

STUDENTS' SOCIAL CAPITAL, SOCIAL SPACE, AND CIVIC LIFE IN SOFIA

Lucien Peters¹

e-mail: lucien_peters@hotmail.com

“I have no kindness for you, and I know you have as little for me”

(David Hume, 1740)

Abstract

After the 1989 change of economic and political regimes in Bulgaria, sustained citizen involvement in civic life has declined over the past decades, save for occasional street protests. This is especially noticeable for students of the Millennial and subsequent generation. While Sofia university students participate in street protests, overall youth apathy is reflected in un-sustained involvement in civic life. Sofia students and recent university graduates appear to live in largely unconnected social ‘silos’, composed of close friends and family on the one hand, and other friends, students or work colleagues, on the other hand. These silos are anchored in specific urban neighbourhoods and in students’ hometowns. In terms of social capital, students’ social circles comprise stable bonding capital with a high degree of trust, and less stable bridging capital with limited trust, including temporary alliances with other social groups. Social interaction among students has been observed for periods between two and seven years. Informants maintain stable bonding capital beyond their university years, while their bridging capital is occasionally re-composed for specific purposes. This points towards the existence of a flexible, adaptable social capital category, which I call “Flex Capital”. Sustained student involvement in civic life appears to be hindered by their unstable bridging capital; a lack of leadership within social groups, and by the narrowly-scoped spatial setting of social interaction.

Key words: students, Bulgaria, social capital, civic engagement, urban space

JEL: Y40, Z13

Introduction

This research project is located at the nexus of youth sociology and social anthropology research on Bulgarian university students and recent graduates. By using an idiographic approach with ethnographic observation, it attempted to elucidate patterns of social interaction among young, tertiary-educated Sofia residents, and its potential impact on their participation in civic and political life.

¹ PhD student, Department of Economic Sociology, Faculty of General Economics, University of National and World Economy

The potential role of the well documented mistrust Bulgarians exhibit towards politicians, or for that matter to anyone outside their circle of family and close friends was examined. It is believed to play a role in the formation of social interactions among Bulgarian young adults, and therefore in the formation of their social capital (Kovacheva & Kabaivanov, 2016; Roth, 2007).

Apart from the nature of their social circles, the spatial and visual setting of a small group of students' socializing in Sofia was analysed, with regard to a possible geographic proximity influence on students' social capital formation, and on their involvement in civic life. Whenever available, the life histories of the young persons' families were taken into account, to look for a possible impact of family education, occupation, economic wellbeing, and family cohesion on these young adults, and to find out how and where they maintain various forms of social capital with family members, friends, fellow students, and work colleagues.

In addition, changes of the social contacts of these students with persons inside and outside of their circle of family and friends was analysed longitudinally, during a period of between two and seven years of observation. These social contacts were both physical and virtual in nature, including social media interaction. The analysis of socializing patterns was done to determine the nature, strength, and duration of social capital among these young adults, including two sub-groups of social capital, namely "bonding capital" and "bridging capital" (Woolcock, 1998). A third sub-group, "linking capital", was not examined, as it refers to hierarchical settings, for instance in the workplace.

With regard to translating the nature of social capital into potential civic involvement, the convening power of both real-life persons and social media (Loader et al, 2014) among young persons was examined, to establish whether group leadership and social media have a significant impact on the creation of social capital in specific environments, especially outside of what is referred to in this paper as discrete social silos of friends and family (i.e. social bonding capital circles).

Research Objectives

The objectives the research project comprised an examination whether the reasons identified in the academic literature of the 1990s for low rates of participation of the post-1980 generation of young university-educated adults in civic life in Bulgaria are valid today.

This analysis was done within the context of students' social capital structure, namely their bonding capital (family and closest friends) and their bridging capital (other friends, neighbours, and colleagues), as public civic action was found to occur mostly within social group settings (e.g. election rallies, public protests, strikes).

An additional objective was to see whether the geographic space within which students and graduates socialize might have an influence on the composition and maintenance of their social capital, and whether this spatial setting might in turn be influential in triggering students' interest in the civic life in Sofia.

Significance of the Research

Since Bulgaria's accession to the European Union (EU) now goes back well over 10 years, and since 2018 marked Bulgaria's first ever rotational Presidency of the EU, this was an opportune time to look back on nearly three decades of a progressive opening of Bulgaria towards Western European concepts of public institution building; civil society formation; citizen engagement; civic education, and social adaptation to the post-Communist world, by the Millennial and subsequent generation of young Bulgarians.

In light of the changes in Bulgarian governance and society since 1990, it was also a good time to examine how young Bulgarians socialize in groups and whether, and how, these groups of young adults engage with politics and civic life. This was done *inter alia* with regard to the possible influence of social media and family discourse about post-1990 politics, as well as the evolution of trust towards others, on young persons' lives.

As Ichilov (1991), among others, has said, active involvement in civic life depends on the existence of strong social bonds, in addition to a sense of identity and awareness of civic rights and obligations among the citizenry as a whole. Hence, strong social capital forms the base of civic engagement. Likewise, active citizenship both depends on, and contributes to, a strong sense of national and personal identity of citizens.

Therefore it is worthwhile investigating the interplay between the formation and maintenance of social capital, on the one hand, and civic engagement in Bulgaria, on the other hand, especially among tertiary educated persons, as their educational background is said to facilitate civic engagement (Hoskins et al., 2008).

As students and graduates indicated early on in this project that it was important for them to actually see civic and political actors at work, the spatial settings within which the respondents socialized, and possibly gathered for civic events, were identified and observed.

Indeed, other than a couple of brief spatial research endeavours into young persons' socializing in Sofia (Höpfner, 2012), little was known about the link between young Sofia residents' socializing space and the possible awakening of their interest in urban civic life.

As regards past research into the interaction between social capital and civic engagement in Bulgaria, comparatively little has been said in the academic literature about the socializing of Bulgarian students within their social capital groups,

and the potential impact of socializing patterns on these students' engagement with civic and political entities. It is only during the past 10 years that Mitev and Kovacheva (2014), for instance, have started to conduct wide-ranging surveys of young Bulgarians and their levels of trust, their social circles, as well as their civic and political engagement. These authors did, however, not examine the causality and evolution of these factors over a long period of time, and did not analyse the nature, purpose, and temporal stability of social circles in greater detail.

Ample research is available on civic engagement of Eastern Europeans since 1990, but a link with social capital has only obliquely been made, such as through observations of the decline of organized groups in society, including labour unions and youth movements, after the fall of communism (Giatzidis, 2002; Morjé-Howard, 2003). Therefore, this was an area to be explored in some detail, in the present case through long-term ethnographic observation of students and graduates over a period of up to 7 years.

Research Hypotheses

Even though most ethnographers tend to start with comparatively few assumptions in their research projects, they rarely start without any hypotheses, in spite of Van Maanen's somewhat extreme suggestion that we should approach ethnography with "a clean slate" i.e. without any reference to existing academic research (Van Maanen, 1988). This project therefore was based on just a few hypotheses.

A first research hypothesis in the project was the assumption that the strength of social capital has an influence on the informants' engagement with civic and political life, be it sporadic or sustained.

Indeed, Ganev (2017), among others, has identified causality links between social capital, education levels, and engagement with civic life, with special reference to the Balkans. On a wider geographical level, Van Oorschot et al. (2006) found similar links. On the other hand, Berman (1997), for instance, warned about the possible misuse of strong social capital by fascist governments, who mobilized people in tightly connected social groups for their ideological purposes.

A second research hypothesis was that trust and the socializing preferences of students are still influenced today by family discourse about Communism and the change of regime, and by discussions with friends, in the real or the virtual world. Indeed, young adults nowadays have been found to regularly consult social and mass media, as well as their friends, about political and civic topics (see for example, Ellison et al., 2007).

A third hypothesis was that social capital among young urban adults has not evolved on a durable basis beyond a set of largely disconnected social groups,

or “silos” of trust and interaction, such as those which are kinship-based, school-related, or work-related.

In other words, within the definition of social capital, the cohesion within the most exclusive group, i.e. bonding capital, may well be strong, but the more loosely constructed, extended groups of friends, neighbours, and work colleagues, referred to as “bridging capital”, is expected to be weaker, as trust within those groups is expected to be less strong.

The nature of these socializing silos was not only examined with regard to their human composition, but also with regard to their geographic or spatial anchoring in Sofia and elsewhere in Bulgaria.

Expected Outcomes

One expected research outcome of the project was to gain a deep insight into how, where, and when respondents have formed their social circles; how these circles are composed, and how stable they are over time, both in their composition and in their spatial anchoring. It is expected that social circles can be identified as showing either the characteristics of closely-knit bonding capital, or more loosely-knit bridging capital. The third class of social capital, namely the largely workplace-based ‘linking capital’ was not expected to have much of an impact the expected outcomes, hence linking capital was not examined.

To work towards obtaining this deep insight into students' social life, first-hand and long-term accounts of Sofia-based university students and graduates' social interactions with friends, family, other students, and work colleagues, have been obtained, and their daily life was observed, in or near their educational setting, for up to 7 years. For recent university graduates living in Sofia, the location of their place of work and daily life was identified and their socializing was observed, also by email enquiries and social media means, when I was not physically present in Sofia.

From current students, first-hand accounts were obtained both in university settings and in socializing spaces outside educational institutions. From graduates, testimony was obtained, and observation conducted, in informal social settings, such as cafés, restaurants, or in private residences.

These types of interactions between myself and the students were expected to reveal in sufficient detail what their social capital looked like and what impact it might have on civic engagement.

Most informants did not object to me disclosing personal details about them, but a handful were concerned about their privacy to such an extent that only highly anonymized observations about them are disclosed (e.g “a recent graduate of UNSS said”).

Detailed information was expected to be obtained about the cohesion of social capital among students and graduates, as well as its physical setting, stability over time and across activities, and its scope.

The discovery of the current parental discourse about Bulgarian society and politics, students' work experiences, as well as students' use of social media also form part of the longitudinal student observation.

Another expected research outcome is the discovery of certain psycho-social factors, such as the transmission to the students of family or friends' feelings of optimism, pessimism, hope or hopelessness, and resignation. It was expected that such feelings might be a potential influence on the nature of social capital among Sofia's students, and their involvement in civil society.

Methodology of Enquiry

Longitudinal ethnographic participant observation was selected as the principal methodology for elucidating answers to my research objectives. This was supplemented by semi-structured or freestyle (e.g. "Tell me about your life") interviews with Sofia students and tertiary-educated, young Sofia graduates.

The students and graduates are referred to as 'informants' in this ethnographic context, in spite of a negative connotation of this expression in post-Communist societies (e.g. "informants of State Security"). In the Western world, the expression "informant" is used primarily for persons who were observed and interacted with, whereas "respondent" appears to be used more when talking about persons who answered questionnaires or interview questions. Informants were aged 19-36, of both genders, and all were known socially to the enquirer for between two and seven years. Some research subjects were university students during some or all of the period of observation, and some had graduated from university at some point after the year 2000, i.e. they all had their socialization and education largely in post-Communist times.

Some informants at the upper end of the age range (i.e. university graduates in their early to mid-30s) were among the last generation to have spent 1-3 years in the Chavdarche and Pionerche Communist youth movements, i.e. during the dying days of Communist rule in the late 1980s, while others had only heard from family and older friends about Communist times, as well as about the period of the "changes" (of regime) in the early 1990s. While some semi-structured, exploratory classroom discussions between current university students took place, ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews of students and graduates in an informal and unconstrained café, restaurant, or home environment were the mainstay of the research.

Ethnography Focus

In this paper, I based myself on a complementarity of ethnography as a component of social anthropology on the one hand, and sociology on the other hand, rather than a contrast between the two disciplines. In other words, while I largely chose an idiographic research approach, I did not exclude nomothetic research by others about the same topic. In this context, one can mention that Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) were among the first to try and reconcile the two disciplines into a kind of academic symbiosis.

Part of the discussion about the validity of ethnography has centred around the perceived bias of ethnographers, who – at least in the eyes of some empirically-minded researchers – supposedly cannot detach themselves enough from their research subjects, to make an unbiased assessment of those persons' lives. In fact, ethnographers do not want to be detached from their research subjects' lives, as this could limit their in-depth understanding of what went on in these lives, as well as why and how events and social behaviours came about.

This debate has already several decades ago pitted authors like Max Weber with his concept of *Verstehen*, i.e. 'to comprehend' people and their actions (Weber, 1964) against Durkheim and his concept of Social facts, which – he argued – could only be identified through maintaining some degree of remoteness from one's research subjects (Durkheim, 1967).

The problem with social facts is, according to Schwartz and Jacobs, that these alleged social facts are both the problems to be explained, and comprise the elements of the explanations themselves, thus creating a kind of circular reasoning, which ontologists have long tried to debunk (e.g. "I feel that I am here, and I can say that am here because I feel").

In light of the above discussion, any tentative presentation of new theories in this paper comes with the caveat that other researchers will want to engage in large-scale quantitative verification and validation of my findings. In the present paper, a tentative, new theoretical pathway is presented, with regard to the nature of social capital.

Site Selection

In this paper a core population of young urban, tertiary-educated residents in the Bulgarian capital Sofia was followed over a period of up to 7 years, between 2012 and 2019. The target persons were attending, or had over the past 3-10 years attended, one of two of the major universities in Sofia, namely the Economics University "UNSS" (Universitet za Nacionalno I Svetovno Stopanstvo, or University of National and World Economy, "UNWE"), or the older Sofia University (SU). Some of the students were followed over the entire period,

while others dropped out of the observation, and conversely, others joined later. This deep sample comprised 15 students and graduates in Sofia, supplemented by four expatriates who had graduated from one of these universities in recent years.

Some of the students and recent graduates had spent a semester abroad, mostly in Germany and in the Netherlands, in the context of the EU Erasmus program, while a few had transferred to Sofia from a tertiary institution elsewhere in Bulgaria.

Sofia as an observation site was chosen because it offered the greatest number of universities in a single place and hence a large population of university students and graduates for me to choose from. In terms of access for ethnographic observation, I had ready access to Sofia students and recent university graduates, who often were also graduates of highly competitive secondary schools, such as public foreign language schools.

My access was facilitated through my occasional lecturing at UNSS; through my previous professional interaction with Bulgarians in Sofia and abroad, and through social media, such as the professional network LinkedIn and the Facebook platform. Indeed, for my project it was of crucial importance to have convenient and frequent access to informants, since they were to be observed very closely over a long period of time. As Kaneff (2004) noted, good access to, and absorption into, a community is a *sine qua non* condition for the success of ethnographic observations.

In terms of geographical setting within the Sofia urban area, the Economics University UNWE is located about 6 kilometres south-east of the city centre, in a student-focussed neighbourhood, aptly called “Student City” or “Studentski grad”. This neighbourhood started a rapid expansion since the 1970s, with several accommodation complexes being built for the housing of students and for related small retail businesses and cafés. This area is also home to four other major universities, located only a short walking distance away from UNWE, namely the Technology University, the Forestry University, the Chemistry University, and the Telecommunications College. The compact layout of the UNSS campus within Student City is well suited to ethnographic observation of, and interaction with, university students, especially since many socializing places outside the campus are located within about 800 meters, including several fast food vendors, cafés, and bars. While student city is linked to the Sofia University (SU) neighbourhood by bus, or by a combination of a bus and a metro ride, there is no geographical proximity. This has led to limited student interaction between the two universities. In fact there is a very large public park separating Studentski Grad from the city center location of Sofia University.

Selection of the Population

For reasons of convenient access detailed above, the group of young adults to be observed comprised university students and recent graduates, aged 19-36 at the beginning of the respective observation periods. This range comprises members of the so-called Millennial generation, born between 1980 and the mid-1990s.

A handful of informants were born on the cusp between the end of the Millennial generation and the beginning of the so-called Z-Generation (post-1995), while some of the university graduates were born during the late Communist period and they witnessed as children the old regime, as well as the subsequent change of regime. The observations focussed on students and graduates who lived in the Sofia urban area, including those living in some of its outer suburbs, reaching as far as Knyazhevo in the far south-west of the city.

In theory at least, living in the capital city allows the target population good access to, and observation of, national political and civic events. Indeed, all universities in Sofia are located within seven kilometres of the national parliament, most government ministries, and the head offices of large NGOs. One of the assumptions underlying my choice of the capital city was that geographic distance as a possible excuse for non-participation of students in civic life was excluded from the start.

Some Sofia University students were easily accessible to me, in part due to my previous lectures at the US Fulbright summer school in Pravets, and in part through referrals by my contacts in Sofia, whereas UNWE students were accessible through my previous lecturing at that university. Another factor driving the choice of Sofia was that I saw that major civic activities, such as the street protests of 2013 and 2020, were being carried out to some extent by students in Sofia, but much less so in other urban centres in Bulgaria.

Analytical Tools

As regards the analytical tools used for evaluating the research findings, several analytical tools from various disciplines have been used, all set within the ethnographic observation and unstructured or semi-structured interviewing of participants. These tools include, for instance, the interpretation of the language used by informants; informant behaviour and attitudes, either alone, or in group settings; informant statements about their family and background; the scope, nature, and timing of informant socializing; visual attention and absorption by informants of public events, buildings and spaces, and finally geographic analysis of informant movements and socializing – including civic action in public space. Summarized hereafter are some of the analytical tools used:

Language Analysis

As regards the analysis and evaluation of the ethnographic findings, Lecompte's (1999) systematic approach to analysing and classifying informant statements, including observation through social media and interviews, is one of the analytical methods used in this paper.

This analysis is used to make sense of respondent statements and to identify recurring expressions of beliefs, values, hopes, fears, and prejudices, as well as emotional expressions among the respondent population towards others and towards public institutions.

Spatial Analysis

Spatial analysis of social capital allows us to examine where and how informants socialize, either within their primary place of residence or studies, and also outside that space. Spatial analysis gives us an insight into which persons, venues, or institutions they frequent, where, when, and with whom. This analysis could have some explanatory power regarding statements made by informants about their feelings towards persons or institutions they visit, and which social circles these persons may be part of. While Putnam had hinted at the importance of the spatial setting of social capital in *The American Prospect* (1993), social anthropologists left this topic largely dormant, until a few social and urban geographers picked it up several years later. The revival of spatial analysis of social capital creation grew out of network analysis in a territorial context, including work done by Westlund and Boekema (1999). This work was supplemented by research focussed specifically on the spatial dimensions of social capital, such as the work of Rutten et al. (2012).

The results of the spatial observation – either on-site, or based on informant narratives – helped me to understand how informants' social capital is actuated, i.e. 'lived' in day-to-day life. For instance, I found out how far and how often informants are willing to travel to meet family members, friends, or acquaintances.

Visual Awareness, Attention, and Absorption

Another analytical method used is visual attention and absorption, specifically how aware informants are of major public buildings and spaces, and how much a respondent's awareness and interest in civic and political life in Sofia is influenced by how much of it s/he sees first hand, and internalises over time.

Space and time observations also helped to draw some tentative conclusions about the stability of social bridging capital over time. This raised questions about

the continued validity of Roth's (2007) and Fukuyama's (1995) theories about the static and binomial nature of social capital (private versus public circles) and trust. These points will be raised later in this paper.

Social Media Analysis

The analysis of informant statements includes statements made in real life, as well as those made through social media, be they of a textual or visual nature (e.g. photos, videos, graphs, drawings). The scope of social media platforms monitored in this context was limited to Facebook and Instagram, as these have been found to be the most commonly used by UNSS and Sofia University students.

Social Capital Theory

This research project was set in the context of social capital analysis, as detailed by Bourdieu (1986), Putnam (1993), and later also, inter alia, by Torsello and Pappova (2003) in an Eastern Europe-specific context. In other words, observations of students' socializing and the composition of their social circles was informed by the nomenclature and classification of such social circles in a social capital context. Even though social capital has not been mentioned much in the academic literature before the 1970s, the subject of attributing a value, economic or otherwise, to social networks and their members was a topic already comprised in the wider concept of human capital, used mostly by economists and labour historians for many decades (Hicks, 1932).

The authors who popularized social capital in the 1980s did not invent the concept of social capital, but instead were inspired by earlier literature on voluntary association of people, including Bentley's work (1908) on government and the citizenry. To this we must add Max Weber's vast body of work on government, bureaucracy and citizen action – both collectively and individually (for the latter aspect, see *Economy and Society*, 1922). One should also mention Durkheim's work on the value of life in groups, as an antidote to anomie (1897). Anomie here is understood to refer to the breakdown of norms and collective values, caused inter alia by ongoing individualization.

The concept of individualization has been presented by social psychologists as early as the 1920s (for example Allport, 1924) and picked up by sociologists later, such as Ulrich Beck (1994) who examined the risks accruing to society of increasing individuation, as he and others called it. The concept of anomie was picked up later by Adnanes (2007) with specific reference to Bulgarian youth and their limited civic engagement.

The concept of ‘social capital’, as a more systematically used concept, emerged with the literature of Bourdieu on the classification of capital, including social, economic, political, and cultural capital (1984). Bourdieu paved the way for a better distinction between social capital as an asset of value to an individual, and the economists’ view of ‘human capital’ as one of the factors of production, just like raw materials and machinery. One could therefore argue that Bourdieu has humanized human capital by going beyond its value as an input in economic terms. Indeed, he has figuratively speaking, peeled social capital out of human capital; highlighted the importance of social networks beyond the economist’s view of groups of people as merely a collective labour force, and allocated a personal value to networks of people, in whatever setting. Bourdieu’s limitation is, however, his strong focus of the value to an individual of certain social networks, including most notably social action networks like labour unions. He does not give much focus to the collective value social capital may have, either to members of a social group, or to society as a whole.

Bourdieu is quite sceptical with regard to altruistic action where an individual is not immediately and personally rewarded by being member of a social network. Apart from individuals applying their personal value systems to their interactions with others in a group, he can only see collective values emerge after struggles have brought a group to accept such values. This fits with Bourdieu’s overall focus on antagonisms, within and between groups. In many ways he seems to be heavily influenced by Marxist views of struggles of the classes – something Bourdieu (1986) actually mentions when he talks about people vying for positions of power, or even domination over the working class.

Coleman (1988), on the other hand, went further than Bourdieu by focussing on the social groups themselves, including their structured settings, such as families or households, or an institutional setting, such as clubs and associations, be they civic, sports-oriented, political, or other. Even though he was – at least initially – mostly interested in the value of family and education in a family member’s later creation of social networks, Coleman nevertheless points out from the start that social networks are formed through a mutual understanding of obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness.

By stating that much of social capital formation is an “unintentional” by-product of a social interaction which might happen anyway, Coleman gives rise to subsequent critical views of his work by Putnam (1993) and others.

Although Putnam (1993) shied away from overtly criticizing Coleman, he nevertheless emphasized that social capital formation can be a deliberate exercise, or at least with deliberate goals in mind. He points out that social capital is formed within civic organizations which tend to have clear objectives in mind, for their members or for a wider population. In this instance, the deliberate formation of

social capital in an institutional setting is said to facilitate coordinated actions among a group or groups of persons with similar interests and goals.

The aspect of social capital theory possibly most relevant to the present project is the finding by some authors that social capital can be multi-dimensional and quite fragmented.

Woolcock (1998) found that there are bonding, bridging, and linking segments of social capital, depending on their scope (e.g. family, or beyond) and potential for interaction (e.g. distinct closed, or open groups). This finding, in fact, becomes the mainstay of the present research project. Portes (1998) finds that within the components of social capital, certain social networks may be inaccessible to the general public. Portes' finding goes along with Woolcock's view that there is a form of "linking social capital", which takes on a vertical, power-oriented nature within circles or networks of interest and benefits (as opposed to the more horizontal, inter-group nature of his "bridging capital").

This raises the question whether, instead of a society being endowed with an all-encompassing "Putnamian layer" of social capital, it might actually be built on a number of "Social Silos". These may or may not be durably inter-connected, and they may actually work against, rather than towards, the construction of a unified social capital base, depending on how conflicting the interests of the members of the various silos are.

More recently, Rakadjiiska (2008) published a paper in which she reviewed several different definitions of social capital, as proposed by no fewer than 16 authors. Rakadjiiska set her paper in the context of Bulgaria's adhesion to the European Union a year earlier. This author touches upon the concept of co-evolution of persons and society in a Nash Equilibrium context. This means that, for several members of a society (or, for our purposes, of a social capital circle) to more or less equally benefit from societal development, there must be a certain degree of synchronicity in each member's developmental evolution.

In other words, in a Nash context, there must not be a zero-sum game, i.e. where one player only gains something if another loses something. Rakadjiiska highlights both co-evolution between countries, as well as within a country, in this instance Bulgaria.

Bulgarian Social Capital

Rakadjiiska's work brings us to look more closely at social capital in a specifically Bulgarian context.

While social capital theory has been discussed at length by Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, and Woolcock since the 1980s, only a few authors have examined the issues of youth socializing, trust, and their interest in civic life specifically in an Eastern European context.

Mihaylova has reviewed this limited, regionally specialized literature (2004). She mentions that, even though several authors have examined social capital's importance in driving civic engagement of citizens in post-socialist Europe, none of these authors focussed specifically on students and their interest and engagement in civil society.

Only a few authors in the English-language academic literature have focussed specifically on Bulgaria in a social capital context. These are Adnanes (2007), Kabakchieva & Hristova (2012), Kovacheva and Kabaivanov (2016), Kabakchieva (2020), Kaneff (2004), Mitev and Kovacheva (2014) and Ghodsee (2011). Most of them conducted their work in the period between the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and they cast their research net much wider than focussing on a specific social capital context. They have therefore not been able to capture the views of the post-1980 generation, especially when its members approached voting age in the late 1990s. Also, these authors have only tangentially touched upon the details of social capital theory, by discussing young Bulgarians' social circles, and their influence on youth behaviour in society.

Kovacheva & Kabaivanov have used a recent survey (2016) of Bulgarian youths for a paper about young adults' involvement in civil society, leaving out, however, explicit references to social capital theory, and drawing on questionnaires and interviews, rather than using longitudinal observation in varying social and political contexts. Mitev & Kovacheva conducted a recent (2014), very comprehensive survey of the life of young persons in Bulgaria, including their interest in politics and civil society.

However, due to the wide scoping of that study, only limited attention was given to social interaction among young adults, and no explicit reference to social capital and its potential link with civic engagement was made. Kabakchieva (2020) focussed most of her work more on the institutional structure of Bulgarian civil society, up to 2011.

Geography and Social Capital In Bulgaria

The *vruski* network of kinship-derived connections is an important element of the Bulgarian *шуробаджанаштина* (*shurobadzhanashtina*).

This is the hard-to-translate elaborate web of 'useful connections' in Bulgarian society, which can only tangentially be compared to nepotism, as it seems to go beyond what we understand in Western society as nepotism. Indeed, *shurobadzhanashtina* appears, from my observations, to entail a wider-ranging and more ongoing system of mutuality and expectations than the mostly one-off favours which drive nepotism in the West.

Instead, this Bulgarian form of ongoing mutual support, if not inter-dependency, appears to be more of a continuum which transpires over time in many aspects of

daily life, be it private or professional. It may well be that shurobadzhanashtina comprises hybrid elements between bonding and bridging social capital in Bulgarian society. A separate study of shurobadzhanashtina interactions will be needed to elucidate in more detail the precise nature, scope, and durability of the social circles involved in this Bulgarian type of networking.

While shurobadzhanashtina is not limited to people in a specific geographic setting, one must also mention the importance of *землячество* (*zemliachestvo*), an equally hard-to-translate concept of connections derived from persons originating from, or living in, a particular town or district in Bulgaria. From my observations, *zemliachestvo* appears to sometimes subsume, but not replace shurobadzhanashtina. In other words, when family members reside in, or came originally from, a discrete area of Bulgaria, or at a micro-level from a particular neighbourhood of Sofia, I observed an additionality of shurobadzhanashtina and *zemliachestvo*, i.e. even closer kinship-derived networks than if family members were geographically more dispersed.

Civic Life in Bulgaria

While many of the authors mentioned earlier have stated that most Bulgarians show limited levels of engagement with civic life, few have defined civic life and analysed the precise level and nature of citizen (dis)engagement from civic and political life in Bulgaria, although Roth (2007) touched upon this topic.

For the purposes of the present project, the level of engagement, or involvement, is defined as the active and ongoing participation in public civic events. As we see in the discussion of student involvement in protests in Bulgaria, the notion of 'ongoing participation' is of crucial importance, as sporadic participation in a street protest is not a reliable indicator of sustained civic engagement.

While the present paper includes the criterion of membership in civic associations organizing public events, I am not limiting the analysis to active participation of association members only.

Indeed, one can be a member of a public association and not participate in any event, or one can participate in many civic events and not be a member of any association, as Cellarius and Staddon (2002) found when looking at Bulgarian environmental NGOs, for instance.

Statistics show that only around 7 per cent of Bulgarians across all age ranges are members of a civic association of any kind (including NGOs, trade unions, sports clubs and the ubiquitous Chitalishte community centers (BSI, 2015). These statistics do not, however, reveal how active members actually are in associations.

Research Results

The ‘Stop and Go’ Nature of Civic Engagement in Sofia

When examining the disconnect of ordinary Bulgarians from civic life and the State, one needs to look at the Bulgarian way of manifesting popular dissatisfaction to government circles, either by what I call “micro-protesting”, i.e. voicing dissatisfaction not necessarily with a government as a whole, or with a range of government policies, but most frequently with some narrowly defined scope, such as high energy prices; the collapse of KTB Bank, the appointment of controversial media mogul Delyan Peevski as head of the national security service (Novinite, 2012-2016); threats to Pirin National Park (Novinite 2018), or recent protests triggered by the exclusive use of a nominally public beach by a politician of the Turkophile political party, the ‘Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)’ (Novinite, 2020).

This is where an interval component of a time axis of civic engagement would come into play. Indeed, over the past five years, I have repeatedly been struck by what I call the “Stop-and-Go” nature of public manifestations of dissatisfaction in Sofia, with particular government policies or decisions. Indeed, while there have been 1-3 large street protests in Sofia every year since 2012, I could not identify any systematic follow-up action after these protests, or the birth of any new civic organizations as a result of the protests, though one reformist political party was said to have been created, in part as a result of one of the protests.

While in countries such as France, Belgium, or Germany labour unions or pro- and anti-refugee organized groups, for instance, are quite regularly on the streets to demonstrate for their specific causes, in Sofia public protests, to the external observer at least, seem to materialize out of nowhere; seem to be under the leadership of nobody in particular, and seem to disappear into oblivion as fast as they appeared.

Indeed, while street protests can last several weeks or even months, they seem to end suddenly, usually without any tangible, long-term progress having been achieved, or only some cosmetic change having been announced, such as the replacement of one controversial person in a public office by another.

The lack of ongoing interaction between those who protest and successive governments which were the target of the protests was highlighted, among others, by Prof. Smilov of Sofia University (Gillett, 2013) who pointed out that there was, what the French call a dialogue de sourds (a dialogue of the deaf), between protesters and the government of the day, i.e. no real dialogue at all.

If one looks at the history of large protests in Sofia, one can focus on those mentioned above, i.e. those of 1997 directed against a severe economic crisis; those of 2009 about overdue payments to farmers, control over State spending,

endemic corruption, and better police pay, to name just a few issues. In addition, in 2013 – continuing off and on into 2014, another set of protests hit Sofia, this time about high public utility prices, and the appointment of media magnate Delyan Peevski as head of State security. Finally, towards the end of the current research project, on 7 July 2020, an opposition politician executed a stunt, whereby he landed with a small boat on a Black Sea beach which had been claimed illegally as private property by a former – but still influential – leader of a political party close to the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, Mr. Ahmed Dogan.

He was promptly detained by local police, which in turn caused a new wave of demonstrations throughout the major urban centers in Bulgaria. This time, the focus of the protests was on the perceived continuing influence of oligarchs on certain national politicians, including Mr. Dogan. This wave of protests also coincided with continued criticism of the allegedly biased behaviour of public prosecutors in Bulgaria, an issue which has been simmering since the recent appointment of senior prosecutors who have been perceived as being too close to certain political and oligarchic circles.

Protests are continuing as of the closing date of the present paper (September 2020), but have seen reduced crowds over the past two weeks.

Leadership among Sofia Students

Queried about the reasons why informants attended public protests, but seemed to lose interest in civic life shortly thereafter, all mentioned the lack of more formal and sustained organization of protest groups; the lack of leadership both among their social circles and more broadly among civic groups which had originally participated in the protests, as well as the absence of continued, structured communication about the issues which triggered the protests in the first place, as the reasons for their drifting away from civic engagement after the protests.

Even during the protests, informants stated that they could often not identify any protest leaders. Informants also said that some protests, such as those of 2013, seemed to lack organization and thus were quite chaotic, with many disparate and loosely assembled groups voicing their concerns with banners and loud shouts, sometimes clashing with other protest groups.

Another factor which was mentioned as making some of the informants shy away from continued civic engagement was their suspicion that some protests had been hijacked by leaders of certain interest groups, which intruded in the protests for their own, sometimes obscure interests. Even some suspicions of “spying” by obscure interest groups on bona fide protest participants were mentioned in this context. Informant Ralitsa went as far as saying that some protests had

been entirely “staged” by special interest groups, and had nothing to do with a genuine popular uprising. Suspicions about the identity of alleged interest groups ranged from “the Russians”, to “State Security veterans”, to “the oligarchs”. No informant was able to provide any specific details in support of their allegations of interference or manipulation in the protests.

At the other end of the spectrum of motivations of various protest participants one could find groups of young persons – mostly students – who seemed to participate in the protests to have a day out and have a good time. This led one journalist to refer to the protesters as ‘the coffee demonstrators’ (The Economist, 2013), as some of them had installed coffee making equipment on the lawn in front of Parliament House in Sofia, and seemed to be more interested in socializing than in the protest topic du jour.

As regards those and other student groups participating in the protests, none of my informants were able to discern any leadership among their student groups during the protests either. Some had been convened by word of mouth, with social media providing reminders and further information about venues and meeting times. Other informants stated that they had been mobilized initially by social media, and that they subsequently conferred verbally with friends about protest participation. Thus, sustained leadership through social media influencers seemed to be absent, at least during the 2013 and 2020 protests.

Informants’ Relationship with Civic Life in Sofia

As regards perceptions of informants about the criteria for civic engagement being fulfilled in Bulgaria, I found widely varying levels of engagement of students and graduates in civic life, ranging from none to active involvement. In light of the observed informant knowledge and activities (or lack thereof), I found that respondents:

1. Knew next to nothing about the work of Bulgarian domestic NGOs, with the exception of Boyko, Nik, Ralica, and Paula who were themselves involved in small NGOs active in the fields of tourism promotion (Boyko), election monitoring (Nik and Ralica) and government transparency (Paula). Only the larger international NGOs, such as Transparency International and the Open Society Institute were known by name, though not by detailed activity.

Bozh and Kristin were aware of the work of the UN Association of Bulgaria (UNABG), because their UNWE International Relations Association cooperated for some events with that NGO. Boris likewise was aware of some UNABG activities during his time with this student association, but his interest in this, or any other NGO, was reduced to nothing right after he graduated from UNWE.

2. Showed uneven acceptance of the concept of the “Common Good” detailed earlier in the paper. While all informants had some understanding of the concept of the common good – after being given additional information in some instances, most stated that they first had to look after their own lives before they could work for the common good.
3. Boyko, Nik, Ralica, Aleks, and Paula felt that, at least in principle, they needed to work in the interest of not just themselves but also in the interest of Bulgarian society at large. When prompted further about any specific involvement they would consider in this context, it quickly transpired that for most of these informants direct personal benefit still remained top of the list, with less immediate societal benefits coming a distant second for them.
4. When told about the causes and goals of some of the Bulgarian NGOs, informants readily identified on a theoretical level with their causes, but were not motivated enough to become involved in any of them.
5. With regard to NGO effectiveness, some informants felt that “if they were more effective, we would not be in the mess we are in” (Boris and Aleks).

Few respondents knew about formal channels of communication between NGOs and the State, such as the Economic and Social Committee (ESC). Only Nik and Boyko knew anything about the mandates of these entities. When told about such formal channels, informants felt that such government – civil society consultation mechanisms represented merely “window dressing”, to give a semblance of civil society consultation when new public policies are being formulated, or have de facto already been decided on. Nik who was, through his work with the Council of Ministers, most aware of this level of communication and consultation, was particularly dismissive of such channels. He felt that all decisions had already been taken among ministers, well before any consultations were launched.

Social Capital of Sofia Students

As we have seen earlier, the nature of social capital among Bulgarians can have a significant influence on their trust in one another and in comparative outsiders (including public institutions), and through this ‘trust filter’, also on their involvement in civic life.

Trust was seen as being particularly high in long-term, intimate social circles, such as bonding capital circles composed of family and close friends.

While the social circles of Sofia students and graduates were indeed composed of bonding capital and bridging capital – just like Mitev and Kovacheva had found (2014), what had been largely un-researched in the past was the fluid nature of bridging capital, and the nature of movements of actors between several

discrete bridging capital groups. Indeed, a question that arose while observing the Sofia student population was how stable their social circles are over time, specifically whether their social capital is static or dynamic. I challenged the implied assumption held by most researchers in the past that social capital is somehow a stable characteristic of a society, both conceptually and temporally. If indeed the composition of students' social capital changes over time, so might their engagement with civic life, for the better or for worse.

Introducing Flex Capital – a New Social Capital Category

In light of the ethnographic observations made in Sofia, it seems appropriate to relativize and extend Putnam and Woolcock's classification of social capital components, namely 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital.

Their 'linking capital' base is of lesser interest to us in the present context, as it refers to hierarchically organized environments, as happens within workplaces, for instance.

Relativize is the operative word here, because I found that a majority of informants displayed a readiness to re-define and change, with little exploratory action and at relatively short notice, the boundaries and composition of their circles of friends or work colleagues in a situation- or objective-specific manner.

This took place in bridging capital circles once or twice a year, often in conjunction with different class attendance or changing leisure activities. Only rarely did this happen in a bonding capital environment, and if so, it took a major disruptive event to trigger such a change, e.g. a divorce in the family or a serious and unresolved argument among close friends or family members. If students were willing and able to re-compose their bridging social circles in certain instances with great ease, we need to consider whether an additional category of social capital would be helpful.

Extending the categories of bonding and bridging capital seems appropriate in light of the observations made of Sofia students' flexible, purpose-specific re-compositions of their social circles.

Many students displayed the characteristics of Voluntary Social Movers (VSM), moving from one interest-based group to another, and some were free floaters who had no long-lasting allegiance to any social circle. While VSMs remained active in a social circle for several years and contributed their time and energy to the group, free floaters would, for instance, only attend selected events of one social circle, and then hop on to events in other circles, without offering much of a personal input into the respective circles. "Whoever has the best party" was the statement made by informant Boris in this context, only half-jokingly, it appeared. While Boris was a member of one student association at

UNWE, he felt no strong allegiance to the members of that association and was equally comfortable mixing with students of other interest groups, whenever an interesting event came along.

One leader of a student association was initially quite involved in that UNWE association, but he dropped his involvement when he realized that another social circle presented him with “better opportunities”. Informant Chris, on the other hand, felt a strong allegiance to one student association and invested much of her free time in that circle.

Outside of her loyalty to this structured environment, however, Chris presented us with some of the characteristics of a social floater, hopping from one social circle to another, when it came to attending events with whichever group formed on any given evening.

One can thus conclude that in a structured environment such as a student association or an NGO, persons can display the characteristics of stable socializers within one, or a few more of these groups, while outside such a structured environment, they easily float from one group to another, or even form temporary groups themselves, usually for a specific purpose, such as attendance at a cultural or leisure event. Student attendance at public protests showed me several concurrent social capital characteristics: In fact, some attendees participated because they were active in specific circles, such as student associations or interested groups of friends, while others were present because it was “the thing to do” on a given day. Others were present at one protest because of their interest in one specific subject – say, an environmental issue raised by some fellow students or friends, while their participation in another public demonstration was triggered by another set of fellow students or friends.

I saw both social floaters who were only loosely associated with whatever protest group they found most interesting at any given time, and VSMs who focussed their energies on the one among their existing social groups, which they could identify as being most closely being associated with the object of a given protest, e.g. a group related to environmental protection, or one against corruption.

This observation of students and graduates in public settings in turn leads me to believe that flex capital can be formed within a bridging capital universe, without a person necessarily having to abandon one group in favour of another. Instead, it appears that students select one group as the target of their relative focus, situation-specifically and temporarily. Rarely did I see members of bonding capital (e.g. family or long-time friends) being included in any other groups for specific events. Interaction of my informants with bonding capital group members appeared to take place in a world of its own. Thus, flex capital did not include members from that discrete and separate world. However, very occasionally a member of a bridging

capital group – who may also have been part of re-composed (flex capital) groups at some point, is admitted into bonding capital, after many years – often over more than a decade – of friendship (see hereafter).

Apart from occasionally re-assembling members of diverse social capital circles on a temporary basis to form new groups for certain purposes (flex capital), students appear to be using discrete and stable social bridging capital groups for different socializing purposes. These groups can be called into action at short notice, often via social media messages, and they can have a fluid composition over time. Members drop in and out of bridging capital groups; such groups widen, shrink, or disappear, but in most cases, each group – in whatever composition – has a leading convenor, who rallies its members for a temporary purpose.

The traditional definition of social capital categories therefore can be extended to include a form of inter-group social capital, which I refer to as “flex capital”, in other words social capital that transcends several bridging capital groups, situation-specifically and usually on a temporary basis.

Spatial Setting of Students’ Social Capital

For a capital city of some 1.3 million inhabitants, Sofia is comparatively compact, with a width of the total urban area of some 9 kilometres, both in a north-south, and in east-west direction. My informants confirmed my inkling that for them, the city centre is bounded in the west and south-west more or less by Gotse Delchev boulevard, and in the south east and east by Nikola Vaptsarov boulevard, which becomes Peyko Yavorov boulevard, as it cuts right through the middle of the largest of Sofia’s city parks, the Borissova Gradina.

To the north, Sofia central train station and the train tracks which lead to and from it, towards the west and the east, provide both a visual and mental boundary to the city centre, as only a handful of major over- and underpasses allow a continuation of one’s journey to the north and north-east, coming from the centre. This area fits well into a circle of some 4 kilometres across.

At the historical centre of the area thus defined, one finds government and cultural buildings; the commercial centre, including a pedestrian street of very recent creation, Vitosha boulevard, which runs on a north-south axis, as well as a mid-size park hosting the massive NDK national cultural and conference centre – one of the largest of its kind in Europe. NDK Park continues towards the aptly named South Park, the southern boundary of which leads us to the above-mentioned outer limit of central Sofia on Gotse Delchev and Vaptsarov boulevards. The historical centre is bounded by Skobelev boulevard to the west and south-west, and by Vasil Levski boulevard to the east and south east. This area measures roughly one kilometre across. From the middle of NDK Park one can take Vasil

Levski boulevard in a north-easterly direction towards Tsar Osvoboditel boulevard, which in turn leads us out of Sofia on Tsarigradsko Shose in an easterly direction. It is right at the intersection of Osvoboditel and Levski boulevards that we find what some informants have called the 'Grande Dame' of Bulgarian tertiary education institutions, Sofia University (SU) St. Kliment Ohridski.

SU is the oldest (1888) university in Sofia. This historical legacy is visually represented and reinforced by the imposing design of the university's main building at the above-mentioned intersection of two boulevards.

The main entrance is flanked by six neo-Greek columns, thus conveying an impression to the casual observer of looking – quite literally – at a 'Temple of higher learning'. While the main SU building on Osvoboditel and Levski boulevards provides the principal visual presence and identification of SU, several of its departments are housed elsewhere, including a less-known presence further east of the city centre, on Tsarigradsko Shose. Informants from academia and students alike felt that SU is seen as a "classics" university, focussing largely on the humanities, social sciences, and to a lesser extent on natural sciences. Most of these informants felt that the location and architectural style of SU's main building confirms its classics orientation, and sets it visually and geographically apart from the other local institutions of higher learning.

SU informants regretted that SU does not have an identifiable, multi-building core campus on which one can leisurely stroll around, feeling that adjacent parks provide only an incomplete substitute for a "real" campus. "When walking around SU, you could really be anywhere in central Sofia", informant Dessi noted, "I never really felt like I was on a university campus". "The closest you get to feeling that you are in a university neighbourhood is when you go to the Bibliotheka dance club near SU", Dessi continued. "There you meet mostly SU students, which gives you a little bit of a feeling that you are in a campus-like environment."

Informant Nik noted that "Unless you go out in the area around Ulitsa Shishman in the center of town and meet up with fellow SU students in one of the bars or eateries there, you rarely feel like being in a student neighbourhood."

Informant Aleks felt that "Due to the fact that most students don't live around SU and tend to return to their dispersed residences after classes, you don't really get to socialize much, unless you make prior arrangements with those whom you know from classes." Informant comments therefore point towards the absence of a well-defined campus having a negative impact on the sustained socializing of SU students, across wider circles than their classmates and friends.

The same seems to be true for the dispersed location of bars and food outlets around the wider SU neighbourhood, which one can roughly identify as the area located between Ulitsa Tsar Shishman to the west and Ulitsa San Stefano to the east.

This area comprised two dance clubs and about a dozen bars frequented by SU students, plus an equal number of comparatively cheap food outlets preferred by students. Students reported that socializing across pre-existing groups is based entirely on chance encounters in that geographic area.

University Space and Students' Social Capital

When we look at all institutions of higher learning in Sofia, we find that they are quite dispersed all over the city. While Sofia University is quite centrally located, close to government and parliamentary institutions, the Medical University is located to the southwest of the centre, and several other universities are grouped in a dedicated educational neighbourhood quite a distance to the southeast of the center. A small campus of the University of Architecture is located to the immediate southeast of the center, while the University of Library Studies is quite isolated in the far southeast of the center, along the main Tsarigradsko Shose thoroughfare leading to the airport and to the city of Plovdiv.

The private and comparatively small New Bulgarian University (NBU) is also quite isolated from the rest, in a neighbourhood to the far southwest of the city center.

This dispersion of the institutions of higher learning across the city space, combined with infrequent public transportation options – if any (NBU for instance has not a single bus line running nearby, only an infrequent Marshrutka minibus) – does not help in promoting cohesion among Sofia's student populations and in bringing large numbers of students together in one central area at short notice, e.g. for “flash mob” type public action (i.e. action summoned at short notice through social media). NBU, for instance, is located some 8 kilometers (straight line) from the national parliament, while the University of Library Studies is located some 7 kilometers away from the center. All other universities are somewhat closer to the city center, though not necessarily easier to reach by public transportation. The universities clustered in the “Student City” area to the southeast of the city center, can be reached from the center by public transportation, either with a 30-45 minute bus ride, or with an equally long (depending on the time of day) combination of bus and subway rides.

Sofia University is located just east, across a small park, from the Bulgarian Parliament and close to a number of embassies and national government buildings.

Public protests have repeatedly taken place in that park and other public areas between SU and the parliament, since 1996. Given the proximity of SU to the parliament, SU students were invariably involved in these protests. Informants Aleks and Dessi who graduated from SU in 2016 and in 2015, respectively, confirmed that they participated in the protests of 2013 against the appointment

of a controversial media mogul as head of the national secret service. They stated that they believed that most students at the protests hailed from SU, with only a few coming from other local universities, as they recognized many of the other students among the protestors as coming from SU. The perceived absence of protestors from other university campuses is of some relevance in explaining the difficulties of gathering large groups of young civic activists, as we will see later on. Dessi felt that “Since we all live in different neighbourhoods, and some of us even ‘way down’ in Studentski Grad, it has always been difficult to get a large group of us together.”

In light of the observations of the geographical dispersion of universities in Sofia, and the nature of the immediate surroundings of SU and UNWE, it was possible to draw some conclusions about the impact of Sofia’s urban geography on the social circles of the university students who were the subject of the present paper.

Spatial Impact on Social Capital

Having examined the spatial aspects of student socializing at SU and UNWE, we can identify several spatial impacts and consequences for the construction and maintenance of social capital among Sofia students:

1. Given the spatial scattering of SU student accommodation and the absence of a well delineated core campus, we have seen that the informants from this university socialize mostly at lunch time and after afternoon classes and generally only for a snack, coffee, or drinks, before returning to their geographically disseminated accommodations.
2. Conversely, UNWE students who live in student city have a comparatively lively social scene, given the compact nature of the neighbourhood where both their apartments and the bars and eateries which they tend to frequent are located. UNWE informants have stated that due to living close together in a relatively compact neighbourhood, they found it easy to form friendships with fellow students – friendships that can continue after university, if UNWE graduates find employment in Sofia.
3. SU and UNWE informants regretted the absence of active university alumni associations in Sofia, or at least they were not aware of any being in existence. They felt that alumni association events held at the universities or nearby could facilitate ongoing interaction between graduates who had not already formed friendships at university, especially when it comes to networking during job search or on a professional level.
4. SU informants reported that friendships formed at university were mostly based on the attendance of common courses, rather than living together, with the notable exception of roommates when the latter were not enrolled

in common courses, but nonetheless socialized together. This was the case for Dessi with one of her roommates during part of her studies. UNWE informants felt that common courses and common living arrangements facilitated the forming of friendships, and that friendships were strengthened by any additionality of these two organizational and spatial factors.

5. SU informants stated that due to the proximity of the parliament and other public institutions to the main SU building, they were more easily motivated to participate in, or at least take notice of public events around these institutions, than if the university was not located in their proximity. Nonetheless, geographic proximity did nothing for making them feel more positively about the parliament, the government, or NGOs. Nik and Boyko were the exceptions in that both took an early interest in the comings and goings around the parliament building and in the work of some public policy NGOs and government entities, in which they actually became involved later in their studies and in their professional careers.
6. UNWE informants felt some geographical remoteness from “where things are happening in town”, including events around public institutions, such as protests. They felt that the large size of Borissova Gradina city park between Student City and the center of Sofia made them feel distant, and the circuitous route of the main bus line into town dissuaded them from participating in public events “in the city”. They generally felt that Studentski Grad was not really “part of the city”.
7. Social capital among SU informants appeared less likely to evolve into strong friendship-based bonding capital than that of UNWE students who lived in Student City, yet SU students were more likely to participate in public events in central Sofia than UNWE students, in spite of the latter’s stronger social capital.
8. SU student informants’ bridging social capital appeared stronger than that of UNWE informants, as especially SU student informants in the social sciences and in the humanities could meet in cafés frequented by students from a variety of disciplines. Political science students such as Nik and Boyko and law students such as Dessi felt that they were able to more easily engage with students from other courses in conversations about political events in café settings around SU, in spite of the scattering of these socializing venues over an area wider than that around UNWE. Nonetheless, upon further questioning, SU students did admit that cross-group socializing – other than through chance encounters in cafés - was largely event-driven, and did not result in the formation and maintenance of larger groups over time.
9. UNWE informants stated that they rarely discussed “serious issues” during their lunch breaks or after their afternoon classes. They felt that the nature

of the venues they frequented in Student City were dissuasive for engaging in “serious debates”.

10. In light of the above findings we can tentatively conclude that spatial aspects, both on a regional macro scale and on a micro scale (city and specific neighbourhoods), can have an impact on the maintenance of social capital over time. A large-scale study of spatial socializing aspects among Sofia students could reveal the relative weight of spatial considerations versus other intervening factors, such as formal or informal group leadership; timing and personal availability for socializing, and costs of socializing (e.g. costs of frequentation of cafés, restaurants, bars, movie theatres, etc.), etc.

Epilogue: Student Social Capital in Crisis Times

While this paper received its final editing in late 2020, the Corona virus-triggered “COVID-19” public health crisis profoundly impacted civic and economic life in Europe, including in Bulgaria.

I conducted a quick survey among my informants with regard to whether and how their socializing patterns had changed when this crisis took hold in Sofia and in informants' hometowns. The outcome of this survey was as follows: All respondents stated that they had taken preventive measures with regard to the scope and frequency of their social contacts. This was in part prompted by the decision of Sofia universities to switch to on-line learning, but also due to increasingly strong calls for extreme caution by public health authorities in Bulgaria. All respondents indicated that they had limited their social interaction to a handful of members of their immediate family, including parents and siblings, and partners or spouses, as appropriate. All respondents indicated that they had stopped all in-person contacts with grandparents and other members of the extended family, especially those aged 60 or more, as these were perceived to be at a higher risk grave illness than younger persons. Only in a handful of cases was a cousin, aunt, or uncle included in the small circle of family if these lived in the same household as parents, or in the immediate neighbourhood.

Furthermore, all contacts with friends, both close and not so close, had been stopped.

Finally, in-person contacts with extended family and friends had largely been replaced by on-line or telephone contacts, these having been said to now be much more frequent than usual.

The speed and scope of this presumably temporary re-alignment of both bonding and bridging capital circles in the face of a major public health crisis appears to point towards the fact that the earlier mentioned concept of Flex Capital might apply not only to bridging capital – as initially expected – but also to bonding capital where the outer circle of cousins, uncles, and aunts is

temporarily relegated to on-line-only contact, and only inner circle members are being interacted with on an in-person basis.

Future research might elucidate the relative importance of mistrust (e.g. perceptions of insufficient prudence of others) versus caution, in such a situation-driven, temporary re-alignment of modes and frequency of contact between inner- and outer circle bonding capital members.

Conclusion

The observations of students and graduates over the past seven years in Sofia, and to a lesser extent those graduates who took up employment in Luxembourg, have provided new insights into the composition and stability over time of social capital of SU and UNWE students and graduates in Sofia, as well as their involvement in Bulgarian civic life and politics.

Even 30 years after the fall of the Communist regime in Bulgaria, a high degree of mistrust continues to inhibit the sustained maintenance of wider bridging capital circles among university students and graduates in Sofia, who have barely or not at all known life under Communism. This continued mistrust in each other and in civic and political actors in particular, inhibits sustained civic and political activism among my informants. Factors traditionally associated with high or low levels of citizen engagement with civic and political life still play a role in inhibiting informants' interest and trust in civic and political life and institutions, such as their family's socio-economic background and the family narrative about the past, and about the regime changes of 1990 in particular.

In addition, I found that the lack of sustained leadership among students, but also the lack of inspiration by NGO and political leaders, play a role in limiting student involvement in civic activism to sporadic street protests, with no ongoing activism beyond this stop-and-go involvement being discernible. Furthermore, macro- and micro-spatial factors were found to influence the scope, stability, and survival of students' social capital over time. In this context, the ease of transportation access to hometown family and friends seemed to be important for maintaining bonding capital over time, especially with those family members and friends on the fringes of bonding capital, such as cousins, uncles, and aunts.

Proximity and the existence of suitable venues for meeting university friends and other students in Sofia were important factors in maintaining students' bridging capital over time. Likewise, the proximity and accessibility of specific locations in urban space were found to play an important role in triggering students' interest in civic and political events, though the maintenance of this interest over time depended on the presence of leadership among students' bridging capital groups. For graduates, their place of residence - once they had taken up employment, played a major role in maintaining contacts with other graduates of the same university

cohort. Likewise, the proximity of their place of residence to public institutions played a positive role in maintaining their interest in civic and political life.

In addition to the existing social capital categories, such as bonding capital and bridging capital, students' ability to quickly re-assign persons from one bridging capital circle to another has led me to propose the new category of Flex Capital in the social capital universe.

This refers to the ability and determination to undertake a potential re-composition, sometimes at short notice, of bridging capital circles among students, depending on the purpose sought by the new group of students, e.g. specific leisure activities, but also sporadic involvement in civic life.

Most of the time, the spontaneous emergence of such re-composed groups did not prevent students from returning to their pre-existing bridging capital groups, once specific events or activities had finished.

Further, large-scale research is needed to determine longitudinal changes in the social capital and civic involvement of students at other Bulgarian universities, to allow us to draw definitive conclusions about these two aspects of student life, and about any causality between the two – a causality which may even be bi-directional in nature.

References

- Adnanes, M. (2007). Social transitions and anomie among post-communist Bulgarian youth, *Young*, Sage Publishing, pp. 49-69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308807072684>
- Allport, F. H. (1924). *Social Psychology*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1994). *Riskante Freiheiten: Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt.
- Bentley, A. F. (1908). *The Process of Government, a Study of Social Pressures*, The University Press, Chicago.
- Berman, S. (1997). Civil Society and Political Institutionalization, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 40(5), pp. 562-574.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital, in Richardson, J.G. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241-258.
- Cellarius, B. A., Staddon C. (2002). Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations, Civil Society, and Democratization in Bulgaria, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 16(1), pp. 182-222.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 94, pp. 95-120.
- Durkheim, E. (1967). *Le suicide, Étude de sociologie*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris.

- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C., Lampe, C. (2007). The Benefits of Facebook Friends: Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 12 (4), pp. 1143-1168.
- Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*, Free Press, New York.
- Ganev, V. (2007). *Preying on the State*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY.
- Gilett, K. (2013). Bulgarian students lead wave of protest, *The Guardian*, 26 November [online], available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/26/bulgaria-student-protest-corruption>
- Ghodsee, K. (2011). *Lost in Transition*, Duke University Press, Durham NC.
- Giatzidis, E. (2002). *An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria*, Manchester University Press, Manchester UK.
- Hicks, J. R. (1932). *The theory of wages*, London: MacMillan.
- Höpfner, M. C. (2012). Evolving elements of civil society in Bulgaria, in Kokot, W., *Living and working in Sofia*, LIT Verlag, Münster.
- Hoskins, B., D'Hombres, B., Campbell, J. (2008). Does Formal Education Have an Impact on Active Citizenship Behaviour?, *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 7(3), pp. 386-402.
- Ichilov, O. (1991). Political Socialization and Schooling Effects among Israeli Adolescents, *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 35(3), pp. 430-446.
- Kabakchieva, P. (2020). From Representative to Anti-Civic Populist Democracy?, *Development and Forms of Civil Society in Contemporary Bulgaria, Southeastern Europe*, vol. 44(2), pp. 208-232.
- Kabakchieva, P. & Hristova, D. (2012). *Civil Society in Bulgaria: NGOs versus Spontaneous Civic Activism*, Open Society Institute, Sofia.
- Kaneff, D. (2004). *Who owns the Past?*, Berghahn, New York NY.
- Kovacheva, S. & Kabaivanov, S. (2016). Differences and Inequalities in Civic Participation among Bulgarian Youth, *Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 4(4), pp. 228-240.
- LeCompte, M. (1999). *Ethnographer's Toolkit*, Altamire Press, Walnut Creek.
- Loader, B. & Mercea, D. (2011). Networking Democracy; *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 14(6), pp. 757-769.
- Mihaylova, D. (2004). *Social capital in Central and Eastern Europe*, Budapest: Central European University.
- Morjé-Howard, M. (2003). *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*, Cambridge University Press, New York NY.
- Mitev, P. & Kovacheva, S. (2014). *Young People in European Bulgaria*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation Press, Sofia.
- Novinite. (2013). Controversial MP Elected Bulgarian 'FBI' Chief, in *Novinite.com*, June 14 [online], available at: <https://www.novinite.com/articles/151239/Controversial+MP+Elected+Bulgarian+%27FBI%27+Chief>

- Novinite. (2018). European Parliament and Commission Divided on National Parks in Bulgaria, in Novinite.com, July 12 [online], available at: <https://www.novinite.com/articles/191037/European+Parliament+and+Commission+Divided+on+National+Parks+in+Bulgaria>
- Novinite. (2020). Bulgaria: Tension in Rosenets Park, Protesters Are Not Allowed to Enter the Beach, in Novinite.com [online], July 11, available at: <https://www.novinite.com/articles/205241/Bulgaria%3A+Tension+in+Rosenets+Park%2C+Protesters+Are+Not+Allowed+to+Enter+the+Beach>
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology, *Annual review of sociology*, vol. 24(1), pp. 1-24.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Putnam, R. (1993). The prosperous community: Social capital and public life, *The American Prospect*, vol. 13, Spring issue.
- Rakadjiiska, T. (2008). Pre-exposing of Social Capital in the Process of Euro-integration of Bulgarian Society, in Božić, M. (ured.) *Balkan u procesu evro-integracije: koncepcije razvoja i socijalne implikacije*, Centar za sociološka istraživanja, Niš, 2008, pp. 165-179.
- Roth, K. (2007). *Soziale Netzwerke und soziales Vertrauen in den Transformationsländern*, LIT Verlag, Münster.
- Rutten, R., Boekema, F. (2012). From Learning Region to Learning in a Socio-spatial Context, *Regional Studies*, vol. 46(8), pp. 981-992.
- Schwartz, H., Jacobs, J. (1979). *Qualitative Sociology*, Free Press, New York NY.
- Torsello, D. & Pappova, M. (2003). *Social Networks in Movement: Time, interaction and interethnic spaces in Central Eastern Europe*, Occasional papers, Forum Minority Research Institute.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the Field: On writing Ethnography*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL.
- Van Oorschot, W., Arts, W., Gelissen, J. (2006). Social Capital in Europe: Measurement and Social and Regional Distribution of a Multifaceted Phenomenon, *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 49 (2), pp. 149-167.
- Weber, M. (1964). *Fundamental concepts of Sociology*, Collier McMillan, London.
- Westlund, H., Boekema, F. (2010). The Spatial Dimension of Social Capital, *European Planning Studies*, vol. 18(6), pp. 863-871.
- Woolcock, M. (1998). Social Capital and Economic Development, *Theory and Society*, vol. 27, pp. 151-207.