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**YAVOR LILOV**

**CITY DWELLERS AND INSTITUTIONS: WHAT LIES AT THE  
BACK OF THE STRAY-DOGS DEBATE IN BULGARIA**

*Introduction*

The presence of homeless dogs strongly polarizes Bulgarian society. The journalist Neika Krasteva writes in daily “Standart”: „There is no other topic that has triggered so many arguments as that of the homeless dogs.”<sup>1</sup> The sharp confrontation around this issue is obvious from the language deployed in the debate in the press, on the Internet and on TV. The debate often descends to the level of street jargon or is full of speech figures. The accusations exchanged are both severe and extreme. It should have sounded as a debate on an easier or a softer subject. There is still a host of issues that are much higher on the public’s agenda judging from the priority lists in the election platforms: tax reduction, fixed prices of electricity and heating, job creation, more money into social provisions and securities, healthcare and education, etc. If we take our clues from the headline makers, there is a great deal of other issues deemed as significant: corruption, crime, family drama, terrorism, cabinet reshuffles, and minorities. Yet, in the big cities, homeless dogs are high on the public agenda. Even more importantly, if on some other issues the participants stay passive or impartial or less than certain which side to take, on the question of the street fauna there seems to be no middle ground and no citizen without an opinion.

The homeless dogs debate presents an interesting phenomenon. The heated exchanges, the arguments, the examples used often shift the attention away from animals to humans, social groups, models for structuring society. Using the talk about canines to lambaste the corruption and chaos of government institutions, to point out how alien to the native environment the dark green

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1 Krasteva, N. 2002: „Homeless Dogs Eat More Than Children“, Standart, March 8, 2002 [Стандарт», Нейка Кръстева: „Бездомните кучета ядат повече от децата», 8.03.2002]

activists are, how impoverished the country is, how ambivalent the role of the great powers is, how irresponsible pensioners or pet owners or even mothers are – this has been turned into a norm, into a well established pattern of communication, into a convention among those taking part in the debate. Pulling the discussion back to the specifics of homeless canines or at least keeping the formal shell of this type of issues is always temporary. The debate fluently and rapidly overflows back to the dominant social or economic issues. And this overspill usually does not need more than a couple of sentences. “You better think about how to prevent children from being orphaned and not where the money goes,”<sup>2</sup> starts his speech one of the Internet contributors taking a stand on the *children versus dogs* issue. He has just created the impression of willingness to restrain the debate, to stop it from spilling into politics, sensationalism, low living standards, etc. His message is that we should apply ourselves to addressing a specific issue rather than globalizing the topic.

But we only have to wait until the next sentence in which the same contributor applies himself to discussing national identity: “Because the primary concern of the Bulgarian is what he will gain and next comes thinking about the ways not to give anything away.” The third sentence already levels criticism at the distribution schemes of the government: “There is money for everything but it doesn’t flow where it should.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, when a visitor to the site (which one?) launches the subject of dog-bitten children, other visitors interpret the message as an invitation to talk about the family and its problems; when a visitor insists on kennel-centered dog extermination, others may understand it as a call for reconstructing the totalitarian system. There seems to be a convention among the interlocutors to speak of canines in ways that always bring to the fore the social issues or the social mores. Intuitively, the interlocutors are capable of recognizing what issues or mores were meant while talking about dogs. They usually provide such an answer as to have clear indicators helping the one who asked the question to clearly intercept, behind the canine subject, the issues implied.

This convention is pursued somehow unconsciously yet relentlessly. In this sense, the canine debate really portrays the Bulgarian as the politics buff: “This [the attitude towards euthanasia and dog castration] is an indicator whereby one can tell how mature a society is.”<sup>4</sup> In the background, those Bulgarians constantly contemplate their social milieu – they anatomize it, re-shuffle the parts and then put them back together as if asking the other one: do you like this model, how about that one? And then get similar messages.

2 The electronic version of Radio Net, comments to the feature: „The Sofia Mutts – The Golden Mine For The Canine Material Business” (Saturday, 24 January 2004)

3 Ibid.

4 A comment in the „Sega” web-page (<http://www.segabg.com>) – Minchev, I. 2002: ‘On Mutts And Humans’, Sega, October 31 [„Сера”, Ивайло Минчев: „За помяряйте и хората», 31.10.2002]

This communication phenomenon provides us with a chance to analyze the relations inside the social structure – among individuals, media, formal or informal institutions. Yet as far as the debate is being conducted on the Internet or in the media there are various degrees of anonymity. This stands in the way of identifying indicators whereby we can put together the professional or social status of those debating. Given that, a possible solution is to concentrate on the text itself rather than on the social context and participants' biographies. One can thus shape the identities that they project on themselves or on their opponents or the roles taken on them. Roles or identities do not say enough about biographies of status outside of this stage yet they provide sufficient information about the drama being staged. Through them, one is able to decode the social utopia, perceptions about the ways in which society works and its hierarchies, innovative interpretations about history, as well as ideas, goals and interests, which in a more open context could remain and speak for one or other reason or mold in harmony with the official language or mental stereotypes.

The analyzed narratives showed different types of institutions and the relations between them (formal/informal; family/state; state/another state) as well as various standoff positions: the public against an institution, conflicts among institutional representatives, conflicts among citizens.

### ***The institutional identity***

We have to mention the resistance shown among some of the debating individuals against certain government functions, and especially against the right of the state to be the only one administering penalties and justice through its statutory requirements and judiciary. This resistance targets especially the City Council for having hijacked, as some of the participants seem to believe, the right to execute street animals. Let us take a closer look into these attitudes.

What the public appears to find most shocking is the mass slaughter.

*Benny: What hurts us most, not only me but also my neighbors, almost the entire neighborhood, is that random slaughtering of homeless animals, right in front of our eyes, as well as the hidden killing across doghouses.<sup>5</sup>*

It is indicative (of what?) that the term *euthanasia* is mostly used by representatives of the competent authorities. If we refer to Foucault's<sup>6</sup> analysis of power, we find a detailed explanation of historical circumstances and particular mechanisms whereby the state has expropriated the right to penalize. By this act the state has tabooed the opportunity that someone else dispenses justice

5 Comments in the „Sega” web page (<http://www.segabg.com>) – „Nothing New On The Dog Front“, Sega, January 13, 2002 [„Сегга“: „На кучешкия фронт нищо ново”, 13.01.2002 г.]

6 Фуко [Foucault], 1997, 1998

(people taking justice into their own hands, vendetta, traditional or religious justice of local communities, etc.). In Foucault's view the state differentiates between two types of penalties: chaotic, cruel, and ostentatious, which is ostensibly not adapted to everyone's interest – when it comes from the bottom; and orderly, hidden, compassionate, adjusted to the laws and consequently serving everyone's interest – when it comes from the top. The former type is characteristic of the local and individual levels, of relations between groups and individuals, whereas the latter is supervised by the state, the judiciary or other institutions. The legitimate nature of sanctions however originates from the fact that official institutions have wrapped their sanctioning prerogatives in an official language, which does its best to stay away from giving the impression of penalizing. Murder however, even carefully hidden in the cocoon of formal language, even meted out according to the official ritual (behind closed doors, following a sentence read out, based on the law, executed swiftly and painlessly, etc.), is still scary. The citizens have a common sensitivity towards its finality and irreversibility; and hence the moratoria on the death penalty in some countries.

The comment of the website visitor above is focused precisely on *pain* and fear. The fact that this person, “the neighbors” or “the whole neighborhood,” or in other words, the local community, can easily construe *euthanasia* as slaughter is a clear indicator of resistance to the formal institution. The fact that they (who?) have clearly articulated knowledge of *the hidden killing across doghouses* shows that the secret is not a secret at all. Such public secrets are usually a sign of passive resistance inasmuch as they function only as bandying about unproven information within the realm of popular culture.

Yet such hearsay knowledge often takes to claiming legitimacy under the condition of being presented in a radical and straightforward manner; i.e. it reaches a point at which the mystery evaporates.

*Ruthless lynching of homeless dogs is a practical lesson for teenagers on the way murder can become a conscious and free-for-all exercise. [...] Mayors lightheartedly sign off the ultimate penalty to thousands of living creatures whose only fault is to have been born. [...] This is a gory picture: writhing bodies mass slaughtered by poison around the skips. Whining of “sorrel mutts”. Howling of cooped up “slop-dogs” [the Bulgarian for a “stray dog”] supplied to the research laboratories...<sup>7</sup>*

We will get back to this piece later on. We may only note here that the government authorities (or the City Council), in an attempt to delegitimize such accounts, respond by churning out material of opposite content and style.

7 Ivanov, S. 1999: „Mr. Mayor, Do Not Release the Dog Executors!“, 24 chasa, February 9, 37 [„24 часа“, Стилиян Иванов: „Кмете, не пускай палачи на кучетата!“, бр. 37, 9 февруари 1999

Here is an example of an employee of the Sofia City Council, a Mrs. Sirmenova, giving her own version of stray dog disposal: “We also stick to the statutory fourteen day period of keeping the dogs. [...] The aggressive ones or the carriers of infection (established by clinical symptoms) as well as those hit by cars are euthanized by narcotic medicine. [...] Strict records are being kept of incoming animals, by drivers who transport them, by the *Egida* guardsmen or by the vets.”<sup>8</sup>

In the first place we have to pay attention to the absence of the word “dogs,” which is substituted by the expressions “aggressive,” “carriers of infection” – a jargon tactic aimed at giving the impression that these are criminal elements that need to be properly dealt with. Secondly, there are several variants of the notion of legality (*statutory fourteen day period, strict records, established by clinical symptoms*). And thirdly, expressions like “established by clinical symptoms,” “euthanized,” “vets” are chosen to assure the public that experts are given a key role, and that the institution only deals with the best level of expertise. The style of talking suggests the municipality authorities do not only enlist the services of legitimate professionals but respect even the civil rights of criminals by doing with them away painlessly and according to the established order. This kind of spin meets the expectations of a public well aware, from the films or the newsreels, that in the U.S. the electric chair and the hangman have been replaced by the lethal injection, or that somewhere in the West there are some doctors applying euthanasia to terminally ill patients.

This emphasis upon a life end coming as a result of narcotic medicine applied by authorized experts on “aggressive” and “disease carrying” elements is designed to convince that the state punishes compassionately, behind closed doors and going through all the motions of officialdom. This is no longer a penalty, it does not sound like one at least, there is no exhortation, there is only justice.

And contrary to this, when the public reverts to the basic meaning of the words *penalty* (a fine, a jail sentence or the death penalty) or *euthanasia* (murder) it implies resistance to the powers of the state or the competent authorities to punish and dispense justice. And this resistance is expressed in rejecting the institutional language.

Resistance is also manifested in citing examples to demonstrate that the rituals of legitimacy have not been observed. Punishment comes from above, but instead of being orderly, compassionate, compliant with the law and in everyone’s interest, it is no better than the vendettas and lynching practiced

8 Nord, N. 2000: „The Dogs Fetch Good Money To Their Murderers”, Noshten Troud, February 10-11, 28 [„Нощен труд”, Нина Норд: „Кучетата носят добри пари на убийците си”, бр. 28, 10-11 февруари 2000, стр. 10]

by the low classes and characterized by chaos, ruthlessness, conspicuousness and flying in the face of common values: *random killings before our eyes (or before those of teenagers), ruthless lynch law, mayors lightheartedly sign off the ultimate penalty to thousands of living creatures, the picture is gory, writhing bodies, skinned alive*, etc. All those easily represent the authorities' actions as illegitimate.

And finally the philosophy behind the resistance may just as well be holistic – it cuts all the way down to the roots of institutionality. In other words, it resorts to the question whether the government, the city council or the municipal company should be vested with the right of dispensing punishment at all: *about the way murder can become a conscious and free-for-all exercise, the ultimate penalty of thousands of living creatures, howling of cooped up "slop-dogs"*. The very privileges of the institutions to impose sanctions are challenged.

The power vacuum left by the delegitimized state, city council or municipal firm is quickly filled by the local community or the individual: *"what hurts us most, not only me but also my neighbors, almost the entire neighborhood"*.

### ***Resisting the official authorities – What does it look like in practice?***

Perhaps this is where we should leave the text for a moment and look at the social context. A survey carried out by Vitosha Research in November 2001<sup>9</sup> under the rubric, "Homeless Dogs as a Public Problem," shows interesting results. To the question who specifically has to take the initiative in resolving the homeless dog issue, approximately 1% reply that this should be a matter of *citizens' initiatives*, 18% pass the responsibility on to *informal organizations* and *private firms*, and 60% expect the problem to be handled by the city council. These results run counter to the impression that one might get from the discussion in the media in which official institutions are perceived as dysfunctional (a criticism which comes from both the opponents and defendants of homeless dogs, but with varying degrees of severity). The paradox is that in a virtual and a somewhat fictional realm as the Internet is, as well as in the papers and TV, most members of the public choose to level criticism at the authorities and their representatives; however in a practical and date-to-day aspect they prefer to give them credit.<sup>10</sup>

9 Vitosha Research Polling Agency – published in Internet: „Homeless Dogs as Social Problem“ (November 2001) [Vitosha Research: „Бездомните кучета като обществен проблем“ (ноември 2001 г.) – публикувано в интернет-страницата на агенцията – <http://www.vitosha-research.com/surveybg/dogs/dogs.htm>]

10 More detail on the specific mechanisms used in resisting the official institutions, see Ewick/Silbey, 2003

Resistance against official institutions is extremely vigorous in the media and passive outside the media. These data were indirectly confirmed in the report of Doctor Klaus Wagner of April – May 2001.<sup>11</sup> In his capacity as an independent microbiology expert, Doctor Wagner was requested to assess the homeless dog situation in Sofia in view of the conflict between the authorities and the citizenry. He made notice of the following facts: “A large number of dogs are being looked after by individuals, with most of the dogs showing, within the existing circumstances, a rather acceptable level of attendance and health. Malnourished and evidently diseased animals are insignificant in number. [...] Aggression is more an exception rather than a common behavior.” In other words the townspeople are predominantly tolerant or even caring of the dogs, which is the reason behind the satisfactory condition and probably the lack of aggression among them. In practical terms, each condominium has someone to attend to the homeless animals. We can name the entire phenomenon “our hobo”<sup>12</sup> after one of the contributors to the Internet’s discussion. Then again we can contemplate whether, at the local level and in a more intimate aspect, these animals are really interpreted as homeless. If we, the people, are living in homes, could then the *hobo* be *ours*?<sup>13</sup>

*Benny: We have already housed two of them in our attic so they may not be hurt by the compassion of the Council people.*<sup>14</sup>

*Our hobo* is possible under two assumptions: it is either that we feel homeless and neglected despite the existing, formal at least, social security or the hobo is enjoying some of that security, he is well integrated into our environment, and therefore only formally is a hobo.

The citizens seem to somehow recognize their own social standing in that of the stray dog while interpreting their relationship with the competent authorities: “What can we say of ourselves though, in spite of having a roof above our heads, so to speak?!”<sup>15</sup> “There are retired people who split their meager morsel of bread to feed their four-legged friends.”<sup>16</sup> To a certain extent, this common identity is probably due to the fact that both homeless dogs and the citizens in a country of low living standards and a crisis-ridden economy have

- 11 Senior Experten Service, Dr. Klaus Wagner: „Begrenzung der Verbreitung streunender Hunde in der Stadt Sofia“, Projekt: BG-SOHUND, Auftrags No. 7127-01-359 (25. April bis 16. Mai 2001) – published in the Internet site of On Speaking Terms with Nature Environmental Association: <http://www.iwns.org>
- 12 Comments in the „Sega“ web page: (<http://www.segabg.com>) – „47 000 Dogs Euthanized: What A Lie!“, Sega, August 5, 2002 [„Cera“: „Лъжат, че 47 000 кучета са подложени на евтаназия“, 5.08.2002]
- 13 On the interpretation of homeless dogs as legal immigrants, see Palmer, 2003 (P&G), p. 52
- 14 Comments in the „Sega“ web page: (<http://www.segabg.com>) – „Nothing New On The Dog Front“, Sega, January 13, 2002 [„Cera“: „На кучешкия фронт нищо ново“, 13.01.2002 г.]
- 15 A debate in the BTV show „Frankly and Personally“ on the topic „The Kids or the Dogs“, aired on 13 January 2000.
- 16 Kirilova, L. 2000: „On Love And Pig Breeding In Bulgaria“, My Friend The Dog , December, 61 [„Моят приятел – Кучето“, Людмила Кирилова: „За любовта и свинеждството в България“, бр. 61, декември 2000]

taken on, in their relations with officialdom, a function similar to what Michel Foucault named undisciplined, *unruly bodies*<sup>17</sup>. The dogs are perceived as a pack while the citizens are a crowd disgruntled with the system.

One way or the other, Doctor Wagner has outlined a peculiar type of civil initiative that can be defined as passive or indirect inasmuch as it is not a matter of integrating a great deal of citizens into movements, political parties, organizations. Instead this type of civil initiative resorts to day-to-day practices characterized by numerous individual acts that permeate the whole social space of the city. There are indeed dozens of movements and organizations involved in homeless dogs' protection: the Life on Four Paws Foundation, the Bulgarian League for Animal Protection, the Civil Movement for Animal Protection, the Federation for Protecting Homeless Dogs, the Dog Friends. However, as Doctor Wagner himself noted, "... they only stand a chance to be heard if they speak in one voice. Competition and envy damage their cause."<sup>18</sup> The lack of joint initiative and coordinated action as well as the absence of formulated common strategic interests have been spotted by the media as well: "Dog champions carry out meaningless events in front of the kennels, resettle animals and wail to the ambassadors of EU countries. [...] The conservationists have monopolized the flow of European subsidies to NGOs [and therefore], they will not benefit from resolving the problem. [...] They rescue a couple of dogs a week, reintroduce them to the neighborhoods which have been cleaned up by the council, yet they have never budged a finger to bring up a single court case..."<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, it is a matter of fact that passive resistance (looking after homeless dogs, having them marked with collars) has proven to be the most effective and prevalent form of protest against municipal policies under the current Bulgarian conditions. However the passiveness of this tacit sabotage is the reason for citizens to regard it as insufficiently effective: "Our critter up in the attic gave birth to puppies last night. We got together with our neighbors to decide on what to do but decided nothing, just had coffee. Municipal compassion scares us, it is true."<sup>20</sup>

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17 Foucault, 1982, pp. 208-226

18 Senior Experten Service, Dr. Klaus Wagner (2001)

19 Comments in the „Sega” web page: (<http://www.segabg.com>) – „47 000 Dogs Euthanized: What A Lie!”, Sega, August 5, 2002 [aCera”: „Лъжат, че 47 000 кучета са подложени на евтаназия”, 5.08.2002]

20 The electronic version of Радио Net, Stela Raicheva: „The Sofia Mutts – The Golden Mine For The Canine Material Business” (Saturday , 24 January 2004) -<http://www.radionetbg.com>. It has to be noted that the author is not entirely on the right side: in 2001 a court action was launched by the association” Regional Environment Protection Center „On Speaking Terms with Nature” against the Sofia City Council.

### *The privacy of the local community, the privacy of the individual*

The above quotation gives us another vantage point to the conflict between townspeople and the institutions of governance. The dogs have acquired the role of something intimate, a part of people's daily life, and an indispensable element of the mundane neighborhood landscape.<sup>21</sup> Official institutions are incapable of adequately handling such intimate stuff (this is at least what the public and the media argue), no matter how problematic it is. The institutions struggle to manifest a commonly received, good-mannered, orderly, charitable and reasonable approach while addressing the homeless dog issue through a number of representations. Yet they fail to do so – what the institutional jargon terms *euthanasia*, people see as *mass slaughter*. The public refuses to hand over to the government or to the City Council the regulation of neighborhoods' daily life not because it does not suffer the consequences of homeless dogs, on the contrary – people definitely sustain losses from having homeless dogs all around (excrements all over the streets, diseases). What is *hurting the most* however, as *Benny*<sup>22</sup> says, is the extermination carried out by the official institutions. In other words, the contributor is basically against state or municipal interference in the local or individual privacy. The dogs are just an example.

The notion of private space sharply contrasted with public space, or the street animal welcoming individual privacy jealously guarded against the state and the municipality, is often the point of the debate. It (what?) is expressed in situations like the one cited above in which a dog has littered, and neighbors get together to sip their coffee and chat, or in outpourings like: “she lies down next to me while I'm having my coffee in the balcony,” “he's quite a handful, a 'street supreme breed,' yet so pretty and cuddly that my heart goes soft straightaway. And I easily forgive all his mischief.”<sup>23</sup>

The same sentiment is expressed in the very manner of speaking during a debate that is supposed to be public, yet is kept far off any officialdom or formality, nervously oscillating to the extremes of sentimentality or, resorting to crude jargon: “Be good, do not only love yourselves!,” “I wish everyone to be sensible and well-meaning!,” “I am fed up really of smart-ass dimwits like you – there is rabies, you say, dogs are biting – c'mon, move your fat [...] and carry them over to the City Council. I'll see what kind of statistics you gonna find there, to hell with you!”<sup>24</sup> Bulgarian radical environmentalists as

21 Comments in the „Sega” web page: (<http://www.segabg.com>) – „47 000 Dogs Euthanized: What A Lie!”, Sega, August 5, 2002 [„Cera”: „Лъжат, че 47 000 кучета са подложени на евтаназия”, 5.08.2002]

22 This phenomenon outside Bulgaria has been analyzed by Gillespie/Leffler/ Lerner, 2002; by Sanders, 2003 as well as by Palmer, 2003 (JSP)

23 Comments in the „Sega” web page (<http://www.segabg.com>) - „Nothing New On The Dog Front”, Sega, January 13, 2002 [„Cera”: „На кучешкия фронт нищо ново”, 13.01.2002 г.]

24 Comments in the „Sega” web page (<http://www.segabg.com>) - „Nothing New On The Dog Front”, Sega, January 13, 2002 [„Cera”: „На кучешкия фронт нищо ново”, 13.01.2002 г.]

the radical environmentalists in Western Europe and the U.S. prefer using the language of everyday life and angry emotion rather than the impartial language of positive knowledge or the jargon of administrators and politicians. They share a negative disposition towards economic analysis and rational arguments. This seems to be a global phenomenon as long as everywhere resistance seems to be poised against the manifestations of official power<sup>25</sup>.

### ***A negative institutional identity***

Based on the above sketching of the problem, let us try to explore some of the specific projections of the negative institutional identity. Institution here

will mostly mean the local authorities (the city council, the municipality), and secondly the other official government institutions – the parliament, the government, various ministries, the judiciary, the state administration. The variety of civil associations designed to protect homeless dogs, the cynological and felinological clubs, foundations, and the media are certainly institutions as well. Then again, what is most striking about the homeless dog debates is that the most vitriolic attacks are targeted precisely at the City Council and the other governmental institutions. Street animal champions and some media (*24 Hours*, *Noshten Troud*) tend to offer radical interpretations of dog-related policies initiated or carried out by representatives of the Sofia Council (the Mayor, the deputy-mayors, the councilors, the *Zoomilosardie* [Zoo-Compassion] council company later renamed as *Ecoravnovesie* [Eco-Equilibrium]).

#### **a) the state and the City Council as a concentration camp**

In terms of giving a bit of background, the dog shelter in the Sofia borough of Lozenets is casually compared to a concentration camp with all the implications – killings in especially cruel manner, holocaust, manufacturing of objects from carcass material:

*A former employee of the Lozenets kennel claims that the dogs caught are put to death by a hit on the head.*<sup>26</sup>

*Cannibalism, death from starvation and underhand dealings have plagued the Zoomilosardie doghouse.*<sup>27</sup>

25 The electronic version of Radio Net, comments to the feature: „The Sofia Mutts – The Golden Mine For The Canine Material Business» (Saturday, 24 January 2004) -<http://www.radionetbg.com>

26 Yearly (1992)

27 Nord, N. 2000: „The Dogs Fetch Good Money To Their Murderers”, *Noshten Troud*, February 10-11, 28 [„Нощен труд”, Нина Норд: „Кучетата носят добри пари на убийците си», бр. 28, 10-11 февруари 2000, стр. 10]

*Every day the shelter 's hunting squads turn in about 60 dogs. At least 40 out of them were dead on arrival, claims a dismissed employee.<sup>28</sup>*

*The picture is gory – writhing bodies<sup>29</sup>, eyes hammered out by the blow.<sup>30</sup> There was nowhere to put your foot on, the place was cluttered by piled up dog carcasses.<sup>31</sup>*

*Whining of “sorrel mutts” skinned alive. Howling of cooped up “slop-dogs” [the Bulgarian for a “stray dog”] supplied to the research laboratories...<sup>32</sup>*

*Most of the dogs had been killed with sticks, some had their bellies ripped open.<sup>33</sup>*

The public will have no hard time making the association with the concentration camps since the effect is deliberately sought by the quoted media. The fact that the public does make the association with the camps is testified by the debate on the Internet between dog defenders and opponents: “In the text that you have written those little words “the dogs” and “the little critters” could be simply replaced by some other little words [...] and it would have been just like listening to Eichman. The man also felt sorry, but expediency demanded a solution to be taken, and a quick one, too, even a final one...”<sup>34</sup>.

That the concentration camp link is deliberately sought is made evident by examples like the following one: “My words are not poignant enough to describe the outrage we have to witness in the late twentieth century. The mass slaughter of homeless dogs during the Jivkov years, and later on under Yanchulev’s mandate, could not resolve the problem.” The attempt to resolve a problem rapidly and smoothly through mass murder is easily associated with the *final solution*. The juncture of *mass murders* (even though it is specified that it is done on dogs) with the expression *during the Jivkov years* also connotes the 1990s debate about the Bulgarian labor camps set up after 1944.

28 Nord, N. 2000: „The Dogs Fetch Good Money To Their Murderers», Noshten Troud, February 10-11, 28 [„Нощен труд”, Нина Норд: „Кучетата носят а убийците си”, бр. 28, 10-11 февруари 2000, стр. 10]

29 Nord, N. 2000: „The Dogs Fetch Good Money To Their Murderers», Noshten Troud, February 10-11, 28 [„Нощен труд”, Нина Норд: „Кучетата носят добри пари на убийците си”, бр. 28, 10-11 февруари 2000, стр. 10]

30 Ivanov, S. 1999: „Mr. Mayor, Do Not Release the Dog Executors!», 24 chasa, February 9, 37 [„24 часа”, Стилиян Иванов: „Кмете, не пускай палачи на кучетата!”, бр. 37, 9 февруари 1999]

31 Kirilova, L. 2000: „On Love And Pig Breeding In Bulgaria”, My Friend The Dog , December, 61 [„Моят приятел – Кучето”, Людмила Кирилова: „За любовта и свиневъдството в България”, бр. 61, декември 2000]

32 Kirilova, L. 2000: „On Love And Pig Breeding In Bulgaria”, My Friend The Dog, December, 61 [„Моят приятел – Кучето”, Людмила Кирилова: „За любовта и свиневъдството в България”, бр. 61, декември 2000]

33 Ivanov, S. 1999: „Mr. Mayor, Do Not Release the Dog Executors!”, 24 chasa, February 9, 37 [„24 часа”, Стилиян Иванов: „Кмете, не пускай палачи на кучетата!”, бр. 37, 9 февруари 1999]

34 Kirilova, L. 2000: „On Love And Pig Breeding In Bulgaria”, My Friend The Dog , December, 61 [„Моят приятел – Кучето”, Людмила Кирилова: „За любовта и свиневъдството в България”, бр. 61, декември 2000]

This period saw the heyday of high-voltage arguments on issues related to totalitarian repression.

Saying *during the Zhivkov years* and *Yanchulev's mandate*<sup>35</sup> in one and the same breath points to the severe confrontation between *the blues* and *the reds*<sup>36</sup> throughout the nineties. The dogs were at the epicenter of a discourse modality that was quite familiar to the public. The myth which is actively exploited here is that totalitarian relics are hidden behind the mask of democracy. The dog champions and some media accuse the City Council of totalitarian heavy handedness, arbitrariness, lack of transparency, concentration of power. They construe the conduct of the municipal officials: the dogs are being slaughtered since this is the safest totalitarian policy pursued by the council but it is inadmissible under the current conditions. Dog-killing is a wanton game which can grow into something much more sinister – an overdue power, which is not above using any means to its ends.<sup>37</sup> The role in which people position it (what?) is that of the totalitarian institution – the role of the executioner, the murderer wielding political power, the dictator: “Never mind, suppose they vote the smiley thief into his fourth mandate, he will then get the pets euthanized as well. Then it will be the cats’ turn. And then everybody else’s.”<sup>38</sup> This is how the dog debate slowly but inevitably evolves into a criticism of the political system.

#### **b) The representatives of the institutions seen as criminals**

Those parallels between fascism or Stalinism and the municipal policy are aimed at pinpointing a global blame against humanity or subconscious attempts at reviving a retrograde and rejected system. Murder is in the focus of attention. In the course of the debate however we come across other blame apportioned to the competent authorities. It has a number of versions that usually gravitate around the routine economic and common crimes: theft, embezzlement, kickbacks, graft, unfair competition, etc. In a number of media and Internet forums the City Council is portrayed as a criminal that is investigated and prosecuted by both the press and the public. More specifically, in the homeless dogs debate the allegations are usually targeted at money laundering and embezzlement (around council acquisitions of euthanizing drugs, other castration-related medicines, consumables, equipment or services, etc.), at the lack of accountability, the bribing of employees (from the mayors down to the drivers), the protection of other players in the illegal business dealings (e.g. keeping competition away from the output of the incinera-

35 Comments in the „Sega” web page (<http://www.segabg.com>) - „Nothing New On The Dog Front“, Sega, January 13, 2002 [„Сегга”: „На кучешкия фронт нищо ново”, 13.01.2002 г.]

36 Todor Zhivkov – a Secretary General of the Bulgarian communist party, the political leader of the country (1956-1989), Alexander Yanchulev – one of the key figures in the Union of Democratic Forces during the 90s, Mayor of Sofia (1991-1995)

37 Union of Democratic Forces (or the blues) and Bulgarian Socialist Party (or the reds) are the main political parties in Bulgaria during the 90s.

38 For more on this issue, see Arluke, 2002, p. 408

tor): “Dead animals were posted in the books as alive in order to pinch the money for the 14-day accommodation . , ” “When they load the truck to the Plovdiv incinerator, they give some cash to the driver to make him overstate the number of carcasses...,” “Some people are very comfortable with the increasing number of dogs instead of having them neutered because this means more and more racket...”<sup>39</sup>

“Instead of the 315 carcasses down in the logbooks, the police only found 302.”<sup>40</sup>

“The council guys have the dogs hunted down, cut out, sold for the hides, the meat or the bone meal, or have them exported to laboratories abroad for Euro 100 a piece...”<sup>41</sup>

“It remains a mystery for the taxpayer where goes all the money scooped from the scanty municipal budget or from generous western donors.”<sup>42</sup>

“The criminal organization ‘Zoomilosardie’ funded by the taxpayers and headed by the deputy-mayor Boris Spirov, has gobbled up over 2 million Lev within a period of two years.”<sup>43</sup>

But for an audience accustomed to this type of scandal involving the police, shadowy business groups, organized crime, ministers, members of parliament, municipal officers, etc. it is not a problem to feel palpably the red line tying together the homeless dogs situation with privatization issues, with the so-called *pyramids*, with the football championship, with the illegal trade in excise commodities, with drug trafficking: “I hope to be able to live until the day when all the fraudulence, all the filching and trouble committed by the gang ruling Sofia will pan out. Not only pan out, but also them being taken to task – I could do with that.”<sup>44</sup>

Media headlines like “A Prosecutor Gunned Down A Dog In Front Of Children”<sup>45</sup> do their best to warrant the readers’ fears that all institutions (without exception) work against them, that the juggernaut of power runs them over while

39 Comments in the „Sega” web page (<http://www.segabg.com>) - „47 000 Dogs Euthanized: What A Lie!”, Sega, August 5, 2002 [„Cera”: „Лъжат, че 47 000 кучета са подложени на евтаназия”, 5.08.2002]

40 Kirilova, L. 2000: „On Love And Pig Breeding In Bulgaria”, My Friend The Dog, December, 61 [„Моят приятел – Кучето”, Людмила Кирилова: „За любовта и свинеждството в България”, бр. 61, декември 2000]

41 „The Police Is Digging About For Scam In The Lozenets Kennel”, Sega, December 14, 2000 [„Cera”: „Полицията рови за далавери в приюта за кучета в Лозенец”, 14.12.2000]

42 The electronic version of Radio Net, Stela Raicheva: „The Sofia Mutts – The Golden Mine For The Canine Material Business” (Saturday , 24 January 2004) -<http://www.radionetbg.com>

43 Krasteva, N. 2002: „Homeless Dogs Eat More Than Children”, Standart, March 8, 2002 [„Стандарт”, Нейка Кръстева: „Бездомните кучета ядат повече от децата”, петък, 8.03.2002]

44 A comment in the „Sega” web-page (<http://www.segabg.com>) - „47 000 Dogs Euthanized: What A Lie!”, Sega, August 5, 2002 [„Cera”: „Лъжат, че 47 000 кучета са подложени на евтаназия”, 5.08.2002]

45 A comment in the „Sega” web-page (<http://www.segabg.com>) - „Nothing New On the Dog Front”, Sega, January 13, 2002 [„Cera”: „На кучешкия фронт нищо ново”, 13.01.2002 г.

staging the theater of legitimacy to disguise its utter arbitrariness. The readers' interpretation of such writings is a routine one. It matches the popular expression "they are all rascals." Or, as another material on homeless dogs puts it: "And as it is often the case in our motherland, the situation is of the type *clutch the one and then hit the other*"<sup>46</sup> (Bulgarian proverbial wisdom, which means "they are all good for nothing").

One is once again tempted to highlight the striking contrast between this type of attitudes towards the official institutions and the absence of an active and well organized civil action. It seems that the "grassroots revolution" here is limited to the realm of the semi-documentary/semi-fictional media outlets.

### ***Positive institutional identity as represented by institutions' employees***

The cases we tried to interpret above involved citizens using the official language to give credibility to the official institutions and at the same time trying to correct their performance. There are also examples of the contrary employees of the competent authorities using the day-to-day language in an attempt to become affiliated with the local community or the individual citizen and thus gain credibility.

In the 2000 local elections were different. Some of the runners for the mayor's post (Nadejda Mikhailova, Veni Markovski) put forward short and clear platforms making a special point to avoid the dry administrative jargon while referring to the homeless dogs issue, and offering changes by means of "down-to-earth" narratives. This approach is an exploitation of the private discourse, of the colloquial language of the electorate, which softens the government institution and makes it more intimate: it addresses the concrete issues of the people, it is here, standing by the people. This strategy puts together an image of the people from governance as *we* rather than as *they*.

Veni Markovski, an independent candidate, tries an intensive communication tactics. In his internet forum he converses *on-line* with members of the public on the issue of homeless dogs thus aspiring for maximum representation. "Unfortunately none of the other would-be-mayors wishes to see this happening [humanely solving the issue with the street dogs]... You know me, and you can be certain that, as long as the issue remains unresolved, I will leave alone neither the city council, nor the municipal administration, nor those put-on little council companies comfortably harboring folks with hefty pay

46 Dragomirova, R. 2002: „A Prosecutor Gunned Down A Dog In Front Of Children”, Noshten Troud, February 11-12, 29 [„Нощен труд”, Руми Драгомирова: „Прокурор застреля куче пред деца”, бр. 29, 11-12 февруари 2002]

packets.”<sup>47</sup> Here the markers of colloquial chat openly prevail over dignified officialdom: *you know me* (the man of the people), *those put-on little council companies* (the fraudulence of official institutions), *folks with hefty packets* (a populist cynicism against those higher up), *I will leave alone neither...* (the single atomized individual who boldly confronts the consolidated block of power – a myth familiar to the public from a number of art genres).

Perhaps the key phrase here is *none of the other would-be-mayors*. And the dogs themselves having triggered the conversation are shoved to the backburner (“shoved to the side” or “put on the backburner”). They do not even get mentioned in this piece – in fact they are just an implication here.

*None of the other would-be-mayors* hardly need interpretation: demeaning other candidates is what most runners do while campaigning. Yet there is something fundamental about it in Markovski’s case because he puts up an image of an institutional representative<sup>48</sup> who wants to be distinguished from the other runners. Markovski is a man of the institutions who wants to be seen as alien to them – he is not clad in the official insignia of power and refuses to be associated with its negative points. Such an ambivalent image stands the chance to reap the benefits of a utopian model whereby the institution is harmonically projected on the private space of the individual, simultaneously staying at the top and the bottom of the social ladder. In other words what the public gets is a presentation of the “man of the people” whereby power is presented as stemming from the people in real terms and as being exercised upon the discredited institutional ranks. The institution (overhauling itself and controlled from the grassroots) becomes close, more humane, the status gaps being cancelled. If such a role is performed well it is very likely to enjoy a significant social appeal.

The opposite strategy used by the representatives of the government authorities in constructing a positive identity is to evade the role of populists and discipline themselves into a paternalistic image.<sup>49</sup> This other pole demands the explicit deployment of official language. A typical example in this vein is the platform of Vassil Ivanov-Luciano, a candidate from the ruling party and the minister for sports: “At present the number of homeless dogs in Sofia has grown to an extent at which the lack of effective measures putting it under control has resulted in exacerbated sensitivities in this area.”<sup>50</sup> The expressions *at present* and *has grown to an extent* are typical of the administrative register whereas *exacerbated sensitivities* somewhat mutes the belligerent de-

47 The electronic version of Radio Net, Stela Raicheva: „The Sofia Mutts – The Golden Mine For The Canine Material Business” (Saturday, 24 January 2004) -<http://www.radionetbg.com>

48 Internet page „Veni Markovski – running for Sofia mayor: Forum” (23.10.2003) -<http://sofia.veni.com>

49 Even though still a runner, Markovski positions himself as already participating in city management: „We will not be waiting eight years to become aware of the problems as Stephan did [the Sofia Mayor Sofianski]. The deeper I get into the campaign ...”, etc. (Ibid.)

50 On the question of the two kinds of representation, see Philips, 1997

bate raging in the press, on TV and in the Internet, amidst noisy scandals and extreme allegations. Choosing such a style is an attempt to convey a feeling of law and order. Similarly, the expression *to put it under control* blends into one the practices of euthanasia and neutering without bothering to specify which one of those is targeted by the accusation of ineffectiveness. This is a way to recognize the importance and justice of the opposing positions of dog champions and dog enemies.

In this example credibility is achieved by means of waiving the profane. This also means neglecting the uniqueness of individual cases and reducing the gap between the poles, which is a way for the institution to break free from the frustrated atmosphere of everyday life and float above it in a serene and motionless form warranting superior order and universal justice.

Rothman<sup>51</sup> categorizes the roles of institutional representatives into politicians, administrators and professionals. And if in the first two cases we saw a variant of *politicians*, then in the following ones we saw *administrators* who, according to Gelner's definition<sup>52</sup> shun differentiations between individual cases for the sake of the common rule. The council representatives engaged in day-today communication with members of the public and the media also step into the role of administrators. They only seem to be willing to speak about interaction with their subordinate or higher administrative tiers, about this or that piece of legislation thus highlighting the self-sufficiency of power: "The ideas of the German environmentalists could result in a sharp decline of the canine population, however they have to initially draw up a program to be lodged for approval with the Sofia council and only then commence its implementation."<sup>53</sup> The paternalistic approach, however, sometimes fails to facilitate the formation of a positive identity: it often provokes public accusations of red tape: "Give us some clear details. What, when, where?," "What was that specific and clear-cut thing you were able to see?," "**How**, rather than **will**. Everyone knows the rest."<sup>54</sup> Hence, the council administrators sometimes sidestep the bureaucratic demeanor. For example, Sofia's mayor contradicts the dog champions, who often resort to demonizing his image, in the following way:

*"There is such an intensive pressure on me that I am going to retire."*

*"Who is putting you under pressure?"*

*"The people who are resolute on keeping the street dogs. [...] I am the father of three children. I am fed up with people coming over here and cursing that my*

51 Vassil-Ivanov Luciano – runner for Sophia mayor: „Platform: the Environment Project “ – <http://www.stebsum.org/projecteco.php>

52 Rothman, 1974, p. 48

53 Gelner, 1983, pp. 19-21

54 Petrov, P. 2004 (interview): „An interview with Petar Petrov, deputy director of the EcoEquilibrium municipal company”, Troud, May 14 [„Труд», Петър Петров -интервю, 14.05.2004]

*daughters should die like dogs.”*

[... ]

*“Where do you think is the solution?”*

*“Vigorous measures should be undertaken. There is one possible solution and it is the lethal one.”<sup>55</sup>*

The top institutional agent gets into an alternative role – he sheds the markers of power (*I am going to retire*) and morphs into an ordinary man — the father of a family — and blends into the intimacy of the local community. In a sense, and he almost plays himself (a game in which the claim to the role is that there is no role), he wins the sympathy of the public by using the gestures of openness. The mayor is recognized as being *one of us*. He talks colloquially, lives in an insecure environment in which everyone turns the heat on him and many even threaten him. He is no longer a figure of authority but a part of the family, the most locally valued institution.

After such a catharsis, having shed the corrupting mantle of power, he can afford to regain altitude and land back at the high perch of the formal institution, in other words – to be reelected. Having swung a swift change of roles he is back in the realm of officialdom: *vigorous measures, a lethal outcome* instead of *killing*.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is hard to give a comprehensive answer to the question: what makes the participants in the debate politicize the canine subject in the ways they do and to the degree they do. A plausible answer would be that dogs present a convenient and popular metaphor for utopias and anti-utopias. They stand at the border between culture and nature, between the home and the street, they resemble humans yet are not humans, they are biological units, and yet at the same time are part of our society (so they also provide a metonymy).

It is tempting to draw parallels between social groups and animals; such parallels provide the public with the opportunity to give feedback to government institutions. As long as the 1990's saw a process of establishing and strengthening the institutions and professionalism in the area of social and economic debate, as long as the forms of official communication asserted themselves,

55 Comments on „Platform: the Environment Project” of Vassil-Ivanov Luciano – a candidate for Sofia mayor, in his Internet page (<http://www.stebsum.org/projecteco.php>)

56 Sofianski, S. 2002 (interview): „Fed Up Of My Daughters Being Cursed”, Standart, March 8, 2002 „Стандарт”, Стефан Софийански – интервю: „Омръзна ми да кълнат дъщерите ми”, 8.03.2002]

as long as the field (which one?) was taken by the political class and various experts in policy, business and entertainment – the canine topic provided the healthy “hole in the system” necessary for everyone to look as an expert. In other words, there was an opportunity for everyone to exert his or her alternative authority in public space. The relative novelty of environmental issues in Bulgaria facilitates such enfranchisement. The basic ingredients of the environmental debate, the consensus, the moot as well as the divisive points are in the process of formation.

However, not everyone nowadays can take the liberty to discuss politics in public using everyday language or to hold up the local community and individual privacy as the primary power regulator and still look serious. Not everyone nowadays can openly advocate the marginalization of minorities (ethnic, sexual, or other kinds), thereby challenging the legitimate paradigm of public life (the rules of democracy, equal rights, integration of European values, the welfare state, etc.).

The homeless dogs debate, however, opens exactly this kind of opportunities for grassroots control, for people’s power, for unsanctioned resistance. Therefore it is such an irresistible temptation to turn the debate on the topic of abusive institutions, of homelessness, of our Balkan backwardness, of the social inadequacy of pensioners, of the suspicious selfishness of those with families, of the lower living standards, of our own alienation.

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