

BOGDAN BOGDANOV: ONE CANNOT LIVE ONLY WITH DIFFERENCES: SIMILARITIES ARE NEEDED TOO

In contemporary Europe the issue is to guarantee many concrete freedoms in many spheres

Professor Bogdanov, how did the idea about “Open Society” foundation come about in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 1990s, what support did it get?

“Open Society”, like many things that happen in Bulgaria, came into being by chance and was a consequence of accidental factors. People who knew George brought him to Bulgaria. At that time Soros was interested in an open society not only as a social practice but also as a platform to be defended. I think that was very useful.

The foundation did not have initial difficulties. Suitable organizers were found, among which the long standing executive director Georgi Prohaski – a highly organized individual with a vision. The governing body of “Open Society” was characterized by a working harmony among many people, whose vision and perseverance led to excellent results.

As far as the idea itself goes – ideas do not always match practice. Since I am intellectually inclined, I have always been interested in the concept of the open society, it became part of my way of thinking, it figured in my research. The idea itself as a platform did not become widespread. As it always happens with all ideas, they involve complex matter, which somehow remains undeveloped. Soros’ attitude is a case in point. He published a significant number of books on the open society. As a practically oriented person he gradually ceased to be involved with the idea. He left that to others.

With ideas, like with everything else, there is fashion. At some point, the idea for an open society was, so to say, in fashion. But as a platform for thought and behaviour it did not reap great success in Bulgaria. More felicitous was the form itself of the foundation and of other organizations which chose that path. Not-for-profit organizations, working under the model of the “Open Society”. As far as that is possible in the highly unorganized, chaotic social environment we live in. The “Open Society” Foundation contributed towards propagating this model of association around an objective and activities that attract funding. That is precisely the positive side.

Why were people initially belligerent to the Foundation – was it because of the personality of Soros or owing to other reasons?

It is understandable in the Bulgarian environment with its idea of a strong state, which has multiple roots. The idea has serious socialist support; it is supported by the habits of the Bulgarians who have lived for many years as subjects. But there is a paradox – on the one hand they are suspicious of the state, on the other – they look upon the state as

panacea. This is still continuing, it is becoming diluted, and it will become more diluted. To a certain extent the European Union sustains it. So we are talking about something that is not entirely negative.

And yet, negativity is present. One way or the other the state is pervasive. It happens right before our very eyes. Although at present we do not seem to have a very strong state – it is scattered, not well ordered. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness is clearly felt in keeping high taxes, collecting a lot of money, distributing the funds, which also happens with pre-election purposes in mind. That makes the state stronger, which cannot be assessed only in a positive way.

That was the deep down reason for the conflicts and attitudes against the “Open Society” Foundation as a carrier of negativity. By the way, they were formulated as betrayal. An environment was created of militant patriotism of nationalists, who made use of big slogans and were on the lookout for enemies. The “Open Society” Foundation turned into their natural enemy. I have been the butt of such assaults several times. When I had to respond I always said that I consider myself as a more effective patriot than those who are nationalistically patriotically inclined. Because a patriot is someone who tenaciously works towards achieving *за определени позитиви*, and does not just offer slogans or pats himself on the shoulder. Vera Mutafchieva was also called a betrayer. She is the last person you can say that about, because she maintained a full vision of the Bulgarian history, which the contemporary rational Bulgarian definitely needs.

I was also qualified as a betrayer. By Mr. Ivan Granitski, for instance. At some point we happened to be members of one and the same council – the National Book Council, where he refused to take part because I, as a prominent betrayer participated in it. I find his attitude quite natural. Some people replace the complex reality with broad classifications of good and evil. “Open Society” happened to fall into such a qualification.

On your website it says: “The world we live in, is it determined once and for all or do we create it? And how do we change it?” Do you define yourself with these two questions or are they provoking?

It’s more a self-definition. I definitely adhere to the view that the human world is complete and one has to get to know it and respect it, but it is also continuously created again. This new making is always before our eyes. The human world is constantly being changed, rearranged and modified. This idea I owe to a great extent to the ideology of the open society. This is one of its tenets, which needs to be emphasized. Every society is an open society. There is no absolutely closed society, although totalitarian societies strive to achieve that. Human society is always open, because it is always in a process of making. Which does not mean that it has no ready things which have to be known and respected. I follow this dialectics not only in my thinking but also in the way I act and react.

What did the Bulgarian do in these 15 years to change his world?

The Bulgarian with a capital “B” is an auxiliary category. There is no Bulgarian; there are Bulgarians, different Bulgarians, connected among each other in different ways. I am negatively inclined towards talking about the multitudes as actually existing in the singular. For instance the human being, the Bulgarian, the woman and the man. In some cases we have to represent the multitude with a word in the singular. Which does not mean that we believe they are the averaged representation in reality. There are different Bulgarians, rather than a Bulgarian. Bulgarians as individuals but also as part of many types of communities, which just like individual people are immensely different.

What I had in mind was in the 15 years of transition, what did we do to the world we found?

Yes, instead of the “Bulgarian” it’s better to say “we”, although it easily becomes misleading. But let me leave this complex topic. In these 15 years we could have achieved more. Therefore, we have to do more in the future.

You say that the freedom in Europe is the multitude of small freedoms.

That is right and freedom is better considered in the plural. Modern Europe guarantees a number of concrete freedoms. They are connected with certain rules, which are fixed and codified. The European freedom is a possibility granted for various specific desires. Unfortunately man wants to have freedom as a full guarantee for everything, so that he does not have to react differently and thus contribute towards enriching the present network of various freedoms. There are freedoms from outside. While Freedom with a capital letter is something on the inside, it refers to whether we consider ourselves as free in principle, I think that freedom is a way of formulating, of internal placing of yourself in relation to the others and the world. This is not easily achieved; it requires education, environment, which to teach you at an early stage how to administer your freedom, to know when and what to be free about and when and what to be dependent on. Therefore, however connected and expressed with one word, internal and external freedom are not the same things.

I have kept the following illustrative memory about non-freedom from socialist times. Sozopol. 1 – 2 places where you can eat. The casino at the harbour - full. The only thing there is meatballs. Everyone has to get hold of the waiter to order. The waiter is bringing out same size portions on a tray. A humble old man. The waiter dumps a portion with three meatballs on his table. The old man gently says: “But I ordered just two.”

The waiter looks with contempt, stretches his arm, grabs one meatball and devours it. Now this is a concrete non-freedom.

The old external non-freedom was made up of such concrete manifestations. The same holds true about the new external freedom. It is also made up of many forms of freedom.

That is why it is better to talk about external freedom in the plural. All the more, since these freedoms are connected with knowledge and skills, which have to be acquired. Separately it is easier than collectively.

In this respect it would be better if we talked in the plural about Bulgaria too. Bulgaria is made up of many different Bulgarias. Connecting then in one whole is not an easy task. It is better if we did it, rather than ignore this hard undertaking by pronouncing in exorcism the word in the singular.

You were born in Sofia after World War Two started. What are your childhood memories?

I have a vague recollection from the bombing of Sofia in January 1944. I was very little then. I just remember how my parents grabbed me and we went down into the basement. We were living in “Knyaz Boris the First” close to the former movie theatre “Solun”. I was studying in the nearby “Patriarch Evtimii” school. The neighborhood around the “Saint George” garden – this is the environment I grew up in.

What is your family background?

I was born into the family of intelligent people. My father Ivan Bogdanov and my mother Elena Bogdanova graduated law. My mother worked in different places as a clerk. My father began to support himself with intellectual work very early on. After 1960 he could once again publish, because after 1947 – 1948 his work as a writer was incriminated, and his book landed on the list of banned books – an early book he published in 1947. After 1960 he gradually managed to restore his life as an intellectual writer. I grew up surrounded by books and reading books, in an ambiance I have preserved until now, so I am deeply indebted to my parents, especially to my father, for the direction of my career. We certainly led a poor, grey and scanty existence; typical of life in the early socialist years. Our life was, however, strictly arranged and ordered and that cultivated in me certain virtues such as punctuality and practicality. My parents, God bless their souls, were practical people. I have learned from them that words have meaning and that a word spoken is past recalling. My mother and my father were punctual people. In my family I didn't know what I came across later – idleness, absent-mindedness, carelessness. In my parents' family I learned something else as well: things happen, but they also depend on the way they are organized and perceived.

I remember a remarkable phrase by my father. My mother, as a toil-worn woman, naturally made the correct observation that everything was expensive. It was certainly expensive for us in the socialist age. Once after such a comment of hers, my father said: “If it's expensive, we have to earn more.”

My parents were thrifty. The saved and piled up, accumulated superfluous things, this is what many Bulgarian families do. In some way I am the same even now. These are remnants from the socialist period, or perhaps from even earlier – you save in one way or

the other. It is not clear if this is a virtue today. And another thing from that time, which I consider a virtue – you are content with less; you are not attached to objects. I have had the option to have more and better, I could have taken the path of earning more money. Earning money is something useful for the development of society; that is how it becomes richer. If there are a lot of people like me, people who are content with less, this would do harm to contemporary society. But it is extremely beneficial for your internal peace.

You started going to school in an exceptionally tumultuous social period, or is it the case that you can't experience it fully if you are so young?

In 1947 I was in the first grade. I have kept nice, dear memories. Childhood is childhood. A child cannot encompass the large scale of things. I remember well the coarse clothes I had to wear, the homespun trousers that rubbed against my thighs, the boots, the illnesses, the inflamed ears...cold, bitter cold, fog, difficulties in keeping the heating working, the bad quality coal, the blackouts, staying at home all huddled around the stove, everyone covered with blankets, my father, doing his writing, I studying my lessons...It was great poverty but not unhappiness.

How did your father accept the fact that his book was banned?

Its title is "Between armistice and peace". I published it again 2-3 years ago – a very gentle book, in which a communist and a social democrat – as my father imagines them – discuss the future of Bulgaria. This incriminated then book has an absolute mild sounding today. How did he accept it? He had to work as legal counsel. But even then things were not smooth. He had a wild and conflicting personality. His life as a spurned, qualified as a fascist, intellectual turned him into a naturally militant individual. But gradually he managed to find his way, without making extreme compromises. Circumstances made him a man who understood reality and could be friends with certain people, in order to survive. He won his well earned wide respect. For a certain circle he was something like a guru. And well deserved on account of his self-confidence, his intellect, his memory and determination. Without making extreme compromises. But in any case, his way of thinking did not change.

Do you owe your interest to classical philology to your father?

This happened more by accident. When I applied to the university after finishing my secondary education in 1958, quite by chance I put down classical philology – and was admitted. There were no entrance exams then, it was based on your diploma and I had straight A's. Afterwards I was also admitted to philosophy and history. But I stayed with classical philology. Years later it turned out that I had made the right choice. What I studied and what I was involved in later gave me something very important, something I call 'step aside'. I acquired this distance from the here and now, which allows me to think

about it in more objective terms. There is this quotidian idea that we live somewhere. It is false. No-one lives in a definite, specific place, in Bulgaria, in Sofia, or in their home. Everyone lives in a small ideal space, built over the concrete. Everyone has their own 'step aside' retreat.

But you found it very early?

Thanks to classical philology. In this sense the philology and the so-called 'step aside' are among the causes for my optimism. Thanks to this world I studied I understood early on that there is no significant difference between antiquity and modern times, because it is all a matter of people's fate. Whatever he does, however he develops, the human being is dependent on solid, durable things. This is what I constantly repeat. That is why I find many things quite natural. Thanks to classical philology I got acquainted with phenomenal texts such as Plato's dialogues or Marcus Aurelius' small book. I spent a long time over these texts; I struggled with the language and in the course of this struggle I acquired positive ideas. As with all ideas, they are someone else's, but somehow also mine. Among them is the highly conservative idea that the human is human, no matter if it is in a totally savage and wild place, socialist Bulgaria or contemporary Europe, the difference cannot be total.

What troubles the modern Bulgarian, and many other contemporaries as well, are the differences, the constant acknowledgement of the differences. It is the main cause for pessimism and bad feelings.

But in reality there are similarities as well as differences. My vision is differently tuned – the first thing I do is look for similarities, and only then do I consider the differences. That is why I do not resort to the contemptuous point of view towards the uneducated man, the rude and the vulgar. First I look for similarities between the stupid person, the rude person and myself. And I say to myself: now this is a stupid thing I'm doing, I, who am an intellectual and do not do or say stupid things. This is not a matter of modesty, but of perception. Do you see, can you discriminate between the smart and the stupid in you? It is not easy. A big obstacle in this respect is the fact that the contemporary world points our attention towards differences.

I feel the same when I run into sexists – for instance a female party talking about the total difference between men and women. There is no total difference; it is a matter of two variants of a human being. The serious question here is whether the man and the woman are always man and woman. The answer is clear: there are many instances when there is no difference between them. The same holds true for a number of other seemingly definite categories, the Bulgarian for example. Is the Bulgarian always a Bulgarian and in all respects? Reality never coincides with the categories. Hence the game engendered by reality, about similarities and differences which we have to handle somehow.

Let us go back to your words that we have to learn to look not only for differences but also for similarities, because the topic about Europe is close to your heart. Did we approach Europe in the wrong way, trying to work out how different we are, rather than try and look for similarities?

There is a difference between what we think and what we do- nothing stops us from thinking wrongly about Europe. Thinking about Europe can be wrong in two ways – first when it is perceived as something purely positive and is embraced with both arms, and second, when it is looked upon as something totally negative and is completely negated. Few people can think as wisely as they can usually act. In actions you have a signal that you're doing something wrong, the signal makes you correct your ways even without taking notice.

That is why I feel distrust towards sociological surveys. On the one hand it is important to investigate what people think. Behaviour, however, is not determined only by what someone thinks. Often the good does not correspond to thought, it often even blocks it. Thinking is something conservative, it can hamper actions, but in some cases it keeps silent and this is the big paradox. You meet people who are sad, dull, depressed. When you ask them how they live they say they have a poor and dull life. Ten minutes later you see them sitting in a bar, drinking happily enjoying themselves. This is the (at least) dual character of the human being, who thinks on the one hand, and on the other - acts – and, thank God, not in agreement with what he thinks.

The truth is that sad, especially abstract thoughts are easier. A sad abstract truth, for example is: socialism ruined our lives. But it ruined some people's lives. It is not only socialism to blame. It is the person's fault as well; in as far as he realized that he is not inside socialism, that socialism is an environment that has crept into his own world. Some people let it in totally. In this sense, when you ask if we have wrong ideas about Europe, I say: "Yes, we have wrong ideas about Europe".

Many people would be dumbfounded if someone said that Europe wants to organize things in a state centralized manner, which reminds of socialism. It reminds of socialism and is startling. The question is if that is so and whether the resemblance does or does not mislead us since we cannot see and formulate the difference.

And yet we all count on Europe – to make us put our country in order, i.e. we are going back to statism again.

We have to have a state. The issue is one of proportions, and this cannot be determined by a simple formula. That is why we have to have a state but it should be possible to fight it.

But we don't like our country; it's not enough, so we look for another – more as an umbrella over our country to bring it to order.

There's no other way, the human being exists as part of a community. The state is an institutional form of community existence. In order to do some things we need the big energy of the big community, the state either gives it to me or it does not. It gives to some; that is why there are people who want to be in power – because power will give it to them.

The so-called political elite look at Europe as the hen that lays golden eggs.

That is right, but they won't be only golden eggs. There will be a number of unpleasant things. For instance – facing heavy bureaucracy, meeting certain standards. Because expected funding will not go where the required standards are not met. The good from Europe will manifest itself mainly in the transposition of these standards. It is good, it is a guarantee for openness – when you have standards things are easy.

Are you an optimist?

Yes, more often than not I'm an optimist. In the evening, when I'm tired I hear pessimism's words and conclusions, but I say to myself: this is not because I'm a pessimist and because life is terrible, but because I'm tired. And I try to wake up an optimist. But sometimes I wake up with a headache. The texts I have worked with, the big personalities I have communicated with have taught me to say: the world in my head is black; I have to find a way for the headache to go away. I can take an aspirin, I don't have to stay at the computer, I can go out for a walk. It's only a headache, nothing more, the world is not to blame, even not because I was born a man and have a head, which hurts from time to time. This is a thought by Epictetus, which I have internalized and made my own. In general, it can be reduced to the following – what happens does not come only from outside, but it also depends on the way we perceive it. One way or the other, we should not transfer our own states and conditions to the world.

What kind of professors did you have at university?

Serious professors who gave me a lot and through whom I acquired important knowledge. For instance, Prof. Georgi Mihailov, who was teaching Ancient Greek historical grammar and epigraphics, a refined, well educated man, who had a great influence on me. Or Ruska Gandeveva, who later became professor, and taught Latin. Or Alexander Milev – Ancient Greek language. These people formed my outlook as a lecturer and as a person. I am extremely grateful to them. Of course, times were hard. The university itself was something like a higher school. But one way or the other, at least in the Department of Classical Philology you could feel the spirit of a better time. Hence the

strong influence of my teachers, formed by great professors of the previous generation, such as Alexander Balabanov and Dimitar Dechev, and also in universities abroad.

I remember some illustrative events. Professor Georgi Mihailov was giving me course work and pointed to a book in French. I allowed myself to say that I didn't know French. He looked at me surprised with his big eyes and simply said: "You'll learn it." And that was that. Or another story with Alexander Milev. In 1963 I became a lecturer in Latin and Ancient Greek at the Higher Pedagogical Institute in Veliko Turnovo. Alexander Milev came from time to time to see how I was doing and how I was teaching. He was connected with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and strongly resembled a priest. He attended a class I was teaching. At the end, just like a priest he said: "Listen, Bogdanov, you shouldn't teach them that much, whoever is capable will learn." I did not follow that advice, although it made a great impression on me. It is in the orthodox spirit – whoever is capable will achieve, there is nothing else to be done. I am not inclined that way, on the contrary – all my life I have been looking for a more effective way of studying Ancient Greek, so that more people learn it and I can say that thanks to this effort a lot has been achieved. That is what I think people should do. Now, at this age, I understand the meaning of such sentences that have stayed at the back of one's mind. They turn into role models. As you can see from both examples, they can be positive and negative. You can follow or avoid what someone has told you. You can combine it and connect it to the other ingredients in your inner world.

How did your life go on from there?

I was a full time lecturer in Veliko Turnovo from 1963 until 1969, when I was 23 to 29-year-old. In the beginning I only taught Ancient Greek and Latin, then I also started teaching history of ancient and West European literature. After 1969 I continued teaching in Turnovo part time. At some point I was Chair of the Foreign Languages Department there. In 1969 I won a competition for assistant professor at the Department for Classical Philology at Sofia University. I started teaching there and this has continued until the present day, 36 years now.

Did you have any problems with your academic career?

I had problems right from the start, when I wanted to apply for the assistant professor position. The Personnel Department tried to stop me, since I was the son of a writer whose work was incriminated. Some "well-wishers" appeared who sent copies of my father's articles, among which an article about the death of Tsar Boris the Third to the Personnel Department. Then Ivan Bogdanov put books and other materials in his bag and went to the Personnel Department. Popchev was the name of the man there. My father banged down on his desk materials with which he proved that Georgi Tzanev – the father of Milena Tzaneva, who was a lecturer at the University, had spoken much more emotionally about the death of Tsar Boris the Third. And then they let me sit for the exam. In my academic path there were other moments of ill-wishing. Especially vile was

the ambition of Alexander Nichev, professor, who I later became assistant professor to. He was unhappy that I did not accept the topic for a PhD thesis that he proposed and that I chose another one. At the viva, Nichev did his best to turn it into a failure. But as it sometimes happens, this led to a triumph on my part and engendered an even sharper conflict with him, which also acquired a political flavour. The two party members in our department – Kiril Vlahov and Alexander Nichev, tried to prove that I had fled to Germany when I had gone there to have a heart operation and had duly informed the university. It was a serious operation, but successful, I came back, and the attempt to fire me bore no fruit.

Was it also a professional conflict?

Yes. Professor Nichev claimed that I was not an academic, that my endeavors had a 'popular' character. After his death I met his daughter. She told me that the Nichevs talked often at home about my activities and that I had turned into something like a hero for her. But these things do not matter to me. I sat in Professor Nichev's chair, I teach his subject and have kept the good feeling towards him as an academic and a lecturer. I respect what he has done, especially the full translations in verse of Aeschylus and Sophocles in Bulgarian, a significant accomplishment indeed. I could not, however, accept this militant communist style attitude, the division of people into our good people and other bad people. By the way, this is how he got into the Classical Philology Department in the 1950s – with an article against Alexander Balabanov and a banishment of some sort. The fact that I succeeded him as a lecturer in the history of Ancient Greek literature was a kind of compensation for his ousting of Alexander Balabanov. I am recounting all this, because I think it is something typical for the time.

Did you feel the ideological framework in the university?

I wouldn't say. I was more like observing certain rules. The ideology was in my education. I was a good student, I resorted to Marxist ideology, and you can feel it in certain places in my books. I am not ashamed of that, it is natural. Everyone needs a general paradigm on which to lean. Gradually I found the weak spots of the Marxist paradigm and think that I have overcome them. Otherwise my stand on ideologies is the same as with everything else – they are never good or bad in themselves. Their use and application make them good or bad.

Looking from a distance it seems strange, that in June 1990 you are already writing about New Bulgarian University – as an idea, as a concept.

Yes, because the society for New Bulgarian University was established in the 1990s, and it gradually grew into the university itself.

What made you do it and made you leave Alma Mater?

What made me do it was the dullness, the grayness. Otherwise I would hardly have done it. In those years I tried to be engaged administratively – for two years I was the Vice Dean of the faculty of Classical and Modern Philology. Precisely on November 10, 1989 there were elections for Dean, I ran and was not elected. The position was taken by a nice female from the party midst. I realized then that Sofia University was not the place for me to show my administrative capabilities, so I started with New Bulgarian University. It was a totally new path that I took.

Is that how you imagined NBU – the way it is now, did you have such bold hopes?

I can't say that I had a clear vision about what we were doing. There was a programme, a platform to follow – the originators were other people, they gradually scattered, and from the initial people there was no-one left. It is a matter of perseverance.

Do you like what NBU is today?

I obviously like it since I'm constantly engaged in it. I think it is something undoubtedly very positive. At NBU the possibilities to choose to combine, to stop, to start, to move to another university are endless. The credit system we have been using for over 10 years now and have extensive experience in allows for different options and combinations and is widely admired. I think that NBU is a serious achievement for the Bulgarian society. There are other such achievements although I cannot enumerate them correctly right now. We must be acquainted with these positive developments in the Bulgarian society. NBU is such an example. It combines a number of contemporary standards with the good sides of the old educational system. I am convinced that the reform is always a kind of a compromise; NBU is such a successful compromise.

You were Ambassador of Bulgaria to Greece. How did you “hop across” from academe to diplomacy?

This happened in the full swing of events in those years. They offered it to me, I was happy and ambitiously accepted. I was Ambassador from April 1991 until July 1993. My stay in Greece was extremely beneficial; it allowed me to see the world from a different point of view. In those two years and a half I tried in my own consistent, persevering manner to achieve something. I achieved very little. The good thing was that I understood how the state itself is structured. I got to know the standards of behaviour of politicians. For instance, according to these standards the Ambassador is good when he doesn't do anything. The less he does and the more he says and repeats the same things, the better he is, but that was in conflict with my character.

Did it take you long to arrive at this conclusion?

Not at all. I wanted to act in person. You couldn't. It was all secretly done. Then I understood the system of the two services – the military and the other intelligence. I understood that they were doing something for the state, but were also doing other things for parts of the state, and even for themselves. I had before my very eyes the special dialectics of the great togetherness and separateness, in which I am deeply interested to this day. One thing was certain, though, – this wasn't my place. My place is something like New Bulgarian University – not too small, but big enough, where what you do is visible.

My character was not fit for an ambassador – however polite, calm and well behaved I am. This is for other people, extroverts, who live for the thrill of high challenge and formality.

What did you have to do as Ambassador?

To meet people, to see them off, to have official talks, to present a certain kind of appearance.

This is not a very positive attitude to diplomacy?

Diplomacy is needed and can be very useful. When there is a big system, which a modern state is, there is a need for good representation. It is important, it has to be done. In this sense, it is important for the person who represents the country how he is dressed, how he talks and what he chooses to say and what not to say. Therefore, the job of the diplomat is useful and difficult. But it wasn't for me. One way or the other, there is a best place for every person. I hope I have found it. If I can say how I imagine it, then it is a place where things happen.

Genka Markova - Excerpt from the book "History – populated by people", April 2005