

Bulgaria: A Lesson in Learning the Hard Way?

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Introduction

In public and political debates, the late communist and the transition period are divisive and open for discussion. The optics are still changing according to the perspective of the beholder and cause polarising views. For example, a recent surge in nostalgia sees the 1980s as a peak and benchmark in Bulgaria's development. But this makes all the more important to revisit the milestones and trends of the period.

"7 Lost Years" read the title of a 1998 article about Bulgaria.¹ It concerned NATO accession, but was pretty much applicable for Bulgaria's transition development. The country was a relative latecomer to many reforms in the economy,² EU and NATO accession. Bulgaria's starting point was not enviable. Bulgaria was known as the closest Soviet satellite with Todor Zhivkov, the longest running dictator in the bloc. Zhivkov resisted even the Perestroika of the 1980s, viewing with suspicion Gorbachev's policies. In the 1970s, the regime has started to nurture nationalism along with the communist ideology. In the mid and late 1980s, the regime began the infamous assimilation and expulsion of Bulgarian Turks. Domestic and international tensions ran high and at the time the country was in even greater danger of conflict than its Balkan neighbours. The country was accumulating debt, leading to bankruptcy in 1990 and through the early transition botched economic policies and nepotism led to unprecedented economic and financial crisis in 1996–1997. The citizens are still frustrated with the uneven social and economic catching up with the West and deficits mar the quality of democracy and judiciary.

There was a lot of bad news, but there was also good news. Despite the danger of interethnic conflict (or even conflict with neighbouring Turkey), the country managed to solve these outstanding issues to avoid the type of conflict as its close neighbours in former Yugoslavia. The Round Table of 1990 managed to negotiate the basic path of transition to democracy and market economy, enshrined in the constitution of 1991. All Bulgarian citizens were provided equal political and civil rights. The party system emerged soon as well as other civil society organisations in line with the freedom of assembly. The first multiparty general elections took place in June 1990 and at the time of writing nearly 30 years free and fair elections have been taking place with a peaceful change of power.

¹ SIMON 1998.

² MIHOV 1999.

After 1997, a new political consensus about the development of the country has been reached, following the crisis of 1995–1996. A currency board and reforms stabilised the economy; the country took course to EU and NATO membership. In 2004, the country acceded to NATO. In 2007, it became EU member as part of the fifth enlargement.

The Last Years of Communism

There were several main trends that probably influenced developments in Bulgaria in the 1980s more than anything else. The first one was the growing affection of Todor Zhivkov's regime for nationalistic mobilisation. Started in the 1970s, the nationalistic surge peaked in the 1980s. More and more, the emphasis shifted away from communist orthodoxy to nationalist ideology.

The other factor was the starting of *Perestroika* in the USSR by Mikhail Gorbachev. It was met with suspicion by the Bulgarian leadership. Todor Zhivkov would not oppose openly the Soviet leader's new policy, but was very reluctant to introduce any meaningful *Glasnost and Perestroika*. Zhivkov famously told a gathering of trade union activists in 1987: "Comrades, we have decided to wait, to see [...] Thus we will lay low for this storm to pass, but after this we will see what to do [...] If the storm does not pass, then we will rebuild ourselves [i.e. introduce *perestroika*]." ³

The third one was the forceful change of names of and the expulsion of Bulgarian Turks. Partly fearing a "Cyprus scenario" with irredentist threat by the Turkish minority in the country, partly pursuing nationalist mobilisation, the Zhivkov regime carried out the so-called "Revival" or "Rebirth" process from 1982 to 1989 with a peak in 1985. ⁴ The regime claimed that the Bulgarian Muslims were the descendants of forcefully Islamised Bulgarians and had to be assimilated. Eventually, many were forced to leave and by 1989, a mass exodus occurred as hundreds of thousands of people left their possessions and went to Turkey. ⁵

The 1980s were a period of economic problems for the regime, too. The foreign debt in the period 1985–1989 tripled. ⁶ The exodus of the Turkish population caused severe labour shortage and economic problems. The regime was accumulating debt, increasingly relying on Western finances, which caused some opening as for example in relations with West Germany. There were ambitions for catching up with the West especially in technology, with Bulgaria specialising in copycat computer technologies within the Eastern Bloc. In 1989, Zhivkov decided to introduce some changes by very limited economic liberalisation with the so-called "Decree (Ukaz) 56 for Economic Activity".

³ Former communist leader Todor Zhivkov reportedly speaking to trade union members in 1987, audio recording. Translation of the author. See Recording of Todor Zhivkov 1987.

⁴ For a thorough account see AVRAMOV 2016.

⁵ The accounts vary, with 462,767 Bulgarian citizens residing in Turkey in 1990, according to ANGELOV–LESSENSKI 2017.

⁶ See STOEV 2004, 90–97.

The Process of Regime Change

Todor Zhivkov resigned on 10 November 1989 in what was described as an internal coup.⁷ In the months prior the resignation, a group of government and party functionaries, allegedly with Moscow's blessing, began planning the ousting of Zhivkov. The date is generally considered the fall of the regime and the beginning of democratisation. However, it might be that both those within the party, who removed Zhivkov, and many of the *intelligentsia* believed that the system could be reformed, not removed.⁸

The emerging opposition had other plans and wanted transition to democracy. A number of "informal" opposition organisations were created and several events took place that helped shape the course of transition. These included the creation of the Club for the Support of Glasnost and Perestroika in 1988, led by Zhelyo Zhelev, who later became Bulgaria's president. On 7 December 1989, the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF) was created by several independent organisations and new or restored parties and became the main political opposition to the former communist party.⁹

Furthermore, Bulgaria had to resolve the question of the rights of the Turkish and Muslim community after the assimilation events. In December 1989, demonstrations for religious freedom and later for the return of names took place. The BCP leadership decided to return the names and in early 1990, a "small round table" took place – as it was called by some of the participants in the process – to decide on the return of names, the civil and political rights of Bulgarian Turks and Muslims, resolving peacefully a potential ethnic conflict.

These early events culminated in the decision to hold a National Round Table with the aim of negotiating the main elements and steps of political transition. The two main negotiating sides were the still ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), renamed to Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in April 1990¹⁰ and the opposition Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF). The round table took place from 3 January 1990 to 14 May 1990 with the declared goal of "carrying out peaceful transition from totalitarian to democratic social setup".¹¹ The main prerequisites for transition that were agreed included pluralistic and competitive democracy with free and fair elections, removing the monopoly of the communist party with the merger of party and state, convening a Grand National Assembly to change the constitution by democratising it.

Political Institutions and Their Changes

As agreed by the Round Table, the first free elections took place in June 1990 to elect the 7th Grand National Assembly. It was convened for a limited period from 10 July 1990 to 2 October 1991. The main goal of its work was a new constitution of the country to lay the foundations of a democratic state based on the rule of law. Since then the constitution was changed five times, but the only more substantial change was in 2005 in relation to

⁷ LINZ–STEPAN 1996, 338–339.

⁸ GRUEV 2015b, 17–18.

⁹ MALINOV 2010, 3; FISH–BROOKS 2000.

¹⁰ See KANDILAROV 2011b, 343.

¹¹ Dokumenti 1990.

the accession to the European Union. The 1990 constitution was not adopted without controversies. There was the “Protest of the 39”; the opposition members of parliament protested against the people and methods of adopting the new constitution as the former communist party acquired a majority after the elections and had the major say.¹² The constitution was nevertheless signed on 12 July 1991 by 313 of the 400 members of parliament.

The new constitution¹³ defined Bulgaria as a parliamentary republic. Article 1 (1) made sure to confirm that Bulgaria was a unitary state with local self-government and “no autonomous territorial formations shall be allowed to exist therein” (Article 2 (1). The rule of law was enshrined (Article 4) as well as the individual rights of citizens: The Bulgarian language was defined as the official language of the state Article 6 (2). Article 11 (4) provided that: “There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties, which seek the violent seizure of state power.” The Bulgarian Parliament – National Assembly (Narodno Sabranie) was constituted as a unicameral, with 240 members, with a term of four years (Chapter 3 of the Constitution). In Article 62 (1) (Previous text of Article 62- SG 12/07), the National Assembly was vested with the legislative authority and would exercise parliamentary control. As a parliamentary republic, the national assembly has broad powers, among them “Art. 84. 1. Pass, amend, supplement, and repeal the laws”; “6. Elect and remove the Prime Minister and, on his motion, the members of the Council of Ministers”.

Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic, but the Round Table and then the constitution identified the institution of the president as the head of state to be elected directly by voters for a five year term.¹⁴ Despite the limited powers, the president may play a significant role by vetoing laws, approving senior appointments and appointing a caretaker government, some of which played a critical part in Bulgaria’s development.

In the very early transition, the president (the term “chairman” was also used at the time) was indirectly elected. The first chairman was Petar Mladenov of the Bulgarian Communist Party, former foreign minister and one of the communist party plotters against Zhivkov. After Mladenov resigned in consequence of a scandal,¹⁵ the former dissident Zhelyo Zhelev of UDF was elected president by the parliament with Atanas Semerdzhiev from BSP as vice-president.

In 1992, the first direct elections for president took place, electing the president and vice-president for a five year term. Zhelyo Zhelev of the UDF won in 1992 a five year term until 1996. He was succeeded by another UDF nomination Petar Stoyanov, who won the 1996 elections. In 2001, the position changed to another party as the BSP leader Georgi Parvanov won the elections. He was re-elected in 2006 for a second term until 2011.¹⁶ In 2011, Rossen Plevneliev nominated by the centre-right GERB won the elections. In 2016, the presidency was won again by a BSP nomination, Rumen Radev, for a five year term.

The Council of Ministers (Ministerski savet) is the government of Bulgaria, consisting of a Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and ministers [Article 108 (1)],¹⁷ to direct and

¹² See RIBAREVA–NIKOLOVA 2000.

¹³ National Assembly 1991.

¹⁴ National Assembly 1991, Chapter four, Article 92 (1), Article 93 (1).

¹⁵ The scandal broke out over the disputed account of what he said, watching a protest rally. Reportedly, it was: “It is better for the tanks to come.” See RIBAREVA–NIKOLOVA 2000, 13.

¹⁶ OSCE 2007, 20.

¹⁷ National Assembly 1991, Chapter five: Council of Ministers.

conduct the State's domestic and foreign policy in accordance with the Constitution and the laws [Article 105 (1)]. The government exercises considerable powers and the prime minister is in practice the most important figure.

In the 1991 Constitution, Bulgaria retained its unitary character. The local self-government and local administration is provisioned in Article 135–146. In 1999, the current setup was adopted with 28 regions (*oblast*) with governors, appointed by the executive Council of Ministers. Article 143 (3) provided that “the municipalities are self-governed by directly elected mayors and councils”.

In August 1991, the Grand National Assembly voted a law on the election of the members of parliament, municipal councillors and mayors, which introduced principles largely used to this day. These include proportional representation for allocating the 240 seats in parliament and the 4% threshold for entering parliament. There were only two exceptions. The adopted electoral system for the Grand National Assembly was a mixed type proportional and majoritarian with 200 proportional and 200 majoritarian seats.¹⁸ In 2009, a mixed system was used again with 31 out of the 240 seats using a majoritarian “winner takes all” system.

NATO and EU memberships play a profound role in the development of Bulgaria. But the decision to join the two organisations came late and was not easy. The political divide with regards to NATO was very broad. While the democratic opposition of UDF supported closer relations and membership, the BSP leadership and voters were very negatively predisposed. It was only after the profound shock due to the 1995–1996 economic and political crisis that a political and public consensus was reached. This allowed three successive governments to prepare and accede to NATO in 2004, starting with emergency actions by a caretaker government in early 1997.

Despite that membership in the EU was not as contested an issue as membership in NATO, and Bulgaria submitted an application in 1995,¹⁹ the country did not seriously move towards EU accession until after the 1997 threshold. The government of Ivan Kostov took advantage of the improved context and started preparations for accession.²⁰ Bulgaria was working hard and fast to cover EU requirements and catch-up for lost time. In 2001, Bulgaria received visa-free travel with the Schengen countries after introducing a number of necessary measures. The negotiations with the EU were opened in 2000, provisionally concluded in 2004 and the accession treaty signed in 2005 to formally enter on 1 January 2007. The EU conditionality within the Copenhagen framework became a key impetus for the political and economic reforms in Bulgaria.

From 2007, as it entered the European Union, Bulgaria held European Parliamentary elections. In the 2007 elections, the BSP and the GERB won 5 seats each from the 18 seats in total, MRF – 4, Ataka – 3 and NMSS – 1 seat.²¹ In the 2009 elections, GERB won 5, the BSP-led coalition – 4, MRF – 3, Ataka – 2, NMSS – 2 and the centre-right Blue Coalition – 2. In 2014, GERB won 6 seats, the BSP-led coalition – 4 seats, MRF – 4, the new populist Bulgaria without Censorship – 2 and the centre-right Reformist Bloc – 1 seat out of the 17 seats available.²²

¹⁸ TODOROV 2014, 147.

¹⁹ Europe Agreement 1995.

²⁰ GRABBE 2006, 112.

²¹ GERB 2007.

²² European Elections 2009; European Elections 2014.

Governments and Party Politics

The first elections of the transition period took place in June 1990 to elect a Grand National Assembly. They employed the mixed system with 200 seats in the proportional and 200 seats in the majoritarian system. The former communist Bulgarian Socialist Party won an overwhelming majority with 211 seats, the democratic opposition of UDF had 144 seats, and the Turkish minority MRF had 24 seats. Three smaller parties won the rest of the seats: the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) won 16 seats, the Alternative Socialist Party coalition – 3 seats, and the left nationalist Fatherland Labour Party – 2 seats.²³ The election results and the reactions to it remain disputed to this day with a suspicion of foul play on behalf of the ruling BSP. But what mattered was that the results were recognised and the GNA convened, despite the fact that the opposition recognised the elections as free, but not fair. These first elections provided the normative and organisational blueprint for elections in Bulgaria for years to come.

From February 1990 to September 1990, there was the first government of the BCP's²⁴ Andrei Lukanov, former economy minister in Zhivkov's government and key figure in his downfall. The second government of Lukanov was appointed by the Grand National Assembly after the first free elections. Lukanov is associated with the profound crisis in the period, colloquially known as the "Lukanov winter". He stopped payments on the foreign debt of Bulgaria, leading to years of graver problems. The crisis continued under the short-lived government of Dimitar Popov from December 1990 to November 1991, backed by a diverse coalition by BSP, the UDF and the small BANU ("agrarians").²⁵ It was touted as "programmatic", "non-partisan" and had to stabilise economically the country with some attempts at economic liberalisation.

After the end of the Grand National Assembly, new general elections took place in October 1991. Three parties entered parliament. The UDF, which was a coalition of parties at the time, won 110 seats out of 240, a BSP-led coalition won 106 seats and the MRF had 24 seats.²⁶ The UDF formed a minority government with its leader Filip Dimitrov as Prime Minister from November 1991 until December 1992. The young UDF tried to start reforms, among other things, with a focus on restitution and privatisation. In foreign policy it sought closer relations with the West, especially the USA and President Zhelyo Zhelev helped join the Francophonie. In 1992, Bulgaria was the first to recognise the independent Macedonia, BiH, Croatia and Slovenia.²⁷ But this government was also marked by a significant rift within the pro-democratic forces as President Zhelev, former leader and founder of the UDF, heavily criticised the cabinet over its confrontation with trade unions, the media, the presidency and the opposition.

Philip Dimitrov lost a vote of confidence in October 1992 as the MRF decided not to support him. In the period of December 1992 – September 1994, the Lyuben Berov cabinet touted as another "expert government" came to power in December 1992 with the somewhat tacit support by the BSP and MRF. This cabinet became emblematic of the period, weak

²³ Bulgaria, Parliamentary Chamber 1990.

²⁴ BCP changed its name to Bulgarian Socialist Party on 3 April 1990.

²⁵ Also translated into English as Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BAPU).

²⁶ Bulgaria, Parliamentary Chamber 1991.

²⁷ METODIEV 2015, 306–319.

and reportedly dependent on vested interests.²⁸ Following a political crisis, President Zhelyo Zhelev appointed a new, caretaker government by the first (and so far only) female Prime Minister Reneta Indzhova to prepare snap elections for parliament.

In December 1994, Bulgaria held another general election. A BSP-led coalition won 125 seats out of 240, UDF won 69 seats, the People's Union coalition (the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union and the Democratic Party) had 18 seats, MRF had 15, the Bulgarian Business Bloc (one of the early populist parties) had 13 seats. A BSP government with its leader Zhan Videnov as Prime Minister was formed. The Videnov Government botched policies such as price controls brought the country into an even deeper crisis.²⁹ The government failed to agree on a new deferment on foreign debt. The banking sector collapsed after politically connected and incompetent bankers syphoned the system. The hyperinflation and food deficit led to mass protests in the winter of 1996 and 1997 with citizens storming the parliament.³⁰ Videnov resigned due to internal party pressure, but the BSP decided not to form another government and to cede power.

President Petar Stoyanov, who was a UDF nomination, appointed a caretaker government led by Sofia Mayor Stefan Sofianski. The April 1997 elections results³¹ brought an overwhelming victory for the opposition United Democratic Forces coalition³² with 137 seats out of 240, the BSP-led coalition won 58 seats, an MRF-led coalition had 19 seats, the Bulgarian Euro-Left had 14 seats and the Bulgarian Business Bloc had 12 seats. The snap elections of 1997 brought to power the government of Ivan Kostov, leader of the Union of Democratic Forces, which was already a party dubbed in one article at the time "Bulgarian Democracy's Organizational Weapon".³³

The deep economic and political crisis under the socialist government of Videnov led to widespread discontent and provided the next government with a clean slate for long-delayed economic and social policies and foreign policy agenda. A number of key reforms were commenced in this period, which influenced the trajectory of development for decades. The first task was to stabilise the economy and the financial system. A currency board was introduced in 1997 with the Bulgarian Lev pegged to the Deutsche Mark (later Euro) and is still in place to remain until entry into the Eurozone. The country decided to take course to NATO and EU membership, which at the time were seen as the "twin" accessions under the "return to Europe" moto.

But in 2001, when Ivan Kostov's cabinet was growing unpopular and, the society wary of the burden of reforms a new, charismatic player entered politics. This was Simeon, the former king who has just returned to the country. Simeon was an actual "Tsar" of Bulgaria from 1943 to 1946 as a little boy, but lived in exile. In 2001, in a matter of months, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha launched a political movement named after himself – National Movement

²⁸ KOLEV 2015.

²⁹ HRISTOVA-STANCHEV 2004, 21–31.

³⁰ AMANPOUR 1997.

³¹ OSCE 1997.

³² The United Democratic Forces (Obedineni Demokraticхни Sili) was the coalition around the Union of the Democratic Forces (Sayuz na Demokratichnite Sili).

³³ FISH-BROOKS 2000.

Simeon the Second (NMSS, NDSV in Bulgarian)³⁴ with a coalition of smaller parties and won the 2001 elections, sweeping aside the main parties that dominated politics until then. The NMSS-led coalition won half of the seats in parliament – 120 out of 240, the incumbent United Democratic Forces (UDF-led coalition) had just 51 seats, BSP had 48 and MRF 21.³⁵ After the election victory, Simeon became Prime Minister, shedding aside ambitions to restore the monarchy as some speculated or hoped. He led a coalition government of his party NMSS and MRF, but also included two BSP ministers, ensuring broader support. Simeon retained the priorities of EU and NATO membership.

The 2005 elections brought a new coalition government, led by the BSP and its leader Sergey Stanishev, but on the ticket of the MRF. The Turkish minority MRF and NMSS of Simeon were the junior partners. BSP had won 82 out of the 240 seats, NMSS had 53 and MRF had 34 seats. The opposition consisted of the centre-right United Democratic Forces with 20 seats, the centre-right Democrats for Strong Bulgaria of former UDF leader Ivan Kostov with 17 seats, the new nationalist Ataka with 21 seats and the Bulgarian People's Union ("agrarians") with 13 seats.³⁶ The so-called "Tripartite" coalition led by Stanishev oversaw the entry of Bulgaria into the EU in 2007. But the relative prosperity in the period of the Simeon and Stanishev Government was slowly replaced by the impact of the global economic crisis on Bulgaria. There was growing public discontent and Brussels had frozen significant funds over suspected irregularities, setting the stage for the 2009 general elections.

The BSP and Stanishev lost the 2009 elections to the up-and-coming GERB party, an acronym meaning "coat of arms" of Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, a centre-right party. It was formed in December 2006 by another charismatic leader – Boyko Borissov, former secretary general of the interior ministry (police) in the Simeon Government and later Mayor of Sofia Capital City.

The 2009 elections featured a mixed type system of 31 majoritarian and 209 proportional seats (the only other was the 1990 Grand National Assembly), meant to benefit the incumbent BSP. But the competitor of GERB won 26 seats and MRF 5 seats of those 31 majoritarian seats. The final results showed that GERB won 91 proportional and 26 majoritarian seats, the BSP-led Coalition for Bulgaria had 40 proportional seats, MRF had 33 proportional seats and 5 majoritarian, the nationalist Ataka had 21 proportional seats, the centre-right Blue Coalition had 15 proportional seats and the populist Order, Law and Justice party (RZS) won 10 seats.³⁷ The winner GERB formed a minority government with 117 out of the 240 seats.

Borissov's cabinet resigned in the winter of 2013 over mass protests, triggered by electricity bills and relaying the growing frustration over the economic and social conditions. The caretaker cabinet of Marin Raykov, appointed by President Rossen Plevneliev, prepared early elections.

The May 2013 snap elections brought a BSP–MRF coalition in parliament, occasionally backed by Ataka. The BSP-led Coalition for Bulgaria had 84 seats, MRF had 36 seats

³⁴ The movement was transformed into a party and later renamed in 2007 and 2008 to National Movement for Stability and Progress, using the old abbreviation NDSV in Bulgarian.

³⁵ OSCE 2001, 19.

³⁶ OSCE 2005, 17.

³⁷ GERB won one additional seat after additional ruling. For the election results see OSCE 2009, 28.

and Ataka had 23 seats. The opposition GERB won 97 seats.³⁸ A government was formed with Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski. But the new cabinet was from the onset met with massive protests over the appointment of tycoon and MRF MP Delyan Peevski as head of the State Agency for National Security.³⁹ The appointment was revoked, but the protests continued. These were the longest running protests in Bulgarian history for over consecutive 400 days. They ended after the government collapsed due to MRF's withdrawal from the coalition and the bankruptcy of one of the largest banks – Corpbank, which caused billions of Euros in losses.⁴⁰ A new caretaker government was appointed by President Rossen Plevneliev with Georgi Bliznashki as Prime Minister to prepare new snap elections.

In the early elections of 2014, eight parties entered the parliament. GERB won 84 seats out of 240, BSP Left Bulgaria coalition had 39, MRF won 38, the centre-right Reformist Bloc – 23, the nationalist Patriotic Front coalition – 19, the populist Bulgaria without Censorship – 15, the nationalist Ataka – 11 and the centre-left Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance (ABV) won 11.⁴¹

After the elections in 2014, GERB formed a coalition with the small centre-right coalition of the Reformist Bloc and the small centre-left ABV of former BSP leader and President Georgi Parvanov, which later withdrew in the summer of 2016. Following the loss of the late 2016 presidential elections by GERB to the opposing BSP-backed candidate, Borissov resigned again in January 2017. Another caretaker government appointed by the new President Rumen Radev with Ognyan Gerdzhikov as Prime Minister came to power.

In the March 2017 snap elections,⁴² Boyko Borissov and his GERB won the elections and formed another government. GERB's junior partner became the loose United Patriots coalition of three nationalist parties – National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), Ataka, IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO). GERB had 95 of the 240 seats, its partners – 25 seats. The opposition BSP-led coalition had 80 seats, MRF – 26 seats and the new Volya (“Will” in English) of tycoon Vesselin Mareshki had 12 seats. The high point of the third Borissov cabinet was Bulgaria taking over the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2018. The presidency made the EU accession of the Western Balkans its priority, among other things.

There are two broad periods with regards to party system development in Bulgaria. The first period dates from the start of political liberalisation from 1990 to 2001. This period was dominated by three parties or the coalitions they led – the left Bulgarian Socialist Party, the centre-right Union of the Democratic Forces and the Turkish minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms.

The Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) changed its name to Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)⁴³ in April 1990 and continued to dominate the left part of the spectrum. Despite some attempts at creating alternatives, the BSP had never been seriously challenged in its field. As a rule, it had coalition partners for elections, but they were satellites with little influence. The BSP was slow to transform, entertaining initially the idea of a “third way” between

³⁸ OSCE 2013, 28.

³⁹ BBC 2013.

⁴⁰ WILLIAMS-TSOLOVA 2014.

⁴¹ OSCE 2014, 26.

⁴² OSCE 2017, 29.

⁴³ See KANDILAROV 2011b.

communism and a social-democracy.⁴⁴ After 1997 it changed some of its basic tenets after accepting NATO accession and supporting EU membership⁴⁵ and became member of the Party of European Socialists.

The Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF) – started as a democratic, pro-Western opposition and largely centre-right union of diverse parties in 1989, but it has had as founders and partners social democratic parties and other organisations.⁴⁶ UDF underwent several transformations, becoming a centre-right party in 1998. From the early transition in the 1990s, the UDF took hold of the larger urban centres and had its most emblematic governments in 1992 and 1997. In 1998, it became member of the European People's Party. Its decline started in 2001, gradually fragmenting and losing relevance, but there is still a small party with this name and other successor parties, such as the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (also EPP member).

The third biggest party from this period was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), founded and still dominated by Ahmed Dogan. Founded on 4 January 1990, it is regarded as the party of the Turkish minority in the country. It has remained one of the most influential players to this day. It has often manoeuvred to its advantage to play the king-maker between the roughly equal BSP and UDF. MRF is member of ALDE. The attempts through the years to challenge MRF and Dogan's leadership within the Turkish community have failed, giving birth to smaller parties that struggled to survive. As a rule, these were established by former MRF leading figures. E.g. in 2012, the People's Party Freedom and Dignity was founded by Kasim Dal, former Dogan's deputy, in 2016 the Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance party was established by Lyutvi Mestan, former formal leader of MRF. Mestan's party, known with the abbreviation DOST (meaning "friend" in Turkish) had high hopes for replacing Dogan and the MRF as it had the support of high level officials from Turkey and the influential Bulgarian-born Turkish diaspora organisations in neighbouring Turkey,⁴⁷ but again the party failed to gain traction. It is worth noting that there has been an interesting dynamic between the MRF and other Turkish minority parties in Bulgaria and the large diaspora of Bulgarian Turks living in Turkey.⁴⁸ With their well-organised associations, political clout in Turkey, money and numbers they have been able to exert influence in the community political matters, but their influence is limited as the MRF and Dogan always managed to take control of the situation.

The existing party model was substantially and suddenly altered with the 2001 elections⁴⁹ and the arrival of former king Simeon. Simeon entered politics as a charismatic leader and established a political movement after him – National Movement Simeon II/the Second (NMSS), officially registered in 2002. In addition to the novelty of a former royal leading the executive in a parliamentary democracy, NMSS proved that founding a leadership party

⁴⁴ KANEV 2011, 238.

⁴⁵ MITEV 2011, 52.

⁴⁶ See MALINOV 2010 and KANEV 2011, including the 1997 United Democratic Forces coalition with the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party, the Bulgarian Euro-Left (BEL).

⁴⁷ TSOLOVA 2017.

⁴⁸ Nearly 370,000 Bulgarian-born people reside in Turkey as of 2014, making up the largest share of the foreign-born population with 37.6% at the time according to the Turkish Statistical Institute 2014.

⁴⁹ See KARASIMEONOV 2010, 127.

to break the status quo is a winning tactic to be emulated later on. In 2005, it lost the elections and in 2009 remained outside of parliament.

The example of Simeon informed Boyko Borissov, who entered politics himself in 2005 as Mayor of Sofia and in 2006 established his party GERB, or Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria. Borissov also won the 2005 and 2007 local elections in Sofia, becoming Mayor of Sofia. His party GERB won the parliamentary elections in 2009, 2014 and 2017, the presidential elections in 2011 and GERB mayors control the major cities in the country. GERB joined the European People's Party (EPP) as a centre-right party in 2008.

The nationalist Ataka party, established in 2005 by Volen Siderov (initially running as a coalition)⁵⁰ is among the indicative phenomenon of the period. It won a significant number of votes in 2005, 2009 and 2013, running on the anti-status quo platform and pro-Russian sentiments. Siderov came second in the 2006 presidential elections and the party joined the cabinet in 2017 with a coalition of other nationalist parties – the IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria.

In addition, in the 2000s there was a surge of small parties on local level, often dubbed “business parties” as they revolved around tycoons.⁵¹ Some of them managed to get into the national parliament as LIDER of energy tycoon Hristo Kovachki, established in 2007, managed to enter parliament in 2014 with the coalition of Bulgaria without Censorship of Nikolay Barekov, who himself entered the European Parliament in 2014. The “Volya” (meaning “Will”) party of tycoon Veselin Mareshki, established in 2007 with some name revisions, won 12 seats in the 2017 elections with all Volya candidates being employees or relatives of the party leader.⁵² Though such parties remained with limited national influence, they had enough success to be able to influence decision-making at either local or national level.

Conclusion

Speaking broadly, in the 1990–2001 period, the main cleavages were “communist” vs. “anti-communist”, “liberal democracy” vs. “reformed socialism”,⁵³ “pro-Western” vs. “pro-Russian” orientation of the country. The socialists adhered to “gradualism”⁵⁴ in changes, advocating for a slow path, sometimes leading to inconclusive steps and results. The centre-left advocated for more resolute reforms. Symbolically, BSP were the colour “red” and UDF claimed the colour “blue” and later parties such as GERB sought after the symbolism. In the 2000s, the twin accessions to NATO in 2004 and especially the EU in 2007 structured the political and public agenda within a mainstream consensus. Bulgaria was and remained highly supportive

⁵⁰ KARASIMEONOV 2010, 151.

⁵¹ LYUBENOV 2017. The start of such parties can be traced to the Bulgarian Business Bloc of George Ganchev, who competed for presidency in 1996, to the presence mainly in the municipal councils of – e.g. the Movement “Our City” established in the city of Varna in 2007, the political party “European Middle Class” in the city of Burgas and a party dubbed “Burgas” in the same city, etc.

⁵² See the article of SPASOV 2017.

⁵³ KARASIMEONOV 2010, 37.

⁵⁴ FISH–BROOKS 2010, 5.

of the EU with trust in EU institutions three times higher than those in the national ones.⁵⁵ But as the global economic crisis coincided with the EU membership, some of the public frustrations were projected onto it, further aggravated by the refugee crisis and Brexit. A number of parties started to run on anti-mainstream sentiments to gather the votes of the disillusioned. But despite discontent and rhetoric, only about 20% of the people would reject EU membership,⁵⁶ which represents the consensus basis for the long-term development of the country.

At the end of the day, those seeing a glass half empty are re-evaluating the entire transition experience unhappy with the slow catching up, the social and economic problems and messy politics. Those seeing a glass half full would point to the peaceful transition in contrast to many of the neighbours, the ability to mobilise in important moments as in the EU accession process, the overall direction and positive developments in a long-term perspective.

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⁵⁵ 33% tend to trust EU institutions and 10% tend to trust Bulgarian institutions more. See LESSENSKI 2017.

⁵⁶ Data from the 2016 opinion survey "Would you vote for a party that supports the exit of Bulgaria from the EU?" in LESSENSKI 2017.

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