

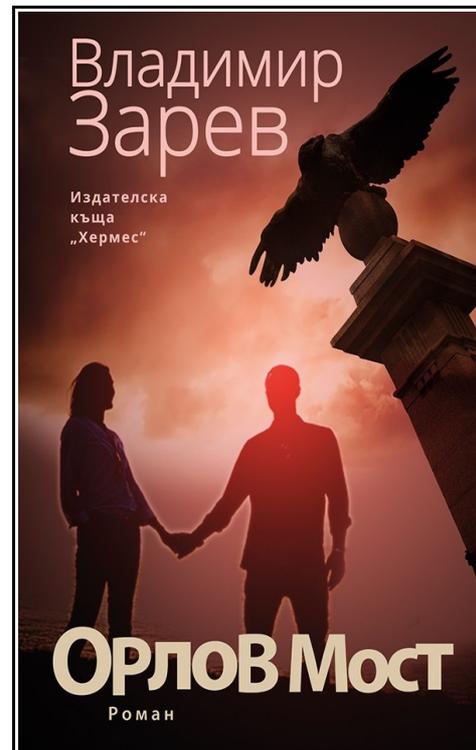


Reviews

Orlov most [Eagles' Bridge], by Vladimir Zarev. Sofia: Hermes, 2015, pp. 210, 14.95 lev, Paperback; ISBN: 9789542615118. Language: Bulgarian.

Eagles' Bridge is the renowned Bulgarian writer Vladimir Zarev's most recent novel, named after the iconic location in Bulgaria's capital Sofia, where tens of thousands of people gathered in 2013 in order to protest. These rallies were first directed against rising electricity bills, then more fundamentally against energy sector monopolies, and finally against corruption and mafia-like structures in Bulgarian politics as a whole. *Eagles' Bridge* thus inscribes itself into the global protest topography of the 2010s, adding the specific symbolic value of the bridge to the now almost ubiquitous square—from Tahrir via Maidan to Bolotnaya—as a site of resistance.

In Zarev's novel, protesters come together in the winter cold on the bridge, ultimately forcing the government into submission. Meanwhile, two of the protest leaders, Julia, an artist and gallery owner, and Pavel, a lawyer, fall in love, despite incompatible political agendas and social status.



Ethics and aesthetics. The two waves of the 2013 Bulgarian protests

Eagles' Bridge is a literary account of the Bulgarian protest movement in 2013. These protests form one part of global protest dynamics of the decade as a whole, but one to which both European and international media have paid less attention. Throughout the year, mass manifestations against oligarchy and corruption inside the political system were appearing, forcing two governments into submission, but without changing inherently either the political system or levels of trust in political elites in the long term.

The 2013 Bulgarian protests are characterized as having developed in two waves. The first wave, from January to March, was labelled the ‘anti-monopolist protest’, and was largely driven by issues of material need. After privatization in the energy sector, electricity prices rocketed sky high, and a significant part of the Bulgarian population feared being left without heating. After a wave of self-immolations unprecedented in recent European history, the government headed by the conservative GERB-party resigned.

Image 1. Eagles’ Bridge. Bulgaria’s contribution to the global protest topography of the 2010s



Source: Videostill ‘Protest Sofija – Orlov most - 24.02.2013 g.’ / Protest Sofia – Eagles’ Bridge - 24.02.2013 y.’, posted by user Stu pi, Youtube, 19.02.2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2H7--k8Omuw> (last accessed 22.06.2016).

The second protest wave started in June 2013, when the newly elected government, now a coalition led by the Bulgarian Socialist party, appointed Delyan Peyevski, a lawyer and media manager, as chief of the State Agency for National Security (*Darzhavna agentsia za Natsionalna Sigurnost* DANS). Peyevski was reputed to be involved in shady economic structures and of using his media holdings to manipulate political opinion. All players with an active stake constantly voiced accusations that the protests were staged and that protesters were paid. Protests and counter-protests were allegedly supported either by the two big players in domestic Bulgarian politics, the GERB party and the Socialist party, or, on a geopolitical level, by the two opposing global political powers, the US and Russia.

The two waves of ‘anti-monopolist’ and ‘anti-corruption’ protests were differentiated by observers not only in regard to their agendas and actors, but also vis-à-vis their aesthetics and protest performances. While the first wave was propelled by existential material necessities and manifested itself in individual gestures of self-sacrifice, the second wave was interpreted as motivated by ethical concerns, articulated through artistic performances. The binary oppo-

sition between the protest waves contrasted as 'poor and ugly' (*bedni i grozny*) versus 'beautiful and smart' (*krasivi i umni*) and generated discussions in the Bulgarian media and among intellectuals. The 'dancing' revolution of the young and 'beautiful' can be viewed positively as the politicisation of a middle class, taking on political responsibility beyond its own immediate economic needs. On the other hand, sceptics have also interpreted this wave as an egocentric journey towards a new ethics that ignores the material structures of economic deprivation. These interpretations recall similar discussions about the protest movements in Russia and Ukraine, which were discredited as being 'middle-class' projects that promoted a new ethics while neglecting the basic needs of the lower income classes.

Zarev's novel is devoted to the first wave of protest, and the cold on the streets plays an important role in the setting's iconography. The symbolism of people having to leave the warm and familiar environments of their homes is unmistakable, while the dancing revolution of the late summer is redolent of collective festivities in shared recreational spaces.

Protest as a love affair

The novelist ensures that Julia and Pavel are turned into emblematic figures of protest. Julia is the leader of a group of protesters who concern themselves with morality in politics. An artist who hasn't managed to realize herself aesthetically, she owns a small gallery on the edge of the city-centre. She lives alone, as her husband has been unfaithful to her, and is involved in a typical mother-daughter conflict with her rebellious daughter. Her cozy flat comes replete with a cat and her beautiful young lover Stojan, known as Stanley, whose body shaven of hair both magnetises and repels her. Julia thus symbolises the middle-class, bored with her life and looking for a new society that has different—more artistic and non-materially orientated—goals and ideas.

Pavel in contrast has started his career as a successful lawyer, working for one of the most prestigious law firms in town, headed by the infamous godfather figure Karageorgiyev. The law firm specializes in defending the corrupt economic elite, the 'mafia' ('mutrite') who exploit the Bulgarian people. When the young and ambitious advocate starts to work on his own initiative and betrays his mentor, he is yanked out of the company and forced to work as a private detective. His previous circles of acquaintances now see him as an outcast. However, Karageorgiyev's people offer him a dirty bargain—Pavel should lead a group of paid protesters, so-called 'soft nationalists' ('meki natsionalisti'), agents provocateurs used to discredit the authentic movement of the peoples' spontaneous protest. On entering into this bargain, Pavel is thus in his innermost habits and ideals actually opposed to the goals of the protesting crowd.

When Julia and Pavel fall in love with each other, the latter finally grasps that his behaviour is immoral. He wants to set things right by making the dirty deal public. In so doing, he can't avoid a head-on clash with the mafia that ultimately leads to his death in a pre-arranged car crash.

Besides the main protagonists, many secondary characters also figure in the novel, various types of protester who are present largely only through their online communications. Flashbacks offer glimpses into Julia's and Pavel's past, their family stories determined by the

hardships of the socialist era and the era of economic ‘transition’. A charlatan in the guise of a businessman has cheated Pavel’s parents out of their family home, and this loss pushes his mother towards suicide and his father into insanity.

Literary critic Chavdar Parushev proposes this thesis: the lovers’ inner dichotomy can be read as illustrating the wish for and the possibility of a unity of high ethical standards and ‘deep pragmatism’. Analysts of the protests did indeed conclude that the protests did not lead to significant political change, and, furthermore, left Bulgarian society deeply divided (Gueorguieva 2015). Others argue that despite practical failures, the protests gave the right to dream back to the people (Krasteva 2016). Literature, Parushev argues further, may have the potential and the right to unite a divided society. Concurrently, the novel works within the ‘regime of wishful memory’ (*rezhim na zhelajeshto pomnene*), a memory that strives to ignore or flatten conflicts within society and secure a continuity of shared historical imagination.

Genre models and protest genres

From a genre point of view, the novel combines the topic of the protests in this way with the generic models of a mafia thriller, family saga and love story. Its protagonists articulate and embody the various political and social discourses and mythologies concerning the Bulgarian protests (the Bulgarian people as being unable to organize politically, an effect of their long tradition of political subordination; the Bulgarian protests as paid for or bought by geopolitical players). *Eagles’ Bridge* strives to portray the different protagonists of protest, their habits and their aesthetics. Both author and literary critics specifically emphasise the empirically correct rendering of urban protest spaces. At the book launch, Bulgarian literary scholar Mikhail Nedelchev highlighted that the protesters—through occupying streets, squares and bridges—made the town their own, and discovered urban space anew (in Dimcheva 2015). What is true with regard to the urban topography, does however not apply to the novel’s modelling of the digital and networked protest environments.

The sociological portrait of the protesters—with the exception of the two main characters—is largely a representation of online language, specifically via the transcription of ‘chat’ protocols. The protesters use nicknames such as Bison, CheGeVara, The Lonely One and The Caretaker. Julia herself uses the characteristic nickname The Mistress or even The Tyrant. While sociological surveys underscore the fact that the protest movements did rely on networked structures and non-hierarchic models of organization (Castells 2012), Julia and Pavel are characterized as ‘protest leaders’, embodying traditional models of leadership and of opposition.

The digital environment where The Mistress discusses and prepares the street rallies together with her flock of followers (remember the Bison!) is called simply a ‘chat’. Social networks and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or related services, which were so significant for the protests, are not mentioned. The specific aesthetics of the digital and the networked, of the slang, the memes and the visual dynamics of the protests are almost completely missing in the novel, as has been noted by the readers as well. The traditional mode of the novel, with its single, omniscient narrator, brings to a standstill the visual and physical mobility of the networked mass protest. True, the witty word play of the protest of the ‘smart

and beautiful' is rather a characteristic of the second wave of the protests than of the winter uprising. Nevertheless, the author, apparently a non-digital-native, is incapable of capturing the specific aesthetics of the 2013 protest movement in its playfulness, creativity, non-linearity and collective artistic and linguistic outburst.

The epic saga of contemporary protest

The early 2010s saw an unprecedented growth of global protest movements around the world, from the Arab spring to Russia's 'Snow Revolution' (2011-2012), from Tahrir in Egypt to Puerta del Sol in Spain, from Bolotnaya in Moscow to Maidan in Kiev. While pundits discuss the political outcomes of these protests with regard to their agendas, their successes and their failures, they are also turned into an object of academic research. Researchers and other interested parties archive the overwhelming majority of Facebook discussions, Twitter posts, Instagram photos and Youtube videos for future study. But it is only through cultural artefacts that these events will be inscribed in cultural memory—in works of art, photography and documentary films. And in novels.

The proportion of writers, poets, artists and photographers, or, in a broad sense, public intellectuals within protest movements has often been noted and analysed, and is part of what Manuel Castells has called a fight for dignity (Castells 2012; Moraski 2016). Artists and intellectuals took part in framing the aesthetics of protest while these were still emerging. They documented protests and events and later on transferred this documentation into works of art. The renowned writer and poet Georgi Gospodinov coined the slogan 'the protesting human is beautiful' regarding Bulgaria, which met with tough criticism from those who wanted to see the social agenda dominate; while the artist Pravdolyub Ivanov contributed some of the wittiest slogans to the Bulgarian #resign movement. 'I am not paid, I hate you for free' turned into a humorous and very popular answer to the accusations of protesters being paid by political interest groups from within and outside the country (Genova 2013). All these elements resonate in the plot of Zarev's protest novel.

It is nonetheless remarkable that it is Zarev, a representative of the pre-transformation generation, who is the first to have written 'the novel of the Bulgarian protests'. Zarev has published about 20 novels over the last 40 years, several of which have been translated into English, German, Russian and other global languages. The author has established himself as the epic novelist of Bulgarian history of the 20th and now 21st centuries. In two novel-trilogies, he traces the history of Bulgarian society from the liberation from Ottoman rule via the totalitarian regime of the Socialist period, and culminates in the hardships of the transformations of the 1990s. One of his most popular novels *Decay* [Razrucha, 2007] describes the turmoil of this transition period in the most drastic terms, relying on a similar opposition between his main characters as he does in *Eagles' Bridge*: a writer unable to cope with the new economics of life, and a former secret service agent turned mafia boss. (Interestingly, another recent novel devoted to Bulgarian contemporary history—*Power and Resistance* [Macht und Widerstand, 2015] by German-Bulgarian writer Ilija Trojanow—relies on the same narrative principle of dichotomy, opposing the political dissident Konstantin to the State security officer Metodi. But Trojanow deliberately leaves the opposition intact, increases conflict lines and underlines inconsistencies in the collective memory. The new generation of digital pro-

testers by the way is labelled here as the 'underground children', due to their life behind screens and their anarchic behaviour, and is seen as the heir of the historic dissident movement.)

By elevating the protest year 2013 to the topic of a novel, Zarev inscribes digital culture and the new urban sphere into Bulgarian history. In all his novels, which together form an epic narrative of contemporary Bulgarian history, Zarev relies on a contemporary realism as his mode of narration, which is why critics only half-ironically call him the Bulgarian Balzac. Here the ideas and methods of late 19th-century aesthetics meet the realities of the digital in the 21st century. The complete inadequacy of the narrative mode, coupled with the inner dynamics and perspectives of the protest, is aesthetically striking and politically significant because it allows a fluidly digital and networked culture to be inscribed more easily into the epic memory of Bulgarian history. What unites Zarev's writing over the decades is a social predeterminism, which he embeds into the genre model of the family saga mixed with elements of the romantic novel: All characters in their psychology, behaviour, thoughts and actions are products of their social past. As such, they are unable to escape their historical and sociological fate. Within the logic of the novel, the only, almost mythological force able to enable change is love, a private emotion, and not a political program. The bridge thus remains the symbolic place where individuals meet, and fall in love with protest and each other. But it cannot not metamorphose into a square, the utopian symbol for the agora, where conflicting positions are discussed and transformed into a political agenda.

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HENRIKE SCHMIDT is private lecturer at the Peter Szondi-Institute for Comparative Literature, Freie Universität Berlin. Her research interests include theoretical issues of digital and networked culture and their significance for the societies of East and Central Europe; Russian and Bulgarian literature (with a special focus on intermediality and genre theory). Among her recent publications is the book *Russian Literature on the Internet. Between Digital Folklore and Political Propaganda*, published in German in 2011 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld. She is currently working on a research project at Humboldt University Berlin, devoted to fake anthologies in Bulgarian literature of the 20th century. [schmidh@zedat.fu-berlin.de]