

Zhelju Zhelev's Claim for Democracy – Hannah Arendt in Bulgaria?¹

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Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* certainly does not require further recognition. Due to the lack of translation, Zhelju Zhelev's *Fascism* (Fashizm't, Sofia, 1982) is virtually unknown to the broader public.² The book lacked also a thorough analysis by political science scholars³. Both thinkers experienced totalitarianism, but while Arendt was able to leave Germany and emigrate to the USA in 1941, the former dissident and now MP Zhelev lived under communism for the major part of his life.

The present paper investigates the claim for democracy of Zhelev. In his critique of European fascism he indirectly values liberal democracy as political alternative. In that, his assessment of the fascist system is strikingly close to Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism. I shall first introduce to Zhelev's biography focussing on the politically crucial events in his life. The second section deals with the text of *Fascism* and the crucial yet nearly hidden claim for democracy. The theoretical similarities of Zhelev's and Arendt's theories shall be the contents of the last section.

I. Zhelju Zhelev – biographical sketch

Zhelju Mitev Zhelev was born 3 March 1935 in Veselinovo in the Shumen district in eastern Bulgaria. His parents were peasants and Zhelju the eldest of three children. His primary and secondary schooling took place in Shumen. From 1953 to 1958 he studied Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of Saint Kliment Ohridski University in Sofia. After graduation he returned to teach in his native village. In 1961 Zhelev becomes a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). From 1962

he lectures at the Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridski University, Sofia and the Institute of Philosophy of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAN), harshly criticizing the Stalinist system. His doctoral dissertation is entitled »The Philosophical Determination of Matter and the Current Natural Sciences« (Filosofskoto opredelenie na materiata i s'vremennoto estestvoznanie). His critique of Stalinism results in his exclusion from the Party in 1965; he is banned to the countryside and remains unemployed until 1974. In 1966 he marries Maria Ivanova Marinova (Maria Zheleva) from Grozden (Burgas district), a teacher at that time. In 1973, she becomes vice-director of the documentary and educational section of TV Vreme. Their daughters Stanka and Jordanka are born in 1969 and 1971. The manuscript of *Fascism* he finishes in 1967. Since the first had been declared »invalid« due to his exclusion from the party and the academy, he submits his second doctoral dissertation on »Modalities of Philosophical Categories« (modalnite kategorii v'v filosofijata) in 1972. Back in Sofia due to Maria's new job, Zhelev acquires the Doctoral degree (kandidatska disertacija) at St. Kliment Ohridski University in 1974. His compromise⁴ with the regime results in his return to academic life. In 1975 he is appointed senior research fellow (starsi nauchen s'trudnik) at the Department of Culture of the Institute of Culture.

In 1982 *Fascism*'t is published. After three weeks, production and distribution of the book are stopped, reviews forbidden, and the editors sacked. The text and its author immediately become famous. Although the text is a political analysis of roots and developments of European Fascist regimes, the implicit critique of

the totalitarian Zhivkov regime is well understood by the readers. The publication of *Fascism*'t is remarkable because it reveals the increasing critique of the system among the intellectuals who support the publication. Zhelev submits his thesis on »Contextual Theory of Individuality« (relacionna teorija na lichnostta) in 1987. A year later, he becomes one of the two initiators of the first independent oppositional group, the »Ruse Committee for Ecological Defense«. He is also co-founder of the »Academic Club for the Support of Glasnost and Perestroika«. In 1989, the year of the European democratic revolutions, Zhelev's political influence increases among the various social organisations spreading: he co-initiates the »Union of Democratic Forces« UDF (S'uz't na demokraticnite sili SDS) and is elected chairman and spokesman. Contributing decisively to the round-table negotiations with the representatives of the reform socialists (BSP, former BCP) he is elected the first non-communist President of the Republic of Bulgaria by the Grand National Assembly. The first free elections takes place in summer 1991. From 1992–97 he serves as first Bulgarian President elected in genuinely democratic elections. During his administration, his distance from the UDF increases resulting in his resignation. He loses the next round of the presidential elections as candidate of the People's Union. Subsequently, he works as an MP and as Chair of the Liberal Democratic Alternative Party. The LDA is a smaller party which represents mainly urban intellectuals who favour economic transformation, democratic participation of minorities, and Bulgaria's integration in the West.

II. The »claim for democracy«: the critique of Fascism as covered critique of the Zhivkov regime

In his text, Zhelev discusses a number of distinct functional features of the totalitarian Fascist state, such as espionage, unlimited propaganda, the isolation of the country from the outside world, and the outstanding importance of the police and the secret service in maintaining strict control of society. The in-depth analysis of the rise and development of fascist regimes he presents, targets the communist regime of the Zhivkov years. The last chapter is dedicated to the end of totalitarianism. Since single-party rule was established by the merging of party and state institutions, the detachment of the party from the state is the first and most decisive event in triggering the end of a fascist regime.

The very thing which the totalitarian state could not deal with was the open competition with foreign propaganda which was targeted at the inner fictive world and seriously jeopardized the ideological foundations of its own power. The totalitarian state could not afford an ideological battle; the only way to limit foreign influence and information was to isolate the population by violent oppression. Terror, trips abroad restricted to loyal party members, jamming of radio signals, and censorship, however, only demonstrated the regime's fear and lack of confidence.⁵

The crucial element of totalitarian ideology is its fundamental fear of coming into »contact with liberal democracy (v samiia straxh ot kontakt s liberalnata demokratsiia)«.⁶

By explicitly mentioning the democratic system in its liberal modern form as a point of reference, which – at the time of writing his book – represented Bulgaria's Cold War enemy, Zhelev's message to his own country's leadership is revealed.

Declaring itself the only political order guaranteeing true mass representation and popular will, totalitarianism claims

to be »real democracy« at its best. Its superiority is expressed in comparison with liberal democracy which the totalitarian ideology portrays as a system ruled by conspiratorial, corrupt, and wicked plutocrats.⁷ After analyzing the national-socialist understanding of democracy and its claim to represent Germany's workers' movement, Zhelev makes some clear concluding remarks about what democracy is and what it is not. He argues that, thanks to fascism, which helped to crystallize and make more precise our notions of democracy, »we already know that mass rallies and torchlight processions do not mean democracy ... that even the struggle against unemployment and the guaranteed subsistence minimum are still not a sign of democracy ... that democracy represents the distinct structure of a society which guarantees the fundamental civic and political rights of the individual (takava struktura na obshtestvo, k'deto za otdelnata choves-hka lichnost sa garantirani osnovnite grazhdanski i politicheski svobodi)«.⁸

The individual's freedom from the state and the realm of politics is immediately connected with the fundamental principle of democracy: »the separation of powers (razdelenieto na vlastite)«.⁹

On this point, Zhelev's analysis leaves no doubt where his political preferences lie. Although the totalitarian fascist state did not physically abolish the institutions of judicial, executive, and legislative power, it abolished their independence by filling all key positions with party members (»se sostoiat ot chlenove na fashistkata partiiia«).¹⁰

The result was the restriction of these institutions to a pure formal existence, which provided the facade of a modern constitutional democracy, while lacking the very essence of democracy: control through the separation of powers. The following quotation reveals the true intent behind Zhelev's book on fascism and totalitarianism:

»On 10 December 1948, the United Nations Organization adopted a historic

document ... it proposes one single positive, democratic and human system ... in which man and his fundamental civil freedoms and rights are regarded as the highest value among all other common values (predlaga edna pozitivna demokratsichna i xhumanna sistema ... v neia chovek't s negovite osnovni grazhdanski svobodi i prava se postavia po-visoko ot vsichki drugi obshtestveni tsennosti).«¹¹

III. Parallels to Arendt's Theory

Zhelev's experience under four decades of Bulgarian communism led him to the conviction that totalitarianism is not necessarily identical with violence, the extreme brutality typical of the Stalinist and Nazi regimes respectively. Arendt, however, identifies the permanent and institutionalized violence embodied in concentration camps, forced labor, and war as key features of totalitarian power. According to her theory, the Soviet Union after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's »secret speech« ushering in de-Stalinization can no longer be called totalitarian, still less Germany after Hitler's defeat.¹²

Both Arendt and Zhelev regard the following conditions as necessary for totalitarianism: 1) Ideology, 2) Party, 3) Single leader. While the ideology claims universal validity it separates the world into friends and foes. The exclusion of critical groups and/or individuals is required for the political homogenization of the masses. The party is the instrument considered to promote the all-embracing ideology, and its structure must necessarily demand strict and unchallenged discipline of its members. Absolute loyalty is required for the rule of the world which always starts »at home«. The connection with the »home movement« is further symbolized by the exceptional skills of the beloved leader; ideology, movement and party are symbolically embodied in one person. The personalisation of politics was a crucial factor in both the Communist and Nazi regimes.

Both Arendt and Zhelev regard modern mass society and the technical innovations of modernity as decisive for the emergence of totalitarianism. Total power and its distinct features of ideological indoctrination, espionage, isolation, oppression, and censorship was made possible only by modern technology. Furthermore, of exceptional importance in the theories of both thinkers is the merging of party and state. While Arendt speaks of »shapelessness«, referring to the absence of institutional structures, Zhelev talks of the »merging of party and state«. Arendt conceives of the role of the judiciary as virtually non-existent, while Zhelev describes its functioning in total subordination to the executive power. When discussing the issue of shadow institutions representing the constitutional facade of a modern state, both thinkers agree that there are no continuities here with the state founded on the rule of law. Furthermore, both regard extremist ideology and propaganda as the fundamental tools of totalitarianism, because only the mono-causal explanations, exclusionist view of the world, and fictive construction of separated realities can produce the horrors which the totalitarian leaders conceived of as historically necessary. In this regard, however, Zhelev differs from Arendt pointing to the critical weakness of the totalitarian state: the need to reinforce propaganda by means of police and secret service oppression reveals the whole fictitious edifice of the state ideology. For Zhelev, all of this is countered by the »real world« of the citizen who, already familiar with the techniques of propaganda, builds up a knowledge of what and whom not to believe. This knowledge does not liberate him, but at least he ceases to be a mere victim of ideology.

What could possibly be set against totalitarianism? Both Arendt and Zhelev advocate the liberal democratic system. The strict separation of powers guarantees civil and political rights as the best protective measure against the rule of

extremist ideologies and the abuse of power. This is, however, not enough: both of them emphasize that the independent political activity of the citizen, his engagement in the civil society, is the crucial basis for effective protection against totalitarianism. Zhelev, as one of the founders of the Liberal Democratic Alternative, is actively involved in the current transformation of Bulgaria from a former Communist country to a Western-type democracy. The Dr. Zhelieu Zhelev foundation¹³ he chairs declares as its main programme areas the enhancing of civil society, democratic reforms, social integration and Balkan integration. As for the topic of the Balkans and the unleash of violent nationalism, Arendt's following quote seems ex-post appallingly true:

»Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.«¹⁴

1 The research on Zhelieu Zhelev's political thought was sponsored by a generous fellowship of Collegium Budapest – Institute for Advanced study in winter 1999/2000. I thank the director and the staff members for their helpful support. For a thorough analysis and comparison of Arendt's and Zhelev's theories see: Josette Baer (2000) »Two Perspectives of Totalitarianism. Comparing the Theories of Zhelieu Zhelev and Hannah Arendt«, *East Central Europe L'Europe du Centre-Est Mitteleuropa: Eine wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift*, Budapest, Vol. 27, Part 2, pp. 69-86.

2. Hannah Arendt (1958), *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego–New York–London: Harvest, (4th enlarged edition); Zhelieu Zhelev (1990), *Fashizm't* (New York: Columbia University Press, in Bulgarian, with Preface by Marin V. Pundeff). All translations from Bulgarian into English by me [JB].

3. It is worth noting, however, that the book has been translated into Romanian: *Zhelieu Zhelev* (1994), *Fascismul* (Bucharest). I owe this information to Florin Turcanu, Institute of History, University of Bucharest.

4 The circumstances surrounding Zhelev's return to the University remain unclear. During his ban, it was repeatedly indicated to Zhelev that he would be offered a position as a PhD candidate at the Academy if he admitted his »error«; A. Aleksov (1991) *Zhelieu Zhelev. Biografichni Belezhki* (Sofia: Tsentralen Izbiratelen Klub), pp. 14f. Hence, a compromise offered by the authorities could have been a »silent« one: no public announcement of the compromise in exchange for a written guarantee not to cross the ideological limits in future.

5. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 242.

6. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 244.

7. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 249.

8. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 252.

9. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 255.

10. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 255.

11. Zhelev, *Fashizm't*, p. 332.

12. Arendt, *The Origins*, Preface to Part Three, p. xxxvi.

13 <http://www.fundersonline.org./orpheusprofile.asp?AN=ZHEL001>

14 Arendt, *The Origins*, p.459.