Chapter Two from *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Publics*  
(James Dawson, Ashgate, 2014 – Accepted, Pre-publication)

Chapter 2

**Liberal Institutions, Illiberal Democracy? The Public Spheres of Serbia and Bulgaria Compared**

Bulgaria is, according to the latest gradings provided by Freedom House, considerably more democratic than Serbia. Moreover, though few would dispute the capacity of databases like that produced by Freedom House to shape Western perceptions about the politics of democratizing states and therefore to influence policymakers, there is an even more glaring indication of the Western endorsement of Bulgaria’s transition to democracy relative to its western neighbour. Since 2007, Bulgaria has been a member state of the European Union, while Serbia, only recently upgraded to candidate status, remains stuck in the waiting room. However, when Serbian and Bulgarian democracy is studied less from the perspective of formal procedures and legal norms and more in terms of the public sphere of discussion through which democratic citizenship is made possible, a different picture emerges from this comparison. In Serbia, the relatively prominent role of liberal discourse in political talk provides a strong counterpoint to the illiberal discourses that occupy the mainstream of political discourse. In Bulgaria by contrast, the content of discussion tends to be less philosophically diverse, leading to the persistence of an illiberal and exclusionary consensus around generally uncontested conservative orthodoxies. Furthermore, the public sphere, recognizable through practices of discussion of public matters, is also conspicuously more evident in the everyday lives of Serbian citizens relative to their Bulgarian counterparts. The evidence of the study therefore leads to the conclusion that recognizable practices of liberal democratic citizenship are rather more evident in the Serbian case. On the basis of this mismatch between formalistic and ethnographic findings, I claim that existing efforts to codify and measure liberal democracy neglect the fact that the very purpose of institutions is to ensure that life in the societies regulated by them is experienced as liberal and democratic.

As I argued in the opening chapter, the blindspots of formalist measurement are increasingly evident to those writing within the mainstream of the liberal democratization literature, which is to say those working in political science rather than political theory departments. When Ekiert et al. state that ‘democracy needs democratic citizens’ and then elaborate that citizens need to be educated with respect to what democracy
entails, they are making policy recommendations on the basis of their own brief ‘sketch of the “state of democracy” in post-Communist Europe’ (Ekiert et al. 2007). What I endeavour to supply in this project is the missing link on the basis of which scholars ought to base such policy recommendations: comparative research that systematically aims to address the empirical question of the capacity of citizens to perform the role of democratic citizens.

This chapter will be structured as follows. First, I provide a summary of the relative gradings that Freedom House has allotted to each of the countries of the study over the past decade. After summarizing these formalistic measurements, I outline an alternative methodological approach geared towards identifying liberal democratic practice: a comparative ethnography of public spheres. This involves incorporating the conceptual apparatus described in the opening chapter into an explicitly comparative framework, advancing the argument that it is both possible and desirable to compare ‘national’ public spheres by reference to ethnographically-gathered data that is rooted in distinct, local contexts. The empirical section commences with an illustrative comparison of two conversation extracts from group discussions conducted in each of the countries of the study with the aim of highlighting characteristic and differential features of public sphere discussion in Serbia and Bulgaria. Since these extracts represent only a small and illustrative sample of the wider public sphere discourse in relation to each country, it is necessary to support the evidence in the conversation extracts with the findings of participant observation fieldwork in the two cities of the study. In conclusion, I return to the theoretical debate concerning the study of democracy by arguing that the progress of liberal democracy ought to be understood in a way that is at least appreciative of the analytical dimension of everyday practice.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to add a caveat just in case the reader may get the impression that I am lauding the Serbian public sphere as an exemplary and inspiring example of a vibrant democratic society. It is not. This is a comparison between two societies in which transitions to democracy have largely been marred by the destructive efforts of political and economic actors to restrict the capacity of citizens to exercise civic power and form solidarities of the kind that would potentially impact upon the characteristic forms of corrupt and rent-seeking practices that are well-documented in both contexts (Ramet 2011a, Dulić 2011, Vassilev 2010, Monova 2011, Pedersen & Johannsen 2011, Ganev 2013). This has sometimes involved the efforts of these same elites to manipulate public sphere discourse in generally illiberal directions and to mobilize publics in support of national intolerance (Vujačić 1995, Živković 2006, Stamatov 2000, Roth 2010).
I do not wish to make light of the difficulties facing the generally financially impoverished and information-poor citizens in either of these societies. Rather, my aim is simply to present an empirically-grounded argument stating that vibrant communities of public sphere discussion oriented towards the production of liberal forms of citizenship provide those in Serbia with forms of civic power that support the liberal democratic system rather than undermining it. Bulgarian democracy benefits less from public sphere discussion, which tends on the whole to be less liberal, less participatory, less evident.

**Democratization in Serbia and Bulgaria: The Formalist Measurement of Freedom House**

Both countries have satisfied Samuel Huntington’s criteria for the ‘consolidation’ of democracy, which require that power must change hands peacefully twice on the basis of election results (Huntington 1991). By this standard, Bulgaria achieved consolidation almost immediately as the political instability of the early 1990s saw power alternate between former communists and their anti-communist opponents (Pedersen & Johannsen 2011), while Serbia did so very belatedly at the 2008 elections, with the removal from office of Vojislav Koštunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), which had held or shared power continuously since the overthrow of Milošević in 2000. However, the classification of states in such a manner is oriented more towards the construction of global databases and less towards the production of nuanced appraisals of specific states in any way that could allow for making a useful distinction between the countries of the study. Of course, the fixation on such questions of binary classification (democratic/authoritarian, consolidated/unconsolidated) does not apply to all formalist measures of democracy, and Freedom House therefore offers a continuous measurement that suits my present purpose of comparing Serbian and Bulgarian democracy. To this end, I focus on the ‘Democracy Scores’ system used in the regionally-specific *Nations in Transit* report published annually by Freedom House and applied to the post-socialist states of Eurasia, rather than the Political and Civil Rights scores used in the annual *Freedom in the World* report.¹ According to the corporate and expert-testimony-based methodology discussed in the opening chapter, Freedom House generates a Democracy Score

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¹ The ‘Democracy Scores’ (DS) system of FH’s *Nations in Transit* is preferred here over the *Freedom in the World* system for two reasons, the second of which was referred to in the opening chapter. Firstly, the *Freedom in the World* report is not conceptualized as a measure of democracy but of ‘freedom’ (Munck & Verkuilen 2002), hence the designation of countries as ‘Free’, ‘Partly Free’ and ‘Not Free’. Secondly, unlike the DS system used above, the *FitW* system does not provide gradings that are nuanced enough to distinguish between the countries of the study because the scores are rounded to whole numbers. As both Serbia and Bulgaria score 2 for both political and civil liberties as of the new 2013 report, they are simply classified as ‘Free’.
between the values of 1 (the highest level of democratic progress) and 7 (the lowest). States scoring less than 3 are classified as ‘Consolidated Democracies’, while those between 3 and 4 are classified as ‘Semi-consolidated regimes’, with progressively less appealing designations filling the territory between 4 and 7.

**Figure 2.1  Freedom House CEE Democracy scores 2003–2012**

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**Source:** Freedom House 2012b.

Throughout the past decade, Freedom House has consistently graded Bulgaria as more democratic than Serbia, a pattern that continues as of the publication of the 2012 rankings in *Nations in Transit* (Freedom House 2012: see Figure 2.1). Serbia’s score has deviated only a little, climbing from 3.88 (still as ‘Yugoslavia’) in 2003 to 3.64 in 2012. Bulgaria has deviated a lot more, improving as the date for possible EU accession approached from 3.38 in 2003 to a peak of 2.86 one year after accession in 2008. Since those years where it

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3 The decision to stick with the 2012 figures in spite of the subsequent availability of 2013 figures is justifiable because it facilitates direct comparison with the ethnographic data collected throughout 2011. Nevertheless, much the same pattern emerges even when the newer figures are taken into account: Serbia is stagnant at 3.64 while Bulgaria has continued to regress slightly to 3.18.
briefly earned the classification of ‘consolidated democracy’ between 2006 and 2008, Bulgarian democracy has been ‘backsliding’, and by 2012 had regressed to 3.13. Significantly for the purposes of this paper, the trajectories of Bulgaria and Serbia have never overlapped during those 10 years of measurement, with Bulgaria always being ranked at least 0.5 points more democratic than Serbia. This has allowed Bulgaria to retain contact (albeit as a clear ‘laggard’) with the mostly Central European states grouped as ‘New EU Members’, which occupy a range between 1.89 and 3.43 as of 2012. Similarly, Serbia’s lower ranking allows it to appear at home among the other mostly post-Yugoslav states grouped as ‘The Balkans’, which occupy the range between 3.61 and 5.18. Thus, in spite of the fact that Freedom House’s measurements are notionally compiled according to the events of the year in question only, the gradings – and the relative gaps between clustered groups of countries – have remained remarkably stable over this period. This allows Bulgaria to be squeezed into a narrative of previously authoritarian countries that have benefited from an essentially peaceful transition and European integration (with the acknowledged problem of some recent ‘backsliding’ since the incentive of EU entry was removed) and for Serbia to be fitted into the narrative of countries that have yet to properly emerge from post-war transition (Ekiert et al. 2007: 20).

However, as I emphasized in the previous chapter, while Freedom House scores are compiled on the basis of subjective expert-opinion, these opinions are evidently based upon objectivist concerns with formal procedures and legal freedoms rather than considerations of discursive aspects of political practice. As the name ‘Freedom House’ suggests, the legal ‘freedom’ to form a civil association to challenge political elites is considered to be analytically equivalent to evidence that civil actors actually use those freedoms. The challenge that I set out in the previous chapter was to harness the conceptual tools of public sphere theory to address these blindspots in such a manner that can allow for a critical appreciation of some important citizen-centred dimensions of democracy that are neglected by Freedom House. In the interests of that endeavour I will presently turn to the task of describing my methodological approach to the comparison of public sphere discussion in Serbia and Bulgaria.

**Methodology: A Comparative Ethnography of Public Spheres**

The comparative ethnographic study of public spheres is conceived of as a means of systematically addressing the question of the capacity of citizens to perform the role of democratic citizens, a concern that arises in the work of several scholars of democratization (Ekiert, Kubik & Vachudova 2007, O’Donnell 2008). In this
section, I describe my approach with respect to the rather complex methodological question of ethnographic comparison and also more practical concerns of ethnographic data gathering.

I anchor my study of national public spheres in specific locations chosen on the basis that they embody certain traits that distinguish them as, if not representative, then at least not conspicuously unrepresentative of the national context. From this perspective, my approach draws inspiration from that of Nina Eliasoph, who presents her study as addressing the ‘American’ public sphere on the basis of ethnographic study conducted at a specific (but undisclosed) suburban location. For example, there is the claim that ‘most Americans live in suburbs’ followed by a description of why the particular type of suburb she studies resembles so many others across America (Eliasoph 1998: 9–10). It is implicit in this rationale that America’s public sphere cannot possibly be observed in its entirety, necessitating this more locally-based approach: ‘The settings I studied could have represented America’s public sphere, made of thousands of local citizen gatherings like the ones I studied’ (p. 11). It is on the basis of similar logic that I seek to generalize about two national public spheres with reference to specific locales. However, since neither Serbia nor Bulgaria exist on such a scale as to support Eliasoph’s claim of an almost endless and relatively homogenous suburbia – ‘These new ethnically and class-diverse dwelling places are criss-crossed by 6-, 8- and even 10-lane highways …’ (p. 10) – I recognize that it is necessary to acknowledge the specificity of the locales in small countries where such industrial-scale imaginings are not appropriate. I will therefore name the large provincial cities of Niš, Serbia (population 255,000) and Plovdiv, Bulgaria (pop. 338,000) that stand at the centre of my empirical work and I will seek to justify the conceit of describing ‘national’ public spheres in this contingent terrain.

These cities were chosen and therefore matched according to a number of rough criteria that might be held to single them out as suitable – which is to say nationally unremarkable – places to study practices of public sphere discussion. Firstly, as cities, they represent the urban settings in which most residents of these countries now live their lives.4 Secondly, they are not capital cities, nor are they areas in which average incomes are considerably above the national average as is the case with, say, Bulgaria’s coastal cities of Varna

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4 This is more emphatically the case with respect to Bulgaria than Serbia. According to the 2011 census, 72.5 per cent of Bulgarians live in urban areas (National Statistical Institute Republic of Bulgaria 2011) while only 56 per cent of the Serbian population lives in urban areas according to 2010 data. CIA World Factbook, ‘Serbia’, available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ri.html. Accessed 20 January 2013
and Burgas or Serbia’s second city of Novi Sad. Thirdly, they are both cities that are demographically dominated by people identifying with the majority ethnic categories, while also having substantial but politically subordinate ethnic minority populations. Though my strategy of presenting public discussion data ahead of any analysis of party politics is a very deliberate one (since I hold that the content of the former is a better indicator of the state of democracy than the fortunes of the latter), I will add at this stage that the local administrations of each of these cities was closely contested at the time of fieldwork between enthusiastically pro-European parties then holding power at the national level and their avowedly nationalist but also formally pro-European opponents. In light of these shared characteristics, it would be reasonable to expect that these are settings in which one might expect practices of democratic citizenship in the public sphere to be neither particularly advanced nor particularly undeveloped in relation to the respective countries at large.

Beyond the rough matching of these cities by demographic and socio-economic criteria, I make no claim that either city is equivalent to the other, nor that they are ‘typical towns’ in the countries of the study – an impossibility in any case. Rather, they are culturally – and historically – specific contexts which, in the sense that all places are similarly unique, are the only kinds of contexts in which nationally-contained political institutions and media spheres are ever interpreted and experienced by citizens. As I have argued, this

5 For the last quarter of 2011, the average monthly salary in Plovdiv was 308 Euros, almost identical to the then national average of 306 Euros. By comparison, the figure in the capital Sofia was 364 Euros, while the largest coastal cities of Varna and Burgas came in at 362 and 331 euros respectively. Data from the National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, available at http://www.nsi.bg/otrasalen.php?otr=5. Accessed 31 January 2013. In 2011, the average net wage in Niš (after stoppages) was 343 euros per month, comparable to the national average of 394 Euros, while the figures in Belgrade and Novi Sad were 485 and 464 euros respectively. Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Available at http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/G2012/pdfE/G20121017.pdf. Accessed 31 January 2013.

6 I provide more detail about the population demographics of these cities in chapters 4 and 5. Both cities have large Roma populations which, privileging my academic colleagues’ estimations over the chronic under-counting in the official statistics, are roughly equivalent to one-tenth of Niš’s population (about 25,000 people) and up to one-seventh of Plovdiv’s (about 60,000 people).

7 In Niš, the local administration was controlled by the centrist Democratic Party and its partners at the time of the fieldwork, although the nationalist opposition of the Serbian Progressive Party were ultimately to gain control after the elections in May 2012. In Plovdiv, the mayoral candidate of the right-wing Pro-European GERB party Ivan Totev narrowly won the October 2011 local elections from the incumbent Slavcho Atanassov who stood under the banner of the newly-formed nationalist splinter party VMRO-NIE, really just a vehicle for the personal ambitions of Atanassov who had led the city since 2007. The recent historical development of party platforms and ideologies in the respective countries is the theme of Chapter 3 while recent election campaigns are covered in chapters 4 and 5.
dimension of citizens’ experience of democracy is poorly addressed by existing approaches. Since most existing studies of democratization (including those of Freedom House) routinely use the national state as the unit of analysis, it is desirable to frame such locally-rooted studies of the public sphere in national terms in order to bring my findings into dialogue with more formal, state-based approaches. Furthermore, it is only through a comparative approach to the ways that democratic citizenship is enacted and embodied by citizens residing in different national spheres that one can approach the question of the relative extent to which ‘democracy’ actually exists at the level of lived experience.

With respect to the specific data collection methods I have employed in this project, I will first address methodological principles. Since the theoretical approach to the public sphere that I described in the opening chapter conceives of democratic citizenship as a form of identification that is observable in the practices of agents (Mouffe 1992: 75, Eliasoph 1998: 11, Wedeen 2008: 114–115), I find that it is reasonable to apply methodological principles devised for the study of a different discursive construction of identification, namely nationalism. The empirical field of ‘everyday nationhood’ is founded upon a core theoretical distinction between the study of the ways in which persons can act as ‘national persons’ when prompted by interviewers or questionnaires and the way that they actually do act as national persons (or not) in the course of their everyday lives (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008: 537). While the social scientific repertoire is replete with ‘prompting’ methodologies such as surveys, interviews, focus groups and so-on, all of which are appropriate for finding out whether or not people can perform the role of democratic citizens, the question of whether citizens actually do participate in public sphere discussion is best addressed by means of an inductive approach to participant observation. Fox and Miller Idriss refer to this as the ‘wait-and-see’ approach (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008). In this project, I have combined this kind of participant observation research with a series of lightly-moderated group discussions in order to address both of these forms of data.

Although there is considerable overlap in practice, I have found participant observation to be particularly appropriate for gauging the degree of civic participation in the everyday lives of informants, while group discussion data is more appropriate for consideration of the discursive content of public sphere discussion. I will describe my use of each of these methods here, starting with participant observation. As with

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8 The empirical dimension of civic participation may be addressed by considering ‘whether, and to what degree, do individuals constitute themselves as citizens through public sphere discussion’.
Eliasoph’s forays into all manner of voluntary associations, ranging from country-western clubs to peace activism (Eliasoph 1998), I have aimed for a maximal range of viewpoints within the chosen cities, and this principle has guided my efforts to sample informants through participant observation research (and in convening group discussions). My entry into the field was aided by contacts in university departments, through whose assistance I was able to take on a limited amount of teaching and research duties. This brought me into contact with both academic colleagues and students who were very helpful in introducing me to subsequent informants. Furthermore, in order to put myself in contact with people not necessarily linked to higher education institutions, I participated in the activities of almost any available recreational and civic associations which would accept me as a member. These included a mountaineering club, a careers office, an ‘alternative’ NGO, a sports club (Serbia), a private language school, an environmental NGO, a running club and a dance class (Bulgaria). Of course, this sample was supplemented by innumerable interactions with landlords, neighbours, youth hostel staff and obviously friends, a great many of whom provided me with the benefit of their thoughts which have found their way anonymously (or pseudonymously) into my field notes. In these ways, I came into contact with people from a range of age groups and social backgrounds. Most of the interactions reported in this book (and all of the group discussions) took place in Serbo-Croatian or Bulgarian as appropriate.9

The format of the ‘group discussion’ is based on the work of Rogers Brubaker and his collaborators in their research into practices of everyday ethnicity in Cluj, Romania (Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox & Grancea 2006: 382–384). In the first instance, the authors follow William Gamson in assembling groups from existing ‘peer groups’ rather than applying the more rigid sampling criteria typical of ‘focus group’ research (Gamson

9At the time of the fieldwork, my Bulgarian language (once very fluent) was still marginally superior to my Serbo-Croatian, despite the fact that I had only received formal tuition in the latter. This was because I had lived and worked in Bulgaria for a period of several years (2002–06) and had already undertaken social and archival research in the country (Dawson 2012) before commencing this project. My Bulgarian inevitably suffered to some degree as I learned Serbo-Croatian at University College London for some three academic terms prior to entry to the field in January 2011. Nevertheless, I was generally able to hold my own in conversations in both languages, and the fact that much of the vocabulary of these languages overlaps undoubtedly helped with comprehension. Another factor that came into play with unstructured interactions – though not group discussions which were always conducted in vernacular languages – was that when I found myself alone in the company of someone of my acquaintance who spoke English better than I spoke their native tongue, as happened fairly frequently, we ‘found the quickest route’ to communication.
1992), and they further encourage informal behaviour by conducting the discussions over food and drink. In order to gain some idea of variation between generations, they seek to organize groups according to three generational cohorts justified according to the overlap of life histories with specific periods in recent Romanian history: 18–23 year olds, 30–40 year olds and over 55s. Finally, the authors refrain from subjecting discussion participants (usually 4 or 5) to pre-set questions in favour of organizing each two-hour discussion around a small number of broad themes such as ‘politics’ and ‘getting by’. Considering that the object of investigation of their study was ‘everyday ethnicity’, it can be seen that the inclusion of topics like ‘politics’ facilitated both the use and the avoidance of ethnicized frames of understanding without explicitly introducing them. The role of the social researcher became a rather passive one – a moderator rather than an interviewer – while the vast majority of the interaction took place between the participants themselves.

I have retained most features of this approach, but have deviated from this model in just a few important respects necessary to address the specific aims of my project. The features that I have retained include the practice of assembling groups from pre-existing peer groups (usually achieved by asking one of the group to assemble their friends or colleagues), the preferred group size of 4–5, the choice of a setting designed to put discussants at ease and the organization of groups according to distinct non-overlapping generational cohorts, roughly coinciding with the age boundaries specified by Brubaker et al.\textsuperscript{10} The argument of these authors that these age groups will have experienced different periods of their respective countries’ recent histories works just as well with respect to Serbia and Bulgaria in 2011 as it evidently did in Romania at the beginning of the previous decade.\textsuperscript{11} The most important respect in which I have differed is in terms of the topics of discussion: unlike Brubaker and his collaborators who waited to see if their informants would introduce discourses of ethnicity, I informed my groups in advance that they would be talking about ‘politics’

\textsuperscript{10} As in Brubaker et al.’s study, one or two participants would sometimes arrive who were outside the age parameters. In such cases, I proceeded with the discussion regardless.

\textsuperscript{11} Older Serbs and Bulgarians (‘over 55s’) would have reached adulthood under state socialism, the middle cohort (‘30–40’) will remember the politically turbulent and economically calamitous times of the 1990s and the youngest cohort (‘18–25’) would have reached an age of political awareness during the present ‘democratic’ period in which the two societies find themselves on opposite sides of the EU’s external boundary. It is possible to add, a little mischievously, that this principle works almost equally well ‘for any time and place context’. The real benefit appears to be that the use of non-overlapping age cohorts allows for the perception of generational variation in views and outlooks.
the central object of my investigation. As I was really interested in the discursive content of discussion on public or political matters, I tended to begin by asking informants to talk about ‘the good and the bad of life in Bulgaria/ Serbia’. This ‘national’ framing of the question encourages informants to discuss their concerns in a way that is ‘public’ and oriented to a wide circle of concern. Subsequent themes relating to ‘politics’, ‘elections’ or specific ‘protests’ were still more explicitly political. Other respects in which I deviated from the authors’ model were led by practical concerns, although these too had significant effects on the nature of discussion. For example, I halved the discussion time to one hour, mainly in order to reduce the amount of transcription, translation, coding and analysis to manageable proportions. In fact, since I convened a total of 12 group discussions in each city, all of which were conducted in vernacular languages, the first two of these tasks were of such magnitude that I could not do them alone.\textsuperscript{12} The relatively short period of discussion meant that I had to take a slightly more pro-active role as moderator in order to push the discussion into more than one domain – a considerable challenge from the perspective that emotive topics like ‘the good and the bad of Serbian life’ and ‘politics’ frequently moved participants into the territory of the 10-minute monologue. After reflecting on the transcripts of early discussions, I progressively became more active in later discussions in order to encourage more dynamic interactions among participants.

Consistent with my approach to participant observation, I made an explicit effort to include as broad a range of perspectives as possible in my group discussion sample. In the first instance, I achieved this by seeking to balance my sample according to gender, age (through the three age cohorts), and educational/professional backgrounds. However, I also sought to sample as wide a range of cultural identities as possible, and it is to this end that I consulted recent ethnographic literature and the advice of local social scientists wherever possible. These kinds of strategies, relying on a combination of local knowledge and snowball sampling where sufficient resources for applying a mathematically defensible sampling frame are not available, have been advocated by the anthropologist Edward Green under the label of ‘convenience, purposive

\textsuperscript{12} I quickly discovered that the idea of doing my own transcriptions and translations was incompatible with the aim of undertaking reasonably productive participant observation fieldwork. I very gratefully paid for this work to be undertaken and have acknowledged those responsible in the Acknowledgements section. Since returning from the field, I have coded all transcripts using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. My use of this software was not particularly sophisticated: more a case of managing a huge body of conversational data, using ‘code-and-retrieve’ functions as a means of re-familiarizing myself with discussions that I had moderated myself.
sampling’ (Green 2001). For example, influenced by recent sociological work claiming a relationship between rural ‘cultural styles’ and nationalist political affinities in Serbia (Cvetičanin & Popescu 2009), I made sure that at least one of the groups sampled fans of folk music in Niš. In a similar vein, when considering the composition of the groups from the over 55 age group in Niš, a sociological colleague of that generation suggested that the social division between rural incomers and Staronišlije (those whose families had resided in Niš for several generations) was salient for his generation, stating that it was important to bear in mind that the population of the city had more than doubled during the socialist period. Thus I resolved to sample at least half of that age cohort from those born outside of the city. These kinds of concerns meshed with more conventional ones, so that I balanced basic socio-economic considerations of gender balance and professional/educational background with culturally- and even locally-specific considerations. In these ways, I used snowball sampling to start with those groups most accessible to me and progressively sought to end up with those perspectives that were lacking until I had reached a sample (totalling 12 groups in each city) that was equally balanced by gender, organized into three age cohorts, each of which consisted of four groups that were diverse in terms of social and cultural composition.

Finally, it is necessary to outline my strategy for presenting this data in a way that achieves the stated aim of bringing my approach into a dialogue with existing comparative approaches to democratization (such as that adopted by Freedom House) while remaining faithful to the ethnographic commitment to context. I try to achieve this by working at two different levels of analysis: by presenting the key findings of the project in a rather condensed form up-front in this chapter, and then supplying progressively more fine-grained forms of analysis in the chapters that follow. Indeed, I claim that the findings that I highlight in this comparative chapter

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Regrettably, one respect in which I failed to represent these cities was in terms of their Roma minorities. I generally followed an ethnicity-blind approach to the composition of group discussions, which led to the participation of a handful of people identifying with minority ethnicities across the two cities, but no Roma. It had become obvious long before the end of the fieldwork period that the degree of social exclusion of Roma populations from the mainstream of life in both of these cities meant that I would have to be more pro-active in convening Roma groups. However, I decided against this from the perspective that I could not have claimed to contextualize the perspectives of these citizens of the towns in any sensible way without conducting a separate ethnographic study. Due to the time-consuming ethnographic necessities of gaining contacts and building rapport, this was impossible given the limited time allotted to an already ambitious fieldwork agenda. Thus what follows can be understood as arising from a broad and inclusive but nonetheless incomplete ethnography of the public sphere in these cities.
must necessarily be supported by more detailed and context-sensitive forms of analysis in order to justify the appellation ‘ethnographic’. In this vein, I follow Peregrine Schwartz-Shea in recognizing that ‘thick description’ is a key criterion of comparability from the perspective that it is only when readers are provided with a sufficient degree of contextual detail that they are able to judge the degree to which the findings may be applicable to other contexts (Schwartz-Shea 2006). Since I cannot sensibly claim to provide this kind of attention to context in the space of this chapter alone, I will take up the challenge in the remaining empirical chapters. To this effect, I supply an account of the recent historical development of political discourse in the two countries of the study (Chapter 3), followed by broader ethnographic surveys of political discussion in each country separately (chapters 4 and 5). What follows in this chapter is thus a condensed presentation of ethnographic data that aims for legibility within the comparative and evaluative framework of the democracy measurement paradigm.

Talking Politics in Serbia and Bulgaria

At the outset of this chapter, I argued that public sphere discussion in Serbia is more philosophically plural with a more pronounced element of liberal discourse relative to Bulgaria. As should be clear from the preceding methodology section, these are findings that arise from the analysis of many hundreds of interactions gathered through 12 months of participant observation and two-dozen group discussions across the two fieldsites. Since any attempt to present a full and representative sample of these accounts in the limited space available in this chapter runs the risk of failing to communicate the vital dimension of the tone and character of public sphere discussion, I have elected to defer presentation of a fuller range of perspectives until chapters 4 and 5. However, it is possible to at least illustrate these findings through the juxtaposition of extracts from just two group discussion transcripts. Since I have argued that the mainstream of political discourse in both societies can reasonably be described as illiberal, my claim that the Serbian public sphere is philosophically plural rests on the idea that some significant liberal ‘counterdiscourse’ exists through which a significant minority of Serbian citizens ‘formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’ (Fraser 1992: 123). My choice of extract from the Niš groups is selective in this sense: it does not show typical

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14 This perspective is supported by some contemporary work on both Serbian (Edmunds 2009, Ramet 2011) and Bulgarian (Pedersen & Johannsen 2011) political discourse.
political talk in Niš, but rather what I represent as discourse characteristic of a distinct ‘liberal’ counterpublic. The existence of this oppositional, liberal counterpublic is worth applauding from the normative perspective of democracy promotion because it may be understood to represent a constituency inclined to demand accountability of elites in terms that are congruent with those assumed by the liberal democratic blueprint enshrined in the country’s institutions.

The presentation of the extract from the Niš group will be followed by excerpts from a similar group discussion from Plovdiv, Bulgaria. My claim of the lesser degree of pluralism and liberalism in the Bulgarian public sphere rests on my argument that oppositional discourse is rather less prevalent there and rather less liberal where it is encountered. While I am not claiming that there is no outspoken liberal dissent against illiberal orthodoxies in Bulgarian public life, I can claim that those Bulgarian intellectuals expressing counter-majoritarian views on, say, national historiography, ethnic relations or social justice have to do so in the knowledge that they can count on very little public support. (Though it is beyond the remit of this chapter, I will add at this point that I agree with those analysts suggesting that the generally hopeful waves of protest targeting the links between oligarchic networks and political elites in Bulgaria through 2013 have so far done little to disturb the taboos constraining the parameters of public discourse [Tsoneva 2014]. These protests are discussed at some length in a post-script to this book.). On the basis of my field research, I can claim that solidarities based on consistent identifications with liberal principles are rare to the point of sociological invisibility in the country’s second city of Plovdiv. In selecting the Bulgarian extract, I could therefore have quoted from almost any one of the 12 groups I convened to stress the relatively unreflexive way in which most

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15 My usage of the term ‘liberal’ in this chapter is based on the lengthy discussion offered in the opening chapter: in short, it connotes principles such as liberty, equality, civic tolerance and representation that are inscribed in the institutional forms of liberal democracy; it is not to be confused with economic liberalism or the individualist pursuit of self-interest. As Schmitter & Karl note, economistic conceptions of liberalism are compatible with democracy but are not necessary conditions of its existence (Schmitter & Karl 1991).

16 As observed through participant observation and recorded in the author’s fieldnotes, these stances have a prominence in everyday life that is roughly proportional to the group discussion sample. As I argue in Chapter 4, its existence also creates an aspirational tendency among a larger number of less philosophically committed Serbs to identify with an intellectual cosmopolitanism that is somewhat at odds with the observed continuity of conservative social tendencies among many urban Serbs.
of those I interacted with in Plovdiv understood politics and social life through illiberal assumptions that impeded their earnest efforts to make sense of the liberal principles enshrined in the rules of the democratic political game. In order to introduce a rough element of systematization, I have elected to quote from the Plovdiv group that most closely approximates to the chosen Niš group in the sense that both groups are gender-mixed, consisting of city-born adults with higher education sampled (albeit imperfectly) according to the same age category.

This first extract is taken from a group discussion in March 2011 in which a group of four friends from Niš in their late 20s and early 30s discuss Serbia’s political problems. As is the case throughout this book, names have been changed to protect the anonymity of informants. While it is clear from the nature of the discussion that the group are highly-educated and maintain a close interest in politics, it is important to note that none of them are employed in politics nor are any of them working in related professions such as law or the non-governmental sector. In fact, according to my notes, two are not in regular employment and there is only one member of the group (the English-teaching assistant lecturer) who is actually contracted to work on a full-time basis. Several minutes earlier, the group had been asked to discuss ‘politics in Serbia’, and the conversation is now in full swing. Several public figures are mentioned by the first speaker (‘Uroš’) and so it is necessary to provide some background information here, even though the tone of the discussion should be fairly clear from the transcript alone. The first political reference made is to the then recent sacking of the deputy PM Mladen Dinkić (leader of the then disintegrating G17+ party) by then PM Mirko Cvetković of the Democratic Party (DS). Thus the ‘they’ who are ‘losing their grip’ in Uroš’s first comment are the DS-led government. The next mention is of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and their leader, Tomislav ‘Toma’ Nikolić, who was then in opposition and calling for early elections. This is followed by a reference to the government’s announcement of the embezzlement trial of Svetlana ‘Ceca’ Ražnatović, the singer and widow of the late warlord Željko ‘Arkan’ Ražnatović. Several independent public officials with briefs to protect citizens’ rights and regulate public affairs are mentioned later in the conversation with respect to the Ombudsman institution. Finally, a reference is made to Muamer Zukorlić, a Bosniak/Muslim leader from

17 ‘Darko’, a bookseller in his late 20s, does not pass comment during the exchange below.

18 The term ‘Bosniak’ stresses a national unity of Slavic Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. It is preferred by some, though not all, Muslims in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.
the Sandžak region of Serbia, who had been agitating for some degree of autonomy from the Serbian state on behalf of the religious community he claims to represent.

Uroš (M, English-teaching assistant lecturer, early 30s): But they sense that they’re losing their grip once they sacked Dinkić … The Progressive Party, no matter what they’re like, they’ll always have votes because people are fed up with the Democratic Party and they want to cling to anyone, even Toma [Nikolić]. They feel they’re losing their edge, losing votes, hence the Ceca case … and they won’t even arrest her, they’ll leave her for the next elections.

Danica (F, Unemployed, late 20s): Their estimate was that Dinkić was the least popular person at the moment so they sacked him … and how did they sack him? They replaced him with his best friend … and now you see Dinkić everywhere, opening factories, bridges, as though he hadn’t been sacked. You can see he still has a say in all those things.

Jelena (F, Freelance Teacher/Translator, early 30s): They had to blame someone, they needed a scapegoat.

Danica: And they try to create the impression that they’re doing something, like: “Look at us, we’ve sacked Dinkić”.

Uroš: The problem here is that the institutions aren’t independent of the ruling group. The institutions in this country are devastated. The army and the police …

JD (author): The Ombudsman?

Jelena: The Ombudsman is the only institution functioning in this country! The Ombudsman, and Commissioner Sabić, and Verica Barac who’s head of the Anti-Corruption Council. This is an independent state body, and she’s been warning the public for months and years about all the illegal things the tycoons have done, and yesterday there was this tycoon complaining about her, and Prime Minister Cvetković took his side saying: Right, let’s see why she’s bothering him …

Uroš: What about that Marko Karadžić, the secretary to the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights … how long was he there? He talked about such things in public two or three times and they finished with him.

Jelena: No, he resigned himself, saying he could not work under such conditions. He said: I don’t want to receive a salary, I’m here to do my job and that’s human rights, but the Minister is sabotaging me … they made a mess of those elections for National (minority) Councils in Sandžak and now they are trying to organize new elections, and that was what enraged Zukorlić and his people …

Uroš: And this is where we are supposed to see the strength of the state. Not in the current government and people in power, but in the institutions, in the mechanisms that govern a state
towards a better future and shouldn’t depend on who’s in power … we don’t have that. Here the police are always loyal to whoever is in power.

Throughout this exchange, the general attitude is one of cynicism and disappointment. As is evident from Uroš’ dismissive mention of Nikolić and his SNS party and the fact that Jelena takes an unusually sympathetic position with relation to the grievances of the Muslim separatist leader Zukorlić, this group implicitly identify in opposition to conservative and nationally-exclusive visions of politics. This stance helps to explain their sense of grievance with the alleged failures of the incumbent Democratic Party, which had long touted its credentials as a liberal, ‘European’ party, and might reasonably have been expected to do a better job of providing an alternative to the corruption and nationalist excess of the country’s Milošević-era past. Both the sacking of Dinkić and the upcoming trial of Ceca are dismissed (by Uroš and Danica) as insincere attempts by the DS to persuade voters that the party really is attempting to do something about corruption in government and the impunity of the country’s criminal elite respectively (‘they needed a scapegoat’; ‘they try to create the impression that they’re doing something’; ‘they won’t even arrest her’). The negative tone of the conversation is temporarily reversed when Jelena responds to my question by jumping to the defence of the Ombudsman institution and the efforts of the other public officials she mentions, but even then she concludes that the sincere efforts of some independent public officials to fight corruption and defend civil rights are inevitably frustrated by the corruption of politicians such as PM Mirko Cvetković. Uroš agrees, adding a supporting example before he returns to his theme of the corrupted state of the country’s institutions, which are seen as lacking independence from ‘whoever is in power’.

Understood on its own terms, this exchange tells a depressing story of citizens alienated by the corruption of a state apparatus on the part of politicians who are seen as putting their own interests above those of the country’s citizens. Specifically, politicians are seen as deciding when high-profile suspected criminals


20 Serbia contains several agencies that are intended to act as a check on majoritarian or self-interested impulses among elected politicians, although in practice some of these post-holders take a more activist role than others. The particular work and achievements of some of these agencies are discussed by Monogioudis (2013).
may be apprehended in readiness for election campaigns or when investigations can be suspended, probably to supply opportunities for graft. These assumptions were widely shared among liberal intellectuals addressing the long-serving Democratic Party-led administration at that time,\(^\text{21}\) so it is highly plausible that the discussants are broadly correct in their conclusions, and that indeed is depressing. However, if I am to take the exchange as an example of public sphere discussion, then it is possible to draw another set of conclusions. Here are citizens, certainly above average in terms of educational level but severely lacking in material wealth and financial security – they are no kind of ‘elite’ – who display a very impressive normatively-informed understanding of the liberal democratic system. Uroš’s complaint that the institutions are not fulfilling their function because of political interference assumes a separation of powers that is a common feature of many well-functioning liberal democratic systems. Jelena’s defence of the actions of a number of public officials is grounded in an understanding of the roles of the independent public officials as providing a legal check on the power of elected politicians in defence of citizens’ rights. This point also reveals a will and ability to discriminate between different public officials based on their actions even when politicians are generally perceived as acting selfishly; it is not a ‘politics is bad so I don’t care’ stance. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Uroš’ implication that Ceca Ražnatović should have been arrested before (he made this explicit in an earlier statement) reveals a lack of sympathy for the section of country’s elite associated with the nationalist excess and breakdown of the rule of law in the 1990s. In a similar vein, Jelena’s assumption that the Serbian government are to blame for the separatist movement in the Sandžak (‘Zukorlić and his people’) reveals a reluctance to accept the ‘groupist’, ‘ethnicizing’ language in which advocates of Bosniak/Muslim autonomy usually appear in Serbian political discourse. In summary, from the normative perspective of a roughly Habermasian constitutional post-national liberalism,\(^\text{22}\) this is a very encouraging piece of public sphere discussion. Furthermore, because such orientations to the political system are sure to have developed in the context of a relational social space, the coherence of such liberal public sphere discourse is evidence enough


\(^{22}\) I am referring in particular to the influential set of essays published as Between Facts and Norms (Habermas 1996) that are often taken in the literature for the definitive statements of Habermas’ approach. The essay on the post-national vision, in which Habermas called for a ‘constitutional patriotism’ is of particular relevance here.
to infer the availability of liberal ideas in the national public arena – whether in formal politics, civil society or the mass media.23

For the sake of facilitating comparison, I will now turn to an extract (in two sections) taken from a group discussion in Plovdiv, Bulgaria from November 2011. The participants in the following discussion are classmates studying English together one evening per week at a private language school; as in the previous group, all have higher education. Perhaps coincidentally, or perhaps not, three of the four have training in different branches of the engineering sciences although two of the group worked as the owners of businesses at the time. It is therefore of obvious relevance from a comparative point of view that this group appear to be a touch better off, rather more commercial and perhaps less academic in orientation in relation to the Niš group quoted above.24 It is also notable that Vili (once again, names have been changed) introduced herself as a member of Plovdiv’s Armenian community and, at different times during the conversation, verbally identified with both her Bulgarian citizenship and Armenian ancestry. The only reference in need of some explanation is that referring to the ‘Stolipinovo’ neighbourhood of Plovdiv, which is mentioned because it is home to most of Plovdiv’s large Roma population. This first section is taken from an early section of the discussion in which the participants are discussing the ‘good and bad’ of life in Bulgaria.

Bozhidar (M, mid 30s, office worker): We are too tolerant and patient as a nation, we prefer waiting patiently, one day comes and another day passes by, but we just sit where we are and there is no progress.

JD (author): If people in Bulgaria were more like the Greeks25 then, if they were protesting, would the situation be better now?

Aneta (F, late 30s, Owner of cosmetics business): I do not know, only a few things bother me in Bulgaria.

23 This point highlights the inter-connection between the study of discourse ‘from above’ and the study of everyday (discursive) practices ‘from below’. Since both analytical dimensions are indispensable for the present study, I address the problem of political discourse in the following chapter.

24 All of these particularistic factors certainly impact upon political talk in ways that signal that this is not a ‘controlled comparison’. However, I argue with Brubaker and Laitin that the very idea of controlled comparison is an illusion (Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 435). Even the most closely-matched of real-world comparisons turn out to be ‘apples’ and ‘oranges’ under closer inspection, as in this case.

25 I used this analogy because it was one that I had often heard in contexts where Bulgarian speakers sought to contrast their own ‘passivity’ with the supposed militancy of their Greek neighbours.
Mladen (M, early 40s, electronic engineer): The Serbs are the same way. There is no surprise they were bombed in the '90s and now they live a better life than us. As a nation they are more united. We are more individualist. I do not know whether this is good or not.

Vili (F, late 20s, sales engineer): Everywhere it is the same. I think it more depends on what kind of person you are.

Aneta: What do you mean by saying it is the same everywhere?

Vili: I mean, in Europe you cannot go protesting in the street like that. In Europe things just do not work that way. It just depends on you, whether you are an individualist or not.

Aneta: Only the laws bother me in Bulgaria. I want my country to have strict law and order.

Mladen: No one abides by the laws here. The fact is that laws exist, but no one cares about them.

Aneta: In neighbourhoods like Stolipinovo there are no laws. From my point of view, that annoys me very much.

Mladen: It annoys me too.

Aneta: It is unbelievable. When I was young and I had a baby, my husband and I were both university graduates. One day we went to a market in Plovdiv, I do not want to say its name now, and we saw that there were new flats built for the Gypsies. And we lived in lodgings and paid rent and I wondered how to make two ends meet and we both had higher education. They get their electricity, water bills and everything paid because when the elections come along, they vote for who they have to and I vote for who I want to.

Mladen: Their bills for electricity and water are still being paid by the government.

Aneta: This is what happens to us – we are educated people and receive nothing. The youth of Bulgaria go abroad to study and remain to live abroad. This makes me angry, because I want my child to live here.

I have included this first section because it highlights a number of the background assumptions that are necessary to bear in mind when seeking to understand the stances adopted in the following section on politics. Specifically, I am referring to the fact that three of the four speakers (Bozhidar, Mladen and Aneta), admittedly aided to some extent by my prompt, explicitly describe the world as being divided into discrete nations each of which has its own essential characteristics. While this underlying national habitus does not necessarily connote a nationalist orientation – note that Bozhidar and Mladen conceive of their aim as criticizing the Bulgarian nation – this view of the world easily maps onto the view of politics as a competitive struggle in which some nations act and prosper while others stagnate in a kind of zero-sum game that would be familiar to scholars working in the Realist paradigm of international relations (after Waltz 1979; for a critique, see
In fact, the popular auto-stereotype of Bulgarians as ‘passive’ or ‘tolerant’ works as a challenge, a call to assert one’s own national interest in order to meet the challenge presented by other nations (Rechel 2007). Only Vili appears to be uncomfortable with the generalizations being passed around the table, but her attempts to recast the terms of the conversation with the claim that ‘it is the same everywhere’ ultimately fails to convince. In arguing that individualist (as opposed to ‘collectivist’?) orientations depend only on the person concerned, she tries to evoke the positive example of ‘Europe’. However, her description of ‘Europe’ as a place where ‘you cannot go protesting in the street like that’ evokes a rather less liberal and more authoritarian image. In fact, the idea that the states of Western Europe prosper because they are less rather than more tolerant of dissent, that they achieve a national unity that is lacking in Bulgaria, is a pervasive one. Aneta ignores Vili’s comment and accepts the nationalist challenge implicit in the negative discourse of tolerance/passivity. She recasts the liberal discourse of the rule of law to focus on the alleged abuses of those cast as a national ‘other’. Thus, her strident insistence on the law becomes a means of airing her grievances about the Roma whom she perceives as a deviant national ‘other’ using up resources that should be preserved for more deserving Bulgarians. Overall, the discussion that emerges from the interaction is one that certainly bears the imprint of the liberal international order in which Bulgarian citizens are compelled to understand their place in the world, with particular references to the rule of law, individual autonomy and the exemplar of ‘Europe’. However, these ideas are not articulated together in any coherent manner, leaving nationalism intact as the dominant and prevailing discourse. Vili’s vision of ‘Europe’ is almost diametrically at odds with how most liberal democratic West European states like to present themselves. Mladen’s conception of Serbia as a country pushing ahead in a spirit of national unity is probably more fantastical still. Despite the subtly different issue stances of the speakers, they appear to share the assumption, unhelpful for the liberal, that progress occurs when all are compelled to pull in the same direction.

In the second section, the same group discusses politics – specifically the recent local elections, with particular reference to the close race for the mayoral position in Plovdiv contested in the weeks just prior to the recording of the discussion in November 2011. Specific references are made to the illegal practices of vote buying that are widely believed to take place on a wide scale in the country,26 which always generates a

considerable amount of comment at election times. Although the mayoral candidates are not mentioned by name, a reference is made to the surprise win by the ruling right-wing GERB party’s relatively unknown candidate Ivan Totev over the popular incumbent Slavcho Atanassov (of the small nationalist party VMRO-NIE) by just a few hundred votes. One controversy relating to this race was that the central (GERB) government in Sofia had withheld the payment of over 20 million euros compensation to Plovdiv for the disposal of the capital’s garbage for the duration of Atanassov’s incumbency, and so the comments about ‘dunghills’ refer to this scandal. One suspicious reference is made to the fact that GERB candidates won by small margins in several towns across the country.

Vili: Half of the votes were bought … and the other half were bought for a lot more money.
Aneta: Who bought these votes? Everyone says that elections are bought.
Mladen: It is impossible for it to happen everywhere, for the party which is in power now to win everywhere with the minimum required to win, by less than a third of a per cent.
Aneta: The strangest thing is that we say votes were bought. Why not assume that maybe this is what the country needs? In the first place I am happy with the elections because I wanted this party to rule in Plovdiv and I was very happy that GERB won. Because I heard all kinds of things about the other candidates and so in this election I voted for the only candidate about whom I know nothing. The one and only reason for this is that I wish to have more money invested in this city. I do not think that the other candidates are so honest and respectable. They are all much of a muchness.
Mladen: Why did they [GERB] divert several million away from our town a year and a half ago?
Aneta: That is why I voted for the ruling party’s candidate – to get more money for Plovdiv!
Mladen: And they will have it [the money] for the next few years and after that they won’t be in power. For sure, that is what will happen.
Aneta: My choice was deliberate – economic. I thought about how we could have the money for the city in which I live. Plovdiv was facing the danger of becoming a huge dunghill for Sofia.
Mladen: Well, it is a dunghill already.

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Vili: I have friends who were candidates for municipalities, not for mayor, and they told me that all the parties sit down together with great mockery, they drink and discuss and then determine who does what and what will be robbed and acquired in the town.

Mladen: I wonder how come there is still more to be stolen from this country. I still cannot figure it out.

With reference to form rather than content, the reasoned argument at the heart of this extract conducted between Aneta and Mladen demonstrates that the slightly-artificial setting of the group discussion has occasioned ‘the performance of a distinct form of personhood, one that revels in peaceful disagreement’ (Wedeen 2008: 119), which is to say that this exchange fulfills one of the minimal requirements of public sphere discussion. However, I am obviously also interested in content. While two of the discussants (Mladen and Vili) come close to the cynical and disappointed tone of the Serb discussants, the gloom is lifted by Aneta who declares herself to be very satisfied with the results of the election and with the ruling party. Clearly, Aneta takes the corruption (that she acknowledges) for granted and has ceased to be surprised or even offended by it. She explicitly accepts Mladen’s claim that the national GERB government was withholding funds from Plovdiv so long as they did not control the local authority and proudly declared that she voted for the GERB candidate ‘to get more money for Plovdiv!’.

While such a cheery embrace of patronage politics is distressing for the democrat, it is also a minority position in my data. In this section and elsewhere, the responses of Vili and Mladen to the perceptions about electoral corruption that they refer to is more typical in that they are inclined to see all politicians as equally tainted. Vili’s closing anecdote of political actors sitting down together and planning to asset-stripe their constituencies is a good illustration of this. While Mladen’s complaints in this section are broadly congruent with the kind of critique that a committed liberal might level at the political machinations that appear to have decided the electoral fate of Plovdiv, such an impression would be misplaced. Mladen elsewhere declares that he much preferred the system ‘before 10 November 1989’, never has voted and never will. Thus, it is fair to say that this group, excepting Aneta’s embrace of the system’s illiberal

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28 With reference to scholarly attempts to judge the health of democracy from satisfaction surveys (Eurobarometer, World Values Survey and so on) it is worth considering the effect that citizens embracing clientelistic politics may have on the data, as enthusiastic adherents might possibly answer questions about ‘satisfaction with democracy’ positively. In addition, such votes help to keep turnout levels respectable in a way that should not necessarily be understood as an endorsement of the political system (‘liberal democracy’).
subversion, perceives no redemption for the political system in any manner that is equivalent to the active support of the Niš group for the actions of independent agencies attempting to hold political figures to account. Moreover, while the Niš group appeared to be united by a discourse that actually provides a rationale for bringing figures to account on liberal grounds, it is unclear whether any of the Plovdiv group would be able to point to any guiding principle short of, perhaps, the nationalist call for solidarity *vis-a-vis* other nations.

In presenting these close readings of conversational data, I have been careful to stress that these extracts are not representative of the broad samples of citizens who participated in the study. The Serbian extract in particular is selected specifically because it represents what I have characterized as a ‘counterpublic’ organized around liberal discourses of freedom, equality, representation, civic tolerance and so-on. These will be the ‘normal’ registers of political discussion for a swathe of Serbia’s urban populations that might conservatively be estimated to number several hundreds of thousands nationally, but in a population of over seven million these ‘hard liberals’ represent no more than a sizeable minority. In this spirit, I will not hesitate to add that roughly half of the Serbian groups probably bore a closer resemblance in terms of discursive content to the featured Bulgarian group than they did to their ‘liberal-cosmopolitan’ compatriots. The economic scapegoating of marginal social groups, the assumption that national unity is a criterion of being European, and even nostalgia for authoritarian rule were all frequently encountered in Niš as well as Plovdiv. It is certainly worth reiterating that the Serbian public sphere is no exemplary case of liberal democratic practice, not least because many Serbian citizens are explicitly hostile or ambivalent with respect to democracy itself.

However, while the Plovdiv conversation could probably also have taken place in Niš, the crux of my argument lies in the claim that the reverse is not also true. Put simply, the public sphere in Niš provides some of its citizens with a capacity to hold political elites to account in a way that is supportive of a specifically liberal conception of democracy, while the public sphere in Plovdiv does not. Furthermore, the presence of distinct liberal voices in the Serbian public sphere forces an awareness of challenges to illiberal and socially-

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29 It is obviously very hard to quantify the prevalence of political orientations. Voting figures cannot help much here since, as I aim to show in Chapter 4, such orientations are only weakly represented in the national political arena. However, it is very obvious on the ground that one is not only dealing with professional intellectuals but also sections of the population that are similarly unimpressed by the influence of mediocre nationalist authors, turbo-folk divas and bearded clerics on politics. After all, *somebody* besides my immediate informants must have been reading satirical websites like [njuz.net](http://njuz.net) and it must have been more than one graffiti artist who sneakily transformed every other daubing of ‘*Srbija Srbima*’ (‘Serbia for the Serbs’) graffiti into ‘*Srbija svima*’ (‘Serbia for Everyone’).
conservative orthodoxies even among many of those citizens who will never take time to consider what Ombudsman institutions are for, or why institutions ought to be ‘independent of the ruling group’. Considering that some Nišlije were able to dissect institutional politics with such philosophical coherence, it should be no surprise to realize that many of their peers who did not seem to follow politics closely were at least able to distinguish liberal and inclusive political practices from illiberal and exclusivist ones. Of course, none of this negates the fact that a great many Serbs prefer to bind their political identity to the exclusivist categories of ethnic Serbdom and the Orthodox Church. Others evidently embrace the patronage politics of well-funded political parties promising less abstract rewards. Through all this, the Serbian public sphere will remain meaningfully pluralist and contested so long as at least some citizens continue to reject the illiberal discourses of the mainstream on clear, principled grounds. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria by contrast, this element of philosophical contestation is missing, ostensibly because no coherent oppositional counterdiscourse has emerged to challenge the nationalist and socially conservative assumptions in which mainstream political discourse is grounded. As in the featured extract, attempts to hold elites to account in the name of ‘Europe’ or ‘democracy’ usually fail because so few can tie these concepts to specific principles. In the absence of any other shared vocabulary, even young and highly-educated Bulgarians tend to fall back on ethnic nationalism and other discourses antithetical to liberal democratic principles. The result is that the Bulgarian public sphere is evidently experienced as a disharmonious consensus in which most seem unhappy with the political present, but find themselves understanding politics through the same exclusivist categories of understanding as the politicians they malign. The avoidance of philosophical conflict is achieved at the price of the elimination of meaningful pluralism.30

Comparing the Everyday Public Sphere in Serbia and Bulgaria

While I have so far relied on just two selectively chosen group discussion extracts in order to ‘illustrate’ my argument, in this section I provide a brief summary of data gathered in the varied contexts of everyday life by means of one year of participant observation divided between the cities of Niš and Plovdiv. The analytical focus is slightly different in the sense that data gathered by means of participant observation is marginally better suited to judging questions of civic participation than discursive content. This methodological point

30 This formulation draws on Chantal Mouffe’s work. As Mouffe has argued, such cases of apparent consensus often mask the frustrations of diverse societies (Mouffe 1999).
informs the findings that I emphasize in this section: the Serbian public sphere is larger in the sense that those in Niš discussed politics far more frequently in the course of their everyday lives than did their counterparts in Plovdiv. From the perspective that democratic citizens are formed through participation in public spheres (Eliasoph 1998: 11, Arendt 1958), this would suggest that everyday life takes on a markedly more democratic hue, providing more fertile soil for the formation of solidarities, suggesting higher levels of ‘civic power’.

To make the case that politics was a recurring topic of everyday conversation in Niš is not to argue that most Nišlije ‘like’ politics. The spontaneous conversational forays into political territory that I observed were more often conducted in a spirit of distancing oneself from political machinations than in embracing them, a phenomenon that has already been described by political ethnographers working on Serbia (Greenberg 2010) and on other contexts (Eliasoph 1998, Fox 2004). To give just one of many examples of unprompted political talk from my Niš fieldnotes, a friend who worked as a teacher of physical education at one of the technical faculties of the university related the opinions of a senior sociologist on the topic of the announced embezzlement trial of Ceca Ražnatović to his assembled friends enjoying drinks in his flat. With some degree of relish, he said, ‘You know what Professor X told me about Ceca? He said that it is now we can tell that the elections are getting close’. Of course, this is really just a different way of expressing the same idea that the Niš group discussants used to understand the case, that the DS-led government was making a belated show of going after high-profile, well-connected underworld figures with the elections on the horizon (after allowing them to conduct their business with impunity during the intervening years since the last election). However, because this statement was unelicited when the speaker might conceivably have spoken about almost anything else, it is reasonable to make a few more observations. Firstly, the admiring tone suggests that the act of expressing clever-sounding opinions about politics increases the prestige of the speaker, which is to say that talk about politics is one of the socially-acceptable ways through which speakers in that context choose to construct their identities in relation to the world (on ‘making one’s appearance in the world’ through political discussion, see Arendt 1958). Secondly, the physical education teacher’s endorsement of the cynical opinion of the sociologist suggests that he too aspires to be critical about politics, to be someone who ‘gets it’ rather than a subject of manipulation. More often than not, conversations about politics were mocking and jocular, but when things became more serious, this gave way to anger. While certainly not complimentary about Serbian politics on the whole, the public sphere seemed to contain close to the amount of discussion about politics that one might hear among working class people in an English city; certainly not models of ‘informed
citizens’, but not generally apolitical either. If one were required to do so, after a few months of acquaintance, it would probably be possible to characterize most of the people one encountered in terms of their political persuasions.

With respect to the Bulgarian case, it is hard to describe ethnographically what I have characterized as a relative absence of public sphere discussion about politics. After six months in the field, it was generally much harder to identify one’s acquaintances in terms of their political persuasion, with the admitted exception of just a few of my university colleagues. This can be attributed to the fact that, rather than expressing views about specific events or political figures, many people preferred to express strong aversions to ‘politics’ in general. One suitable illustration of this tendency may be the aversion to formal politics in the country’s green movement, which – at least prior to the emergence of broad anti-government protests in 2012–2013 – was the only progressive social movement able to mobilize Bulgarian citizens to any significant degree (Kenarov 2012). The general distaste among green activists for getting involved in politics no doubt helps to explain the electoral insignificance of the splintered green parties which exist (none of which passed the 1.5 per cent threshold for public electoral funding in 2009, not to mention the 4 per cent threshold for entering parliament).

Within one organization that I volunteered for, those few members who were seeking to participate in the local elections were viewed with suspicion by the majority who did not. In part, this could be explained in terms of pragmatic considerations: politics involves making alliances that can leave one without access to public funds when the fortunes of one’s political allies falls in the bitter factional world of Bulgarian politics. However, such a pragmatic disavowal of politics could not explain the deep contempt with which many committed nature conservation workers and volunteers viewed those who ‘brought politics into the office’. Political involvement was seen by many as a means only of seeking ever greater personal power or, as one of the organization’s employees told me, ‘building an empire’. When I asked one senior member involved in the political faction why there was no enthusiasm in the green movement for forming progressive alliances of the kind popular in some Western European countries, where greens articulate their programme together with other progressive forces such as social democrats, minority rights groups, gender rights and pro-LGBT groups, he answered vaguely that the problem was that the green movement in Bulgaria contained many people who would not support it if it ‘became political’. Seeking clarification, I asked whether he was referring to the relatively large number of ‘skinheads’ who came along to green events and might withdraw their support if the greens threw their lot in with progressive parties. However, his response revealed that the barriers to progressive alliances
were not imagined as rooted in popular aversions to specific causes, but to politics itself: ‘No, many people just don’t like politics. I mean lots of people, not just the skinheads’.\textsuperscript{31} Of course, the organizational structure of a green organization is a very specific context, but the dynamics observed are themselves informed by broader social norms.

Like those in Serbia, when Bulgarians do discuss formal party politics, they usually prefer to identify ‘against’ rather than ‘for’. However, I argue in Chapter 4 that most Serbs may be understood as being more vehemently against some part of the political spectrum than others, in a way that quite obviously identifies them as ‘nationalists’, ‘liberals’ and so-on. In Plovdiv, the abdication of identification with political competition was generally far more comprehensive – as with all of those in the group featured in this chapter, save the woman who embraced GERB on a clientelistic basis. After many months in the field I found that it was unusual that I could characterize the political preferences of people whose social habits and cultural tastes I had come to know quite well, with the exception of some of my academic colleagues (a minority of whom identified as intellectuals of the political right – a stance discussed at length in Chapter 5). Most of the people I came to know best in Plovdiv are still more identifiable to me as Manchester United fans or as computer programmers than in terms of their political preferences, still less in terms of political philosophies of the kind implied by the ‘left’ and ‘right’ labels that are routinely attached to journalism on political competition in the country.

The contrast I have presented above has important implications for how we might think about political participation. Voting is probably the dominant social scientific measure through which a ‘participatory’ political culture is identified (Dahl 1971), but it is by no means the only one. As should be clear from the theoretical discussion presented earlier, I favour those normatively engaged theories that stress the manner in which democratic citizens are constituted through the discursive activity of public sphere discussion (Arendt 1958, Habermas 1989, 1996, Fraser 1992, Warner 2002). Perhaps the most ambitious of these theories is that proposed by Hannah Arendt who, building upon the Aristotelian distinction between political and private persons, argued in \textit{The Human Condition} that it is only through speech and argumentation in public contexts

\textsuperscript{31} Author’s fieldnotes, October 2011.
that human beings can reach their full potential – that of the political rather than the private person\(^\text{32}\) (Arendt 1958). Of course, such normative ideas about how democracy ought to be performed are not judgemental about whether or not citizens are generally dismissive or effusive about the way that their societies are being governed, only about whether they participate in discussion. The Arendtian vision is still less dependent on the question of whether such agonistically organized discussion leads to the casting of votes. On the basis of these ideas, it is reasonable to make the argument, as even Habermas repeatedly does in spite of his predilection for prescribing specific legally-binding institutions, that it is public sphere discussion that is the very essence of democracy (Habermas 1989 [1962], 1996). On the basis of my fieldwork, I can simply report that the Serbian public sphere as observed in Niš, Serbia is considerably more prominent than that in Plovdiv, Bulgaria where citizens tend to be less inclined to indulge in self-organized argumentation about public matters. Consequently, independent of the kind of institutional development attested by measurements such as those provided by Freedom House, Bulgarian citizens are more atomized both from policy discourse and from each other, leading to an observed public sphere that is less contested, vibrant or evident. In the Arendtian sense, life is more political in Serbia, not marginally but obviously so.

**Conclusion: Liberal Institutions, Illiberal Democracy?**

I commenced this chapter by referring to the Democracy Scores published by Freedom House in which Serbia has consistently been graded as less democratic than Bulgaria over the past decade. These gradings are an artefact of the methodological approach used to deliver the verdicts, which is to say that they privilege institutional frameworks and practices over all else. I have not disputed the importance of formal institutions in this chapter, except to make the case that on their own they are not enough. Liberal democratic institutions can only lead to a fairer and more equitable society when they are staffed by officials and approached by citizens who both understand and identify with the principles and ideals enshrined in the system. In this sense, gradings that claim to assess democracy in different states with reference only to institutions must be seen as

\(^{32}\) The Aristotelian distinction between the private and the political also animates some of the celebrated work of Giovanni Sartori, who nevertheless concludes that a science of politics ought to be concerned primarily with the functioning of states (Sartori 1974). I find that Sartori’s view of politics as institutions, unlike Arendt’s view of politics as civic participation, contradicts the emphasis on public argumentation in the classical philosophical traditions that both scholars identify as antecedents of the modern study of politics.
partial rather than comprehensive. With respect to the relative gradings of Serbia and Bulgaria offered by Freedom House, the data presented in this chapter suggests that they are misleading.

Much of the distaste for including discursive elements of political culture in measurements of democracy results from the understanding that they are unmeasurable.\(^{33}\) This is debatable. While it may not be advisable to translate this kind of data into numbers, the discursive content and degree of participation in public sphere discussion is undoubtedly detectable, and therefore ripe for evaluation and comparison. In fact, when one takes up residence in a new society, public sphere discourse is the domain of political culture in which variation between contexts is most immediately apparent, long before institutional vagaries such as electoral systems or judicial codes can be expected to have any direct effect on one’s life. The newcomer usually starts to make preliminary judgements concerning whether people seem liberal or conservative, cosmopolitan or suspicious of the outside world within the first few days. Comparison is inevitable. Considering the comparative research project that is summarized in this chapter, I would argue that no scholar versed in the normative or empirical literature of the democratic public sphere could possibly perceive Bulgarian society as more democratic than that of Serbia. It is probably more consensual in the sense that the illiberal and exclusivist bases of mainstream political competition generates less dissent, but certainly not more democratic in any sense that Freedom House or the European Union should be applauding.

These findings are as relevant for those focussing on institutions as for those who are interested in the public sphere, as the functioning of formal institutions is dependent on the public sphere. In fact, it is worth speculating that the relative institutional progress of Bulgaria up to 2008 as recorded in the Freedom House Democracy Scores was almost definitely shallower than the phrase ‘consolidated democracy’ implies. Pre-EU Accession institutional reform was worth risking on the part of power-holding elites who have subsequently intensified their corrupt practices (Pedersen & Johannsen 2011, Ganev 2013). The main reason they can get away with this is because citizens are ill-equipped to hold them to account. In 2011 cross-party parliamentary majorities were able to collude to include nonsensical stipulations in the Bulgarian electoral codes designed

\(^{33}\) Consider the cautious manner in which Ekiert, Kubik and Vachudova implore their readers to recognize the importance of ‘Ostensibly arcane and impractical philosophical debates … [which] have tremendous relevance for the tone and tenor of political and social life’ (Ekiert et al. 2007: 17). What can ‘impractical’ refer to here except for ‘difficult to translate into numbers’?
to guarantee unfairness in favour of the existing main players, but they did so on the calculation that the public were broadly unable to understand the liberal rationale behind electoral laws based on Western liberal templates. The Freedom House Democracy Score fell partly in response to this in 2012, but it happened with very little discussion or dissent because Bulgarian public discourse has never yet been characterized by liberal democratic ideals, not in 2005, 2008 or 2011.

I should make clear that I have not covered all vital dimensions of public discourse in this chapter. It should be fairly obvious that the Bulgarian and Serbian citizens quoted above form their opinions and constitute their identities in very different contexts. Thus I have presented a condensed description of what public sphere discourse is like, not how it came to be like that. It is to that task – focussed on politics from above in the contemporary and recent historical context – that I will turn in the next chapter.

As I discuss at length in Chapter 5, the electoral codes adopted in early 2011 stipulate that ‘virtually all campaign coverage on public broadcasters must be paid for’ (OSCE 2011: 2), which resulted not only in the obviously enhanced visibility of the two best funded campaigns of the right-wing GERB and the Bulgarian Socialist Party candidates but also in a general ‘de facto absence of journalism’ (OSCE 2011: 16) in the sense that most media coverage took the form of paid advertisements that were not labelled as such.