobri Djurov to come to the entrance and try to speak to the crowd. Expectedly, they were met with new demands for resignation and booing. It was in the specific context of this complicated situation that President Mladenov pronounced his infamous remark, "It would be better if the tanks came" (Луджев, 2012, с. 280; Желев, 2010, с. 302-303; Симеонов, 2005, с. 661-667).

Perhaps the most striking evidence that this was precisely a pre-developed political scenario is the fact that the situation was repeated in almost identical details (and almost at the same time of year) in the early winter months of 1997, as will be discussed later in this article. However, neither in 1989-1990 nor in 1997 was it possible to regard these events from such a perspective, as these were years of mass euphoria and a completely different attitude towards the politics of Bulgarian society in general. The first one who tried to formulate some explanation for what happened in December 1989 was Zhelev himself. Commenting on the situation at another rally in front of the parliament building on August 1, 1990, as already mentioned before, he did not even dare to use the term *velvet revolution* but conveniently shifted the emphasis to accusing his own supporters of failing to ensure a massive enough presence on the square (Желев, 2017). The truth was that by the winter of 1989, the UDF was still a very young political opposition with no particularly formulated long-term goals and no experience in harnessing street pressure. Therefore, its leaders preferred the form of a *negotiated transition* following the example of the Round Tables in

Poland and Hungary, and at that historical moment, they were far from the idea of challenging the governing legitimacy of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The Bulgarian version of the Round Table was convened on January 3, 1990; its meetings continued until May 15, and the National Assembly was obliged to vote only on those decisions and laws that were adopted within its framework. The agreements reached included the complete abolition of the political system of state socialism, a transition to parliamentary democracy, the abolition of the political police, the depoliticization of the army, the courts, the prosecutor's office, and the diplomatic service; the dissolution of the BCP's organisational structures; as well as the holding of elections for a Grand National Assembly under a mixed majority-proportional two-round system. It had to draft a new constitution and adopt the necessary laws to change the political and economic system (Кръглата мада, 1990, с. 692-695).

It was in the context of the election campaign in the summer of 1990 that the popular logo of the UDF with the smiling lion with two raised fingers, depicting the sign of victory, was born. Its author was the artist Georgi Lipovanski, and the idea to choose this particular symbol was proposed by the world-famous French advertising agent Jacques Segela, hired specifically by the electoral headquarters of the opposition coalition to advise on the preparation of the election campaign. The association with the traditional Bulgarian national symbolism was consciously sought, including with the national liberation struggle of Bulgarians against the Ottoman enslavers; the ideological suggestion in 1990 was that Bulgaria should never again fall under communist rule. Once more on the advice of Segela, the main slogan of the election campaign was also chosen: "It's ours time!" with a direct reference to Bulgarian 19<sup>th</sup>-century national hero Vasil Levski's remark, "Time is within us and we are within time". It was then that the *colour of change* was specified, too. It was the blue one, which was broadly used in all opposition propaganda materials as well as in the background of the new logo of the UDF itself. As a natural visual counterpoint to red, the blue colour corresponded perfectly with certain visual archetypes of Bulgarian social psychology, one of which was the opposition *blue-red*, formed on the basis of the sports rivalry between the supporters of the two biggest Bulgarian football teams, CSKA and Levski. In this case, the reference to the opposition *Communism-anti-Communism* was quite obvious because the supporters of CSKA are traditionally people with leftist political views, while those of Levski have, to put it mildly, a reserved attitude towards the political regime in the country. For the first time, however, the blue colour was used as an element of the visual symbolism for political purposes

during the big rally around the National Assembly building on December 14, 1989, when opposition activists tore off a blue shirt and each tied a ribbon on his right arm, which was presented as the symbol of peace, the symbol of the United Nations, and Europe, but in fact represented a direct anti-association with the red bands tied on the left elbows of Communist Party supporters in the days immediately following the September 9, 1944 coup d'état. A few months later, however, in the context of the election campaign for the Grand National Assembly in the summer of 1990, more serious attention was paid, particularly to colour symbolism, and it turned out that the blue colour was the perfect tool for the achievement of a mass emotional impact. The propaganda concept developed under the leadership of Jacques Segela relied entirely on the blue colouring of all public events organised by the UDF, from the blue flags, inflatable balloons, advertising hats, T-shirts, notebooks, and pens to the blue ribbons tied to the collars of pets. This was the point at which one could speculate that the Bulgarian *velvet revolution* began to evolve into a *colour revolution*, as the introduction of the *colour* tool for psychological modification of public opinion went hand in hand with the adoption of a more aggressive approach in protest actions against political opponents. While the ruling Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) stresses its aspiration for non-violence, social justice, and a smooth transition, the sympathisers of the opposition UDF were trying (and to a large extent successfully) to shift public attention to the negative legacy of the Communist regime, the bloody repressions after September 9, 1944, the labour camps, the failures in the economy, environmental policy, and other denigrating topics (Kalinova, Baeva, 2010, pp. 260-261). This was the moment when, according to Dimitar Ludzhev, who was then a member of the Coordination Council of the UDF, foreign radio stations such as Deutsche Welle, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and the BBC started to intervene in the Bulgarian election campaign with special broadcasts and commentaries, while a host of Western journalists, diplomats, and experts engaged themselves in very open support for the opposition through consultancy and the provision of material assistance in the form of supplying paper, sound, and other equipment, printing propaganda materials, renting their official vehicles to the UDF's leadership, etc. (Луджев, 2012, с. 182-186). According to official data of the National Endowment for Democracy, during the spring and summer months of 1990, the UDF as a political organisation, the student associations gravitating to it, the Demokracy Newspaper (Вестник „Демокрация“), as well as the Independent Trade Union Podkrepa, received grants under the US programmes for public diplomacy and countering 'Russian influence'

totaling \$1,657,622 (Table 1). This ranks Bulgaria second after Poland among the top ten beneficiaries of U.S. transition assistance grants in Central and Eastern Europe. The young Bulgarian opposition was quite purposefully looking for and making such contacts because it still did not have the material resources to run an election campaign, and this was its way to legitimise itself in the political arena – within the country and before the wider world. Thus, from the very beginning of the Bulgarian transition, the newly emerging right-wing political elite voluntarily placed itself in immediate dependence on the favour of foreign (this time Western) centres of influence and interests, which would remain an invariable feature of the Bulgarian state government for at least three decades to come.

*Table 1: Funds allocated to Bulgaria in 1990*

<b>Donated by</b>	<b>Beneficiary</b>	<b>Grant Funding (в долари)</b>
Freedom House	Democracy Newspaper	232 695
Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI)	Podkrepa Trade Union	276 190
Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI)	Podkrepa Trade Union	51 024
Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE)	Federation of the Independent Students' Assosiations	100 000
National Democratic Institute (NDI)	Civic Education Programme	299 126
National Democratic Institute (NDI)	Bulgarian Association for Free Electiobs (BAFE)	182 024
(International Republican Institute) IRI	Ubnited Democratic Forces (UDF)	75 000
(International Republican Institute) IRI	Ubnited Democratic Forces (\ UDF)	441 563
	Total:	1 657 622

*Source:* NED, Annual Report 1990, 23.



The culmination of the election campaign came on June 7, 1990, when two parallel, crowded demonstrations of *the Blues* and *the Reds* were organised in Sofia. For this purpose, the BSP engaged all the larger squares in the central part of the city. The UDF remained with the only option to block traffic through the Eagles Bridge and Russki Boulevard (at present, Tsarigradsko Shosse Boulevard). With its impressive organisation and foreign support, the rally of UDF supporters far overshadowed that of the BSP, remaining in the historical records of the Bulgarian transition after 1989 as the largest political event, in which (according to the opposition) about 1 million people took part. In this connection, some sufficiently striking details that give a vivid idea of the scale of this protest cannot be overlooked. The central grandstand was located at the Eagles Bridge crossroad, while along the boulevard there were four more stages, each offering its own musical program. This provided a huge area that none of the capital's squares could offer. The technical facilities were donated and installed free of charge by the Greek conservative party New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία). On the next day, to maintain the euphoria, a special microbubble circulated around the city, from which blue and white helium balloons were released. Gradually, a column of cars carrying blue flags formed behind it. They continued to move around even after midnight, already on the pre-election day, when political propaganda was officially banned. The headquarters of the Blues had no doubt about their imminent victory (Симеонов, 2005, с. 701, 703, 715).

The election results showed otherwise, however. The opposition union appeared to have won in the big cities, but not in the countryside. The UDF headquarters declared their intention to contest the results. *Blue* supporters gathered around the National Palace of Culture, where the ballots were being processed, and a *human chain* was formed in an attempt to repeat the scenario of the first mass *blue* demonstration in December 1989. The specially summoned foreign observers, however, expressed the unanimous opinion that the elections had been conducted normally, in full compliance with all the legal rules, and stated that the reported cases of violations were due rather to poor organization and lack of experience than to intentional fraud (The June 1990 Elections in Bulgaria, p. 103). The Blues' leadership was warned that even a single broken glass at that point would compromise them as democrats (Луджев, 2012, с. 260-265). Finally, the Coordination Council of the UDF announced its decision, stating that the elections were "free" but not "fair". As would become clear later, this was a tactical retreat that pursued longer-term goals, while for the moment the justification to the Blues' supporters was that the UDF had nevertheless achieved an electoral

victory by securing a third of the seats in the Grand National Assembly and, accordingly, a decisive say in the future vote on the new constitution (Луджев, 2012, с. 266-267). Apart from that, the success for the right-wing opposition was huge for another essential reason: the model of contesting election results through street pressure had already been tested and validated for subsequent political application.

Having formally acknowledged the election results, the technologists of the protest, the local leaders of the UDF, and their foreign consultants proceeded to the next level: the *colour revolution* passed into the phase of positional defence. At this stage, a key role was once again assigned to the “young”, the “smart”, and the “progressively minded” – the students. Between the two rounds of the elections for the Grand National Assembly, a small group of students declared an “occupation strike” in the building of Sofia University as a sign of disagreement with the recognition of the election results and demanding clarification of the situation. And then something interesting happened: several days after it became clear that the results of the vote could no longer be challenged, the protest tactics seemed to have changed, and in the general tense socio-political situation, the “tank remark” of President Petar Mladenov was launched too conveniently. The timing was more than appropriate and carefully chosen. By some strange coincidence, the students’ strike in Bulgaria corresponded perfectly with the exacerbation of political tensions in neighbouring Romania, where the processes of transformation of the system had already reached the stage of a direct armed clash between ruling and opposition parties. During exactly the same days when in Bulgaria the *forces of the protest* were beginning to prevail, seeking political responsibility even from the acting President, in Romania, on the contrary, the *forces of the status quo* led by the leftist President Ion Iliescu managed to neutralise, at least for a certain period of time, the opposition with the support of the miners and not without a serious dose of street violence. The Mineriade, which analysts would later refer to as a direct prototype of the *colour revolutions* (Крутиков, 2019), was in fact a distorted mirror image of what was happening at the same time in Bulgaria, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the events in Bulgaria reflected in a distorted way what was happening in our northern neighbour. In any case, one can conclude that these were variations of the same political scenario, but with two alternative outcomes, probably because it was necessary to check what the consequences would be, respectively, in the event of a victory by the opposition, as ultimately happened in our country, or in the event of maintaining the political status quo, as was the final outcome in Romania.

After the video recording of the “tank remark” was broadcast in the UDF’s TV pre-election studio, the students demanded a technical examination of the tape, and once it was confirmed to be authentic, they directly demanded the resignation of Petar Mladenov as head of state. The demand was spelled out in a declaration published on July 5, 1990, which, among other things, contained a call for support for the parallelly ongoing sit-in organised by UDF supporters in front of the Presidency building (НЕНОВ, 2014, с. 217). Tents were hastily set up there, and thus a new and hitherto unknown form of protest emerged, called the “City of Truth”. Among its 175 permanent residents were famous artists and writers, university professors, academic researchers, parents of protesting students, and many others. The protest wave grew; students from all universities in the country joined the demand for the resignation of President Mladenov, and even representatives of the more radical wing of the BSP itself expressed their solidarity. With such a strictly organised and massive attack, Petar Mladenov had no choice but to succumb to the pressure. On July 6, 1990, he resigned as head of state. Together with the small *tactical* successes of the managed civil discontent achieved in the previous months, which secured stable positions for the Blues within the Grand National Assembly, the removal of Petar Mladenov, who had been the main face of the internal party coup of November 10, 1989, presented an opportunity for the UDF to achieve its first *strategic* success, as it thus symbolically distanced itself from its leftist connection, which allowed it to claim control of the presidential institution. Henceforth, the establishment of right-wing control over the executive power as well — the Prime Minister’s position — was only a matter of time.

An indication that the revolution was developing according to a strictly guided behind-the-scenes model was the fact that the civil discontent did not subside but, on the contrary, grew once more after the resignation of President Petar Mladenov, encompassing other major Bulgarian cities and expanding and complicating its demands. “Cities of Truth” formed also in Burgas, Varna, Ruse, Veliko Tarnovo, and Stara Zagora, with protesters already demanding the removal of Georgi Dimitrov’s body from his mausoleum in Sofia; the removal of all Communist symbols from buildings and elsewhere; the holding of a “People’s Court” against Todor Zhivkov and his entourage; and the expulsion from the Grand National Assembly of all leftist deputies associated in one way or another with the “crimes of the communist regime” (НЕНОВ, 2014, с. 218-219). An emblematic example of the use of one of the techniques of the colour revolutions in Bulgaria at that time was the organisation of a concert of the popular singer Lili Ivanova in the “City of Truth” on July 27, 1990, through which a huge crowd was

attracted to the ideal centre of Sofia. As expected, after the concert, the crowd headed towards the National Assembly building, where, in the meantime, a heated debate was taking place about whether Todor Zhivkov should be summoned to speak in the plenary hall. The crowd surrounded the parliament and once again attempted to break in. It was crucial for the prestige of the Blues to provoke a public lynching of the former first party and state leader, who was destined to become the scapegoat of the revolutionary wave that had been first initiated by his fellow party members but quickly spiralled out of their control and turned in a radically different political direction.

In this tense setting, rose the management star of the then chairman of the UDF, Dr. Zhelyu Zhelev. With his nomination and election to the presidential post on August 1, 1990, the forces of the revolution secured their control over the highest-level representative institution in the state for at least five years to come. This necessitated another change of tactics and the regrouping of these forces into a separate parliamentary wing, which retreated from the street and adopted the means of legally regulated inter-party struggle and a civil movement, which had to maintain public discontent outside parliament. The actions of this civil wing of the Blues turned out to be crucial for the further development of events, with its two most popular activists, Plamen Stanchev and Konstantin Trenchev, the leader of the Podkrepa Trade Union, being the instigators of the initiative for the removal of Soviet symbols from the buildings of the Largo in Sofia, as well as of the pogrom and the burning of the former Party House (Семерджиев, 2004, с. 443-445). It should be noted here that the actions of the civilian wing of the UDF, and especially the excesses they provoked in the centre of Sofia, played their part in successfully maintaining the impression that the country was on the brink of civil war and military dictatorship, as President Zhelyu Zhelev did not fail to note in his radio address on the night of August 26-27, 1990 (Желев, 2010, с. 387-388). It should also be noted here that the increased self-confidence of the *blue opposition* in the summer months of 1990 corresponded directly with the assertion of the *forces of change* in the remaining countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with the “outstretched hand” of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) after the adoption of the Turnberry Message (Message From Turnberry, 1990) and the London Declaration (London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance, 1990), and with the beginning of the integration of these countries into the Western European political-economic space, consolidated under the supranational guidance of the EEC. Against this dynamic international background, the development

of the political situation in Bulgaria simply followed the general trend of the withdrawal of the pro-Soviet Left from power and the gradual occupation of the positions vacated by the newly formed pro-Western political parties. This is what predetermined the next stage of the *Bulgarian Colour Revolution* – the seizure of the supreme executive power through the removal of the leftist Prime Minister Andrei Lukanov.

This goal was achieved in the autumn of 1990 in the atmosphere of new mass trade union protests, a shortage of basic foodstuffs, and a coupon system that knocked public confidence out of Lukanov's cabinet. The power opportunity that opened up for the UDF led the Blue's headquarters to make their first major political compromise – to agree to participate in the newly formed coalition government of the non-partisan lawyer Dimitar Popov (December 1990–December 1991). The subsequent drop in tensions, however, was only temporary and represented the visible and more publicly acceptable side of the complex transformations of the country's economic foundations, which were beginning to place it in long-term dependence on the political favour of powerful international financial control structures such as the World Bank and the International **Monetary Fund (IMF)**. **Bulgaria became a member of both in 1990, thus unconditionally accepting to comply with the new US policy for economic expansion in Eastern Europe, including** through such sustainable development programmes as the "Rahn-Utt Plan". This was just another element of the model of *the colour revolution*, together with the parallelly applied techniques of manipulation of public consciousness, the emanation of which became the trial organisex against Todor Zhivkov, as well as the protest of the 39 blue deputies who left the parliamentary hall and took to the streets under the pretext that they did not accept the legitimacy of the Grand National Assembly because of the predominance of former Communists among its members. In fact, their protest was part of the newly launched election campaign for the 36<sup>th</sup> Ordinary National Assembly, the numbering of which, albeit half a century late, aimed to show the continuity between the post-war and pre-war parliamentary traditions.

The preparation of the elections for the 36<sup>th</sup> National Assembly was taking place in the context of extremely dynamic international events, which cannot but affect the struggle for political power in Bulgaria. It is a repeatedly proven fact that in the country, the direction of *the winds of change* has always been determined by the influence of *an external factor*, which in different historical epochs has different dimensions. In the summer of 1991, this principle affected Bulgarian foreign policy on at least two levels: Eastern

and Western, with the main events setting the parameters of the Eastern one: the collapse of the Eastern bloc after the self-dissolution of the Warsaw Pact Organisation (WPO) and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), and the publicly announced intention of the North Atlantic allies to intervene in the political processes in Eastern Europe. After the beginning of the actual expansion of the Western politico-economic space to the East by binding all Eastern European former Soviet satellites to the treaty system of trade and economic cooperation with the EEC, came the next logical step: attaching these countries to the West in a military-political sense as well. Thus, in an environment of growing global Western influence, the process of the voluntary withdrawal of the socialist left from power and its handover to the right-wing opposition was accelerating in Bulgaria, parallel to the replacement of pro-Eastern (pro-Soviet) with pro-Western political attitudes among the ruling elite, already quite openly supported by Washington, especially after the two successive visits to Sofia of US Vice President Dan Quayle (June 6-7, 1991) and NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner (June 12-13, 1991).

I am mentioning these two unprecedented visits here, as they played a key role in the final decision of the National Assembly to unilaterally denounce the Bulgarian-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (as of August 1, 1991). The termination of the military-political bilateral cooperation, announced in this unequivocal manner, the rightness of which seemed to be deliberately confirmed by the attempted Moscow coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, was a signal to the new partners in the West and a catalyst for the ideological regrouping and consolidation of the Blue Forces. From that moment on, the UDF, representing until then a centre-left coalition, started adopting more extreme right-wing political principles, attracting mainly anti-communist-biassed members. By the time of the elections, scheduled for October 13, 1991, the UDF had already split into three new formations: the "UDF-Movement", uniting the most radical Blues, including the 39 members of Parliament protesting against the BSP's participation in the drafting of the new constitution; the "UDF-Centre", uniting the more moderate social democrats and the Ecoglasnost movement; and the "UDF-Liberals", which included the Green Party, the former Glasnost and Reconstruction Clubs, as well as some politicians who had declared themselves in defence of Western liberal democracy values (Калинова, Баева, 2010, с. 281-282). Not without the assistance of President Zhelyu Zhelev and the majority in the Grand National Assembly, the abbreviation "UDF" and the blue colour of the ballot paper were given to "UDF-Movement". With them, it would win the elections and subsequently

appropriate the laurels of the Bulgarian revolution, permanently imposing the manner of anti-speaking as the main method of political struggle. The age of the open “witch hunt” on an anti-Communist basis was beginning. Particularly seriously affected by this process was the sphere of foreign policy, from which, after a massive purge in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, experienced experts and career diplomats were removed on charges of being “communists” and agents of the former State Security Services. Thus, the new UDF’s government, which took power after the elections, was clearing the ideological ground for the new “transatlantic” values, which occupied a key place in its political programme (Програмна реч на Филип Димитров, 1991). The nuances in the terminology used are very important in this case. For the Prime Minister himself, the former blue leader Philip Dimitrov focused precisely on the *transatlantic* component of cooperation with the Collective West, ignoring its *European* component. Thus, the US became the most important and now fully official foreign policy counterpart of the new Bulgarian right-wing ruling elite, which even dared to claim that the USSR/Russia should be sewed for damages inflicted on Bulgaria during the previous decades, as Foreign Minister Stoyan Ganev put it (Баева, 2004, с. 67). After 1991, there was a relative lull in the organised manifestations of civil discontent for several years, while the power structures and the course of the post-socialist transformation remained under the control of the Blues. This period, covering the terms of office of two Prime Ministers, Philip Dimitrov (November 1991–October 1992) and Lyuben Berov (December 1992–October 1994), could be defined as an intermediate stage of *the Colour Revolution*, or rather a pause between its two main stages. That was a time in which, according to indirect indicators, American financial support for *the forces of change* continued. It is known that for the entire period 1990–1999, the grants awarded to Bulgaria amounted to a total of 5,356,105 USD (Hale, 2003, p. 221), but unfortunately, there are still no declassified documents showing a breakdown by donor institutions and their respective beneficiaries.

The revolutionary tensions burst out again with full force in the winter of 1996–1997. Then, as already mentioned, the scenario from the dawn of the transition was repeated, but now with many more of the characteristic visual elements of the Maidan model, this time directed against the leftist government of Zhan Videnov (January 25, 1995–February 12, 1997). The particular external factor that unleashed these tensions was the open raising of the issue of NATO enlargement to the East. By 1990, the issue of the eastward expansion of the organisation was considered frozen for a long time to come, after the inclusion of the reunified Germany as a full member of the Western military-political space. In 1997, however, it re-entered the

agenda of the transatlantic allies after the last Soviet/Russian soldier had already left Eastern Europe. It was this circumstance that predetermined the second stage of the Bulgarian *colour revolution*, which began with a food supply crisis and continued with galloping hyperinflation and bank collapses in 1996. This exacerbated the anti-government attitudes in the society to the extreme and very conveniently concealed what was happening in the geopolitical background, where Bulgaria had already demonstrated serious signs of indecisiveness in both levels of its post-socialist pro-Western reorientation — the political-economic and the military-political one (ЯКИМОВА, 2019). The country was lagging behind both in its integration into the EEC and in the transatlantic financial system of the International Monetary Fund. That is why the external scriptwriters of the Bulgarian transition and the mentors of the right-wing-oriented Blues obviously decided that the processes started in 1989-1991 needed to be given a new and more powerful impetus. And Zhan Videnov proved to be an extremely predictable and easy-to-neutralise opponent, due to his naivety in foreign policy and inability to generate sufficient internal party and public support. Thus, the government of the Lefts found itself in the complicated situation of being an unwanted partner both in the West and in the East. In the West, because of its attempt to make a U-turn towards restoring cooperation with the Russian Federation, and in the East, because of the official Russian warning about the inevitable deterioration of bilateral relations should Bulgaria abandon its position of neutrality and decide to join NATO<sup>8</sup>. Solving the case required political will, stability, and strength, which the Lefts did not have at that historical moment, and so Zhan Videnov was forced to resign, and consultations began on the formation of a new cabinet within the same government mandate. It was then that the Rights, which had been in opposition until then, decided to resort once again to *coup technology* in order to temporarily regain their lost control over state power.

And so came January 10, 1997, another turning point in the history of the Bulgarian post-socialist transition. On that frosty afternoon, just as in December 1989, a crowd of discontented citizens gathered in and around National Assembly Square in Sofia. This time, they were joined by protesting taxi drivers. The demonstration was organised by the so-called “United Democratic Trade Unions”, including the leadership and members of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (КНСБ, which was its popular abbreviation in Bulgarian) and the Podkrepa Trade Union. The faces of the protest were the same as in the early 1990s, with TV cameras capturing Konstantin Trenchev, Philip Dimitrov, and several other newer but eminent blue leaders; among them were Ivan Kostov (yet to become



Prime Minister), Stefan Sofiyanski (future caretaker Prime Minister and Mayor of Sofia), Evgeniy Bakardzhiev (future Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Regional Development), Nadezhda Mihaylova (future Minister of Foreign Affairs), as well as the newly elected but not yet officially inaugurated President Petar Stoyanov. The parliamentary building was once again occupied and surrounded by a ‘human chain’ of angry students. The resemblance to the familiar pictures of December 1989 and beyond is too striking to be overlooked as pure coincidence.

However, if at the beginning of the 1990s the success of the revolution relied on the euphoric happiness of the already-achieved *freedom*, in 1997 the protest rhetoric and visual and musical propaganda were chosen in such a way as to support gloomy statements like: there is no freedom; it is a dream in the distant future; the communists are to blame for the crisis and the lack of economic progress; the struggle against them will be long and hard; and the prospects for the country remain unclear. This time, the propaganda toolkit included much more radical elements, with the immediate aim of provoking aggression and the bleeding of civil discontent. On January 10, broken paving stones, snowballs, smoke bombs, and firecrackers were thrown at the parliamentary building; supposedly, random protesters broke the windows and almost broke through the doors. Leaders of the ‘‘Communists’’ who were in the meantime sitting inside and discussing the options for a ministerial cabinet were brought out under the cover of police shields and were also pelted with paving stones, while the opposition leader Filip Dimitrov appeared before the TV cameras from a hospital corridor with a bloodied and bandaged head, claiming to be the victim of police violence. The trade unions were also strictly following the scenario of escalating tensions. Their structures helped to set up an orderly organisation to block the normal functioning of the state at all levels. All the capital’s public transport stopped running, and an ‘‘indefinite occupation strike’’ was declared with the participation of all the capital’s universities and schools. Students and pupils took to the streets and actively participated in the building of barricades at the capital’s central intersections, where campfires were lit under the sounds of revolutionary songs. In addition to Sofia, barricades were also built at key road junctions across the country with hand tools, rubbish bins, and farm machinery. The public was directly engaged to follow and participate in the dynamic events through aggressive media propaganda. The then-two channels of Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and the newly established opposition Radio Darik were involved with extraordinary, all-day broadcasts, reporting directly ‘‘from the scene’’ on the current situation. Tensions were running high, and when the date of February 4, 1997 came, instead of

announcing the composition of the new left-wing government, the BSP's leaders, Nikolai Dobrev and Georgi Parvanov, decided to return the mandate unfulfilled. On that day, the centre of Sofia was literally flooded by a huge crowd of people who gathered from all directions around the perimeter of the so-called "Triangle of Power", from the Presidency and the Council of Ministers to the Parliament building on the National Assembly Square. According to unofficial data, more than 1 million people protested against the formation of the left-wing government in the capital alone on that day. Later, two of the main participants in those events, former President Petar Stoyanov and his successor Georgi Parvanov, both argued unanimously that the return of the mandate on February 4, 1997, had prevented the outbreak of civil war. The association here with the events of the summer of 1990 and the burning of the Party House is more than obvious.

After the turbulent revolutionary beginning of 1997 and the three-month rule of the caretaker government of Stefan Sofianski (February 13, 1997–May 21, 1997), state power permanently passed into the hands of the Blues – for the first time since the turn of 1989 – for a full four-year term. This is the government that would complete the process of preparing the country for full accession to NATO and the EU at the cost of many compromises with the country's national interests and controversial foreign policy decisions, such as the granting of Bulgarian airspace for the purpose of NATO's air campaign against the former Yugoslavia. From the perspective of the present day, it can be noted that Bulgaria's integration into the political-economic and military-political structures of the transatlantic space was a kind of finale of the transition in a broad geopolitical sense. In this way, the Bulgarian post-socialist revolution achieved its ultimate goal: the permanent detachment of the country from Moscow's sphere of influence for at least three decades to come. That is why today we can classify it as a 'colour revolution', because the final results and the long-term consequences of the foreign policy reorientation suggest exactly such assessments and conclusions. What still prevents the official acceptance of this very term in Bulgarian historiography and political science is the fact that to attach this definition to the processes that took place in Bulgaria in the 1990s would mean to deny both the "blue idea" and the entire political and, above all, emotional significance of the system change that resulted from the November 10, 1989 coup. However, if we look at the few currently declassified archival documents, a picture emerges of a used ideal and a flawed civil protest, which could be assessed as originally justified. And the reason for such a development lies in the combination of the lack of sufficiently prepared politicians after the generation of Zhivkov's nomenclature in the dynamic international

environment as well as in the lack of sufficient own resources, which could allow the country to follow an adequate line of political behaviour before the world after the withdrawal of the longstanding geopolitical shield of the USSR. The undoubted merit of the local ideologues of the Bulgarian post-socialist revolution, however, certainly lies in the fact that they did not allow it to be “stained with blood” as suggested by its external scriptwriters and as happened in neighbouring Romania or during the later political revolutions of the early 21st century. That is why the organised civil discontent in Bulgaria of the 1990s might indeed be regarded as more akin to the model of the central European *velvet revolutions* of the same historical period, despite its intrusively *colourful (blue)* component.

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