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Bulgaria: the Asparoukh bridge, between socialism and capitalism

* ASSEN SLIM*PUBLIÉ LE14/04/2020ÉCONOMIE, POLITIQUE, SOCIÉTÉ

The Asparoukh Bridge is a condensed version of Bulgaria's recent history. Built at the height of socialism in this country, abandoned in the 1990s, finally rehabilitated before being quickly outdated, it should share its name with a duplicate planned for 2023. It is also the bridge of all emotions, including despair, with an average of 70 suicides per year.



"Varna appeared behind the Asparoukh Bridge, unattractive despite the sun."

Dimana Trankova, *Le sourire du chien*, 2014, Éd. Intervalles, p. 568 (translation: Marie Vrinat)

The Asparoukh bridge is inseparable from Varna, an obligatory passage for those who want to access the city from the south. The bridge is named after Khan Asparoukh, founder of the Bulgarian kingdom of the lower Danube in the 7th century (there were other Bulgarian kingdoms around the Sea of Azov and on the middle Volga).

Located on the Black Sea, Varna is the second-largest city in the country and today contributes 15% of Bulgaria's annual GDP. It experienced a major industrial boom during the socialist era: the development of the Varna-Devnya industrial complex (chemicals in particular), which depends on the port of Varna and is now one of the largest in the country, quickly saturated the transport capacity offered by the old canal linking Lake Varna to the Black Sea. Therefore, constructing a second, larger canal was a natural choice.

Technical feat of socialism

It was then a question of preserving the continuity of the city's transport and communication system, linking Varna to the Asparoukh district and the Black Sea road. Therefore, a competition was launched in 1967: after having explored different options (tunnel under the canal, flap bridge, the road around Lake Varna, ferry ...), it is finally the option of a bridge that is chosen.

Its construction began in 1973, and the structure of 2.05 km long, 46 m high and 21 m wide, for a total weight of 3,200 tons was inaugurated by the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party Todor Zhivkov, on September 8, 1976, a few days after the inauguration of the new canal.

An engineering feat for its time, the Asparoukh Bridge consists of a primary structure (including two reinforced concrete trestle sections and a central steel structure) and two complex road junctions at both ends. No less than 78,394 special high-strength bolts were used to assemble the steel structure⁽¹⁾. Built on loose soil (3 to 4 m of clay, 20 m of water-saturated sand, 46 m of silt), the bridge piers rest on deep sinking piles (a type of concrete pillar) that reach a depth of 53 m. The structure is designed to withstand winds of 180 km/h and a temperature range of -40°C to +40°C. Finally, it is the first bridge in Bulgaria to support a moving load of two columns of trucks weighing 30 tons each and spaced at 10 m.

With such assets, the Asparoukh bridge is immediately recognized as one of the most important in the country, absorbing average traffic of 10,000 vehicles/day.

A bridge left to itself in the post-socialist wanderings

After the end of socialism, the time has come for outright budget cuts and massive disinvestment in public infrastructure.

The Asparoukh Bridge was not spared: left to decay, its structure gradually deteriorated. However, in 1996, the traffic was finally interrupted, in an emergency, to allow reconstruction works. Initially planned to last 16 months, the result was eventually prolonged, mainly due to a lack of funding. The fully renovated facility was not put back into service until September 17, 1999, after a long communication and travel difficulties for the region's residents and businesses. The Asparoukh Bridge will undergo a new wave of renovations in 2015, less disabling as bicycle lanes will be added.

A bridge that is no longer up to the task

The Asparoukh Bridge is then at the crossroads. It is an integral part of the European road 87 (E87, it connects Odesa to Antalya along the western coast of the Black Sea). It also receives traffic from the Hemus highway (A-2, currently being completed, connects the Bulgarian capital Sofia to Varna and joins the European transport corridors IV and IX). Finally, it is the only link between the residential area Asparoukh and the rest of the city of Varna.



As the generated traffic was dangerously close to the technical limits of the bridge, the project to build a second bridge was born in 2013. After a few years of feasibility studies and tenders, the construction of a bridge “Asparoukh 2” began in March 2017 and is estimated to take six years. The new bridge will be located near the old one, further west. It is an ambitious project to build a two-level structure supported by cables: level 1 will be dedicated to traffic from the Hemus and Black Sea highways, while level 2 will, in turn, be reserved for traffic from the city of Varna (in the continuation of Levski Boulevard). The construction will be done in two stages (without interrupting the traffic on the current Asparoukh Bridge), at a projected cost of 0.7 billion euros for the first stage (level 1) and 0.9 billion euros for the second (levels 1 and 2). The structure is expected to be 1.9 km long, 58 m high, and 29 m wide, with a total weight of 45,500 tons⁽²⁾. According to its designers, the Asparoukh 2 bridge should considerably ease the congestion of the first one.

Expression of all the emotions

The first Asparoukh bridge offers a breathtaking view of the canal and the city of Varna. So much so that, after the collapse of socialism, it quickly became a “spot” where paragliding and bungee jumping enthusiasts meet regularly: a club specialized in the organization of this type of event was founded in Varna in 1992. All kinds of jumps are offered: individual (it costs 80 levas - 41 euros - for a single jump), in a bathing suit, with the family, in love, etc.⁽³⁾

But the bridge is also known to be the place of expression of the deepest despair. It holds a dismal world record for the number of suicides: 5 to 7 attempts are made every month (an average of 70 per year, for a country that records 37 suicide attempts per 100,000 inhabitants per year). This makes it the first place in the world among the “bridges of death,” fame that is all the sadder because it could be easily hindered.

It is curious to note that the Asparoukh Bridge has not been equipped with any specific system to prevent suicide attempts. It would be neither complicated nor costly to provide it with the classic procedures used on this type of structure (fences, high barriers, railings, safety nets, surveillance cameras, emergency telephones, etc.), even though these deterrent devices have proven their effectiveness everywhere they have been installed⁽⁴⁾. In the case of the famous Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco Bay, for example, the construction of a 6-meter-high barrier begun in 2018 (and expected to be completed in 2021) has already reduced suicide attempts to 14 for that same year, compared to an average of 21 per year since 1937!⁽⁵⁾.

In Varna, a mass was celebrated in April 2013 by Metropolitan Cyril at the bridge's highest point to stop the suicides there. In vain. For the time being, it is very often the fishers, on their initiative and with their only means, who manage to save a handful of people from death. In the absence of specific facilities, the population organizes itself. At most, pedestrians and drivers crossing the bridge are asked to remain vigilant and notify the police at the slightest suspicion of suicidal behavior. A single person standing on the edge of the bridge is now enough to trigger an intervention by the Varna police, who estimates that about 40 suicide attempts per year are prevented⁽⁶⁾. Nevertheless, civil society regularly calls on the city authorities and the state to deploy deterrent equipment.

Whatever way you look at it, Asparoukh is a “bridge” in the total sense of the word: it is a link, or a crossing point, between a city and a neighborhood, between the north and the south of a country, between the past and the future, life and death... The ambitions and failures of socialism, as well as the disillusionment of the transition to capitalism, have left their mark on it for a long time. Some see it as a metaphor for a solid foundation for renewal; others point out it is built on soft ground.

Notes:

- (1) [Asparoukov most](#) [The Asparoukh Bridge], *Grad Varna* (Consulted on October 28, 2019).
- (2) "[Stroiat втори Asparoukhov most do 2025 godina](#)" [A second Asparoukh bridge will be built by 2025], *pik.bg*, 19 octobre 2018.
- (3) [Adrenalin.bg](#) (Consulted on March 13, 2020).
- (4) Magdaline Boutros, « [La délicate conception des barrières contre le suicide du pont Samuel-De Champlain](#) », *Le Devoir*, August 14, 2019.
- (5) Brittany Shoot, "A Suicide Net is Quietly Being Added to the Golden Gate Bridge. Here's Why It's So Controversial", *Fortune*, August 16, 2018.
- (6) "Tcherna konstatatsia: [Asparoukhoviat most vev Varna e nai-predpotchitanoto miasto za samooubiistva v stranata](#)" [The Asparoukh Bridge in Varna is the country's favorite suicide spot], *Petel.bg*, March 27, 2015.

Thumbnail: illustration by Nina Dubocs.

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