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## Bulgarian Political Culture in Change

■ Some path dependencies had a decisive impact on the shaping of Bulgarian political culture through ages. The Bulgarian culture, frequently described as a traditionally “parochial” one, evolved from the values of Eastern Orthodoxy. The latter lagged behind the process of revival, initiated by the West European Renaissance. Some incompatibility of the local traditional culture appears thus to be a first marker to distinguish it from Western European values and structures.

■ The search for forms of peaceful coexistence beyond sheer battles limited the collision of cultures and religions and may well be considered as the essence of Bulgarian experience. This unique art to cope with “othernesses” and bridge deeper cultural asymmetries in a global world may enrich the shaping of a new European integrity.

■ The EU accession of 2007 has been widely perceived by most Bulgarians as restoring some historical justice after decades of “punishment” by great powers, following isolation under totalitarian oppression.

■ Bulgaria has only formally completed the requirements of Western European representative democracy. Systematic failures of the political system, limited good governance, less culturally “domesticated” national elites, alongside a widely neglected “rule of law” etc. threaten to divert Bulgaria’s young democracy from its European gravity.

■ Bulgarians are still confronted with the need to search for more efficient forms of public control and monitoring over their state and institutions. This is a great challenge for a new participatory and activist civic culture interlinked with other European countries and their common perspective. Rationalizing this in a pragmatic way may be considered as the only realistic way out of the present Bulgarian dilemmas.

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## 1. Introduction

The transition in Eastern Europe has led to peculiar mixes of *parochial*, *subjective*, and *quasi-participant* elements that have reshaped political cultures in many ways. This heterogeneity is often considered a premise of new uncertainties or rising risks. History still matters, but not too much, and not in the old way. Even though political cultures do not change “overnight”, they are worth a more thorough scrutiny. Political cultures are learned. But do we really “learn”? And to what extent do we utilize our widely neglected civic potential beyond older political boundaries, or even visions. This analysis is an attempt to contribute to the rationalization of an awakening civic consciousness in Bulgaria.

## 2. Historical and Social Roots

Some *path dependencies* had a decisive impact on the shaping of Bulgarian political culture through ages. Their brief outline in support of a better rationalization of its social nature, major deficits, but also qualitative changes that have occurred since 1990 is presented below.

### **Features of Bulgarian parochialism**

The Bulgarian culture, frequently described as a traditionally “parochial” one, i.e. defined by the smallest unit of a territorially and religiously bound community, evolved from the values of Eastern Orthodoxy. The latter lagged behind the process of revival, initiated by the West European Renaissance. Some incompatibility of the local traditional culture appears thus to be a first marker to distinguish it from Western European values and structures. Most of these immanent features go beyond formal political criteria. They evolve from a deeper demarcation line between religions and their spheres of influence.

Indeed the West European Renaissance impacted mostly the Catholic world. This is why its refreshing spirit touched mostly the Czech and the Polish and partially the Serbo-Croats on the Adriatic Sea, out of all Slavic people. The Orthodox world, the whole Southern and Eastern Slavic community, alongside Byzantium, stayed very much aside from this vigorous cultural process. Byzantium could not raise the people in Eastern Europe up to the new spiritual, creative, moral and social heights, as Italy did in the epoch of Renaissance and Humanism.

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A most *expressive emotionality* blurs the parochial mind, enchainning it to its introvert world, binding the individual to isolation and a kind of an “enclave” of spiritual existence. However, this is notorious for most Balkan people. This process has even deepened after the fall of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom under the Turkish invasion in the 14th century. This *existential pattern* shaped the perceptions of the parochial Bulgarian, as related to power and domination, state order, or even life style.

Most of the elements of this traditional culture may be defined as *deeply alienated*. A decisive turn occurred not earlier than the New Bulgarian Revival in the 18th century. Its cultural contribution had great impact on the shaping of the Bulgarian national identity. In a certain way it restored the awareness of many Bulgarians as inheritors of one of the oldest states in the region. It also contributed to the reestablishment of the connections with Bulgaria’s European roots that had almost ceased to exist as a result of 500 years of Ottoman oppression.

Another significant point is that Renaissance in West European had opened a road for the transition from feudal economy to capitalism. Bulgaria was deprived of this progressive trend in many ways. Most spontaneous civic thrives have been suppressed by a notorious primitivism. The latter has shaped a specific “*philosophy of survival*” which has deeply obstructed a pragmatic notion of politics and political life. Most of the evolutionary, culturally consolidating patterns relevant to Western Europe appear *missing per se* in their Balkan nexus. Consequently, Bulgaria never had the chance to sustain its own political elite, as invasions, crises and devastating wars lead to its extermination. Persecutions for political reasons, clan rivalries, or revenge have often been seen as radical outcome of social dilemmas.

The Bulgarian societal existence has been perceived as a constant challenge and a balancing on the verge of deep *asymmetries*, rather than some continuous pattern of independent development. Uncertainties of social, economic and political type have been widely misused by great powers. Most downfalls of history and politics are still perceived as “dagger in the back”, result of conspiracy theories, less as own cultural deficits. One argument might be a deeply rooted voluntarism and partisanship of local elites. They have rarely been inspired by constructive ideas, more often apt to ready made, “import” solutions. This eclectic pattern reflects deeper uncertainties of identities and backward conservatism. Ideologies have been less lucky in this part of the Balkans where some egocentric, shortsighted pragmatism has prevailed.

Bulgarian political leadership is rather vertically accentuated or even tempted by an *“Asian spirit”* of power. The latter was cultivated in the ages of Ottoman oppression, refined by Russian imperial paternalism after the Liberation of 1878, moulded in a couple of authoritarian regimes before World War II and fomented in 45 years of communist isolationism. Bulgarians seem more inspired by a leadership of the *“strong hand”*. Politics have rarely been perceived as a collective commitment of the national elite. It still seems a matter of grasping the chance, or taking advantage of being on the side of the winner. Political loyalties have been challenged in severe *“revenge”* pattern, or sustained through most ruthless clientele.

This political culture appears less *“sedimented”* as compared to other European nations (Germany, Italy, especially the UK). It is bound to its own gravity of deep mistrust to both politics and power, therefore leading to deeper resentment. All this may illustrate but does not explain the wide spread *“fatalism”*, rooted into the social behaviour of most Bulgarians. Most observers have arguably pointed at deficits of political will, persistence, or even the capacity to mobilize the society.

One way to live through Greek tyrannies for example was *“amity as parity”*. Bulgarians may have well refined this pattern after 500 years of Ottoman oppression inventing their own ways of *“making friends even with the enemy”*. This has often been the only way to sustain a widely challenged identity. A systematically abused social justice by the *“strong of the day”* may be considered the core of this *“wait and see”* philosophy. Time has often been the only reliable ally of indigenous Bulgarian people against the tide of so many intrusions and collisions at this crossroad of the Occident and Orient.

### ***Notion of State and Statecraft***

The Bulgarian *notion of state and statecraft*, from its very early beginning emerged as a result of immense challenges. These relate to both *culture and politics*. Cultural barriers aggravated the lack of tradition in state governance after the Baptizing of the Bulgarian people by King Boris I, 852–889. Thus it was even less possible to implement the values of the refined Byzantine culture in Bulgarian reality. The Byzantine culture had its roots in the ancient Classicism, but this significant heritage was unknown and out of reach for Bulgarians, who only through Christianity could enter the stage of civilization. This explains why Bulgarians stayed alien to Byzantine theological wisdom, which King Simeon I (893–927) wanted to spread in his Bulgarian lands. It could not inspire the spirit of people to creativity; it could not give

an answer to the simplest questions, which troubled the mind of the indigenous Bulgarian people, deprived of the faith of their ancestors.

Little might be added to this deep cultural cleavage. It is an objective premise of deeply alienated patterns of interaction of Bulgarians as related to their (secondary deprived) political objects, governing institutions and political leadership. Even though the threads of this *proto-Bulgarian culture* are irreversibly torn off from some older pagan tradition, they are still a source of a rather idealized notion of own statecraft capacity. Those values of the founders of the Bulgarian state are still embedded in the mental attitudes of contemporary Bulgarians. The 546 years of state tradition - the First Bulgarian Kingdom lasted 339 years, the Second one 207 years - give enough reasons to consider Bulgarians more as *“keepers of the strongholds”* and less a *“buffering culture”* which has preserved Christianity and Europe from foreign invasions and cultural influences. Bulgarian rule in Macedonia sustained for 221 years, in Albania for 130 years, in the region of North-West Bulgaria and the Timok river region, bordering former Yugoslavia for 495 years, the North of the Balkans and Dobrudza (now Romania) for 524 years, in the Rhodopy mountain region, bordering Greece for 113 years, in the region of Edrine, now territory of Turkey, for 284 years, and in Plovdiv and the region of Thrace for 222 years.

The search for forms of peaceful coexistence beyond sheer battles limited the collision of cultures and religions and may well be considered as the essence of Bulgarian experience. This unique art to cope with *“othernesses”* and bridge deeper cultural asymmetries in a global world may enrich the shaping of a new European integrity. But not before Bulgarians start to build on the pillars of modern participatory political cultures and less on their *“shabby imageries”*, inherited from the past.

### ***The Bulgarian Elite and Foreign Influences***

During the national revival and its aftermath, we can distinguish three primary and a few secondary impacts onto the cultural-political orientation of the Bulgarian elite.

- Greek influence is the first to be mentioned. Its most positive manifestation was a vast network of Greek schools, where most of the first generation of activists of the Bulgarian national revival movement received their education and shaped their secular life views. Gradually, through the transfor-

mation of Greek schools into Slav-Bulgarian and finally Bulgarian schools, the national elite profited immensely from the flourishing Greek culture, by bridging Europe and the civilized world.

- **S e r b i a n** influence, though not as strong as the Greek one, started at the end of the XIX century. The similarity between the Bulgarian and the Serbian language very much determined this mutual cultural interference. The Bulgarian Revival initially started in the West Bulgarian districts. The Serbian influence may be characterized by intense commercial, but also stronger cultural interactions with the West. Through learned community leaders it had great impact on the national awareness of Bulgarians. It contributed to the political engagement of Europe in a wider Slavic context and the shaping of the young Bulgarian nation.
- **R u s s i a n** influence seems the most significant of all outside influences. It dates back to XV century when close religious ties between the Rila Monastery and the Russian "Saint Panteileimont" of Atone developed. Soon after 1774 and the Kju-chuk Kajnardza peace treaty, the Turkish Empire allowed the re-establishment of direct trade relations of Bulgarians with Russia. This marked the beginning of a long lasting commercial interaction, which equally permitted an exchange of cultural and political ideas. The Russian culture and progressive intellectual ideas influenced a considerable part of Bulgaria's elite of the revival and finally replaced the Greek influence.
- **F r e n c h** influence began with the spread of the ideas of the French Revolution and its echo in the Ottoman Empire. This impact may be assessed as secondary, however. Primarily the Greek middle class and Greek newspapers in Viena carried the French influence. They provided information on Bonaparte and outstanding Republican personalities. France played an important role for the *political emancipation* of the younger generation, notably the Bulgarian elite of the national revival. Furthermore, it had supported the Bulgarian national unification process and it's linking to a European political mainstream of progressive political thinking.
- **E n g l i s h** and **A m e r i c a n** influence became noticeable in the 1820s as protestant missionaries became active on the Balkans and in Greece. After the opening of the first Greek university on the island of Corfu by Lord Gilford, the missionaries founded a number of schools offering primary education in Greek language. They also supported the translation of books. Their biggest

contribution was the translation of the Holy Bible in popular Greek and in Bulgarian.

- **G e r m a n** influence was mainly noticeable in the context of the Lutheran Reformation of the XVI century, which had greater impact on Slovenians and especially Croatians, less on Catholic Bulgaria however. There is only one Bulgarian intellectual leader of this epoch, Peter Beron, who responded positively and promoted widely this influence. Vasil Aprilov, founder of the first school in Bulgaria based on a systematical education approach, is another representative of German influence. Similar to the French, the German influence had only an indirect impact on the shaping of the Bulgarian elite of the revival.
- **P o l i s h** influence is related to the period after the revolution in 1830. In particular, it is related to the personality of Chaika Chaikovski (Sadak Pasha), organizer of the Turkish Kazakh regiment in 1854, where many Bulgarians also served. After the revolution in 1848, Poles (together with Hungarians) acted as representatives of civic culture in the Bulgarian regions. They actively engaged in the solution of the Bulgarian Church question (religious rights acknowledged from 1860).

This brief outline of foreign influences on the Bulgarian elite during the national revival is not exhaustive. We have to omit here most interesting secondary influences, as the Czech, the Hungarian, the Italian, the Spanish, the Ukrainian or even the one of Finland. Historians have still a lot to add. What is worth to be accentuated here is that the Bulgarian political culture may be defined as a synthesis of different cultural traits and impacts. It is of greater importance that it has been moulded by outstanding values of the European culture, even though in some less systematic pattern. This is another premise to be still taken into consideration.

### **A „Catastrophic Matrix“ - Devoured Subjectivism**

Three "*fatal fives*" marked and carved a tragic path in the newest history of Bulgaria from 1878 up to the end of World War II – *five failed insurrections*, unsuccessful participation in *five wars* and *five coups d'état* interrupted a natural and normal state development. Most elements of this aspiring *subjective culture* and the interaction with one's own political object carry an explicit positive load, when we look back to this period. At the "input" side, one finds amazing self-sacrifice and commitment. The "output" side, however, is more than disgraceful and humiliating. The forced attempts to capitalize on the only remaining national human capital

and its sacrifices result from most extreme political ambitions of the pre-war Bulgarian political elite, bound to the interest of imperialist great powers and their monarch egocentrism. The result of the two clashes on the Balkans (1912-1913), which took place within 9 months only, has been discussed mostly within the "balanced" frameworks of totalitarian indoctrination. Less has been commented on the side effects of these events on the political culture of the nation:

- The systematic involvement of Bulgarian "*subjectivism*" into some evolutionary sediment "mix" of parochial, subjective and participant elements was interrupted;
- Wars damaged the normal flow of national identification both "in" and "out" of the formally defined territories of Bulgaria;
- A "*catastrophic matrix*" crashed both *subject* and *civic* orientations of many Bulgarians divided at both sides of their bordering homeland;
- The loss of a national ideal - more connected with a more dignified position among other European nations than with ambitions for a wider "*Lebensraum*" - has deeply hurt Bulgarians;
- This has paralyzed the Bulgarian national spirit for decades and made it even more susceptible to Eurasian influences;
- An Occidental future of this nation has been denied for too long.

The EU accession of 2007 has been widely perceived by most Bulgarians as restoring some historical justice after decades of "punishment" by great powers, following isolation under totalitarian oppression. This newly acquired European status has still to find some missing "core" – the one of a participative civic culture of democratic involvement and responsibility. This is a challenge both for the young democracy in this country and the EU integration in so far a long delayed significant and desired societal change is to be propelled.

### **Liberalism and Conservatism (1919-1939)**

What strikes most is the epigone character of both liberalism and conservatism in their Balkan paraphrases ever since their implementation in the region. This *ideological plagiarism* has a long-established tradition. It is not the only one to blame for a unfortunate development but also volatile civic culture, crashed in a ruthless manner. The European resonance of liberal or conservative ideas on this side of the Balkans has most often ended in sequential fiascos. Both ideolo-

gies have nourished some idealism of their own. This blurs pragmatic and realistic attitudes to politics. Political values have rarely been a premise of motivation.

On the one hand, liberalism is considered to offer more freedom, which is the reason for its popularity with the masses. Despite that fact, it never managed to mobilize significant social cohorts or cultivate a lasting tradition. Conservatism on the other hand seems a product of rather extreme and desperate efforts to feed on the scarce resources and primitive means of production. Wealth accumulation has been "successful" mostly through trade exchange and/or speculative or hazardous ventures. The latter are less relevant to the innovation patterns of economic growth typical of Central Europe. This deficit is reflected in the leadership strategies and governmental visions of both liberals and conservatives.

### **Fragmentation and Isolation**

In most European countries up to 1913, the voting right did not involve more than 25 % of the population. From those who had right to vote, an insignificant share made use of it. Practically not more than 10-15 % of the European population before World War I made proper use of their constitutional rights to participate through voting in their representative democracies. The *use of the voting right* is an achievement of the modern age indeed. Bulgaria seems exemplary of some twisted matrix of quasi-democracy applied in a transitory context. Voting percentage has dropped in the last decade to "sanitary minimums" at parliamentary elections. Relatively higher is the voting participation at local elections. It suffices less to define this trend in terms of "penalty votes", widening anomie, political apathy or resignation. The deep political resentment reflects massive erosion both of the operational political system and lack of civic competence to propel decisive changes in all spheres of social life, especially in public control on governments.

Quasi-political involvement (buying of votes, mimics of reforms, insider networks, nepotism, etc.) has shaped oligarchic, "captured domains" of power and influence, performing through coercive pressure and economic deprivation of substantial segments of the population (Roma, ethnic Turks, converted Muslims etc.) The younger generation has been very much isolated from a clear social perspective and pushed into the niches of escapism. The weakened state, characterized by deeply perplexed institutions, widespread corruption, interaction with "interest groups" and organized crime, add to the volatilities of a civic culture, now challenged by the global crisis of late 2008.

There is enough empirical evidence to claim that Bulgaria has only formally completed the requirements of Western European representative democracy. Systematic failures of the political system, limited good governance, less culturally “domesticated” national elites, alongside with a widely neglected “rule of law” etc. threaten to divert its young democracy from its European gravity. Authoritarian regimes appear an alternative “option” for deeply frustrated marginalized groups, especially clienteles of “captured” regional environments. A paralyzed judicial system and law enforcement, mal-functioning of central and regional administrations, topped with administrative inefficiency and lack of capacity to implement European standards in all spheres of social life have unveiled a new reality.

### 3. Modern Institutional Frameworks

#### *Trust in Parties*

Trust, as related to politics, is a most ambiguous category. Electoral “cores” and “peripheries” in support of major political players have been defined by a number of demographic agencies. The ratings of BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party), GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), “Ataka” (Nationalists) and the MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms - Ethnic Turk party) may be mentioned here as offering enough voting resources for successful parliamentary representation. Most of the democratic opposition parties have to override the deep crisis of unconsolidated “right” and/or “right centre” to cross the barrier of 4 % in the parliamentary elections of late summer 2009. Several new/old players may be added e.g. “The Forward Movement” – consisting of IMRO, the “Leader” Party, and the Agrarian People’s Union. They compete for a centrist-right position as an alternative to the lost glamour of King Simeon Saxe Coburg-Gotha and his movement, recently turned into the party “National Movement for Stability and Prosperity”. Since most probably none of the above-mentioned political parties may mobilize enough resources to rule alone, a broader governing coalition is likely to be the outcome of these parliamentary elections. The quality of this new “mix” of power seems very much determined by old clientele ambitions.

Political trust looks less a choice between “lesser evils” and more like a blurred mirror of most *uncertain party identities* and interwoven interests of “interest groups”. The perception related to the political elite that “they are all the same”, very much questions rational participant patterns of political involvement. Bulgaria seems pushed back to street scenarios of

1997 by interest groups who misuse a “civic” agenda for populist and sheer political interests. The latter offer little realistic or consistent social projects, but rather use money and corruptive patterns of patronage to protect segments of the captured state and business by representative means. This may not only foster some “euro scepticism”, but also destabilize both the political system and the weakened state. It may end in coalitions of most disputable consistency and even less stable governments (Italian pattern).

An explicit reflection of trust in parties (assessed by conventional scales “left” vs. “right”) offers little measurement of the *political identification* of the Bulgarian electorate, however. Even though dichotomies of “left” vs. “right” have very much lost on meaning, they still reflect a self-perceived identity. According to a survey from 2005 by the ASSA-M research institute one third of the population would describe their political identity as “rather left or left”, another third as “centre”. Only 20% see themselves as “rather right or right”, whilst 15% of the inquired did not respond.

It is obvious that most of the mushrooming parties have “exhausted” electoral sources through some shareware pattern of “mobilization”. Several points may be of interest in respect of this rapid decline of value-oriented politics as well as attitudes to political objects:

- In 1991 in the early days of the democratic changes 34% of Bulgarians shared no trust in *The Great National Assembly*, over 40% claimed they do not trust their local *authorities of government*;
- At the same time over 30% of the Bulgarians declared, “no trust” in *any state institution*;
- This “cynical input” into a political system of permanent tensions and (latent) crisis turn most problematic in the present political context;
- Positive attitudes to government(s) of 20% to 43%, reflected some sort of residual etatist expectations, that has declined even more in recent years;
- These expectations today have been transferred to EU institutions as the only possible factor of change;
- Mistrust reaches the limits of normal political communication, which to a large extent is left to Public Relations and to an ever lesser extent to persuasive party or institutional speakers. This correlates with less civic competence and unawareness of behaviour in governmental institutions.

### **Presidency, Parliament and Government(s)**

Trust in the “*three wheels*” of the political object correlates with *rapid shifts* of the political preferences of the electorate. Surveys in the early years of the transition indicated a high trust in the *Presidency*, amounting to above 40%. Hypothetic models of some “imperial”, “symbolically weak”, “above all party”, or even “socially” accentuated presidency have less influenced the evolution to a more demanding attitude towards the presidency. None of these “ideal types” promoted by political gurus of the pre-EU-accession stage turned relevant in the political culture of the nation. It still adheres to some *paternalist – subjective* (less participative) attitude to state power symbolized by the president. The cognitive scope of the majority of the electorate remains “personality centered”. As disputable as it is, it corresponds less to the power aspiration of major political players. A tendency of some “remote control” mentoring the presidency on governmental decisions, has questioned its role in a parliamentary context. The president is increasingly perceived as a guarantor of the failing “matrix” of the political system which reproduces a worn-out status quo and even hinders rapid modernization.

Appeals in favour of a majority voting system seem less imposing as so far most of the criteria of this political selection in a highly inconsistent (and morally contaminated) environment interfere with the interests of smaller parties, especially their less certain clientele.

### **The Army**

The traditionally positive (and rather sentimental) attitude of most Bulgarians to “their army” has deep roots in its political culture. The memories of victories at all battlefields (“Prussians on the Balkans”) but diplomatic failures and a wide spread notion of “*a dagger in the back*” still inspire patriotic hearts. The Bulgarian army has contributed to the integrity of the country. For decades, it also played the role of a socializing institution. This relates to some “melting pot” function in respect of ethnic and other less educated cultural groups. Obligatory military service ended 1990. Most of the ratings rank this institution on top of all scales. 70-75% of all inquired from the early years of transition (1993) to present days trust “their army”.

However, critical attitudes towards its involvement in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and in other hot spot NATO engagements, towards the US bases planned on the territory of Bulgaria, higher military expenditures at times of social scarcity, etc. have very

much brought this institution down from some idealized pedestal. This perception seems less hesitant on its role as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region. The Bulgarian Army is facing new responsibilities as a member of NATO and other structures of EU security in shape. It still has to foster reforms and integrate fully and contribute to these structures.

### **The Police**

Bulgarians are still frustrated by some old image of this institution as instrument of totalitarian power. What counts most in present times are rising appeals for more “transparency” and public control over this institution. The privatization of the security sector, corruption and interaction of some of its structures with organized crime, lack of control mechanisms etc. have questioned its present status. The new State Agency for National Security (SANS) is viewed as a way to accelerate reforms in the security system. The frequently delayed or vague effects of law enforcement, inefficiency of both the prosecution and the juridical system as related to publically recognized criminal groups, intouchability of high ranking officials, involved in schemes of illegal enrichment, misuse of EU funds etc. have challenged the image of the police very much. Its success in the fight against drug trafficking, illegal emigration, human trade, etc. has been much more appreciated.

A growing public awareness that the police should by no means be used as political instrument (as in recent years) but operate as a guarantor of civic interests of Bulgarians in a democratic European context gain a new momentum. The police still needs a lot to contribute to the fight against criminal groups and to the improvement of the internal order of Bulgaria.

### **The Judiciary**

The *Courts of Law* and the *Prosecution* are among the most disputed institutions in the latest years of transition. A generally negative attitude to illegal privatization, enrichment of oligarch structures, captures of both state and businesses led to a dramatic decline of trust in the operating juridical system. In the last decade trust in the Courts of Law and in the Prosecution dropped under 25%, no matter of political preferences of inquired Bulgarians. Persistent demands of the European Commission regarding the improvement of its efficiency correlate with a growing awareness of the citizenry that the reform should be deeper than ever thought – or allowed by political groups. A widely neglected “rule of law” and inefficiency of the juridical system reflect a deep crisis of this society, very much



captured in some pattern of “easy going” with criminality and corruption penetrating into all spheres of life, into political parties, corporative settings, the system of education, and even the church.

Demands for radical reforms seem to a great extent hampered by some older conservatism of deeply rooted totalitarian traditions, persistent nomenclature, nepotism and conflict of interest that have deeply eroded these institutions. Lack of relevant European experience, especially political has very much paralyzed reforms. It is a real challenge for the Bulgarian EU membership and an even deeper crisis of legitimacy of the weakened state may occur. A more demanding EU pressure and mutually coordinated policies to implement proper professional standards in the judiciary are of crucial importance for the stability of Bulgaria’s young democracy. They will be decisive for Bulgaria’s further integration into Europe.

### **National Identity**

An important aspect of political culture is national self-consciousness and the satisfaction of belonging to a certain nation. The identification with most symbols of the nation and the state seems rather “suppressed” for most Bulgarians, even though compatriots rarely deny their Bulgarian nationality. Their national identification is not a spring of some explicitly expressed patriotism, less it is of national pride as compared to Anglo-Saxon cultures. Bulgarians do not share readiness to sacrifice much for public goals. They can be related to some rather “latent”, more introvert patriotism as prescribed to Germans. Concerning their alienation they look similar to Italians, even though less split into some culturally divided North-South axis of own cultural gravity. The integration of other people and nations into the Bulgarian national entity seems more a bitter fruit of formal-administrative, contradicting “acts”, than some evolutionarily maturing cultural integration processes.

Recent, data suggest that approximately 7 million Bulgarians live outside the territory of their country. They can be found e.g. in Macedonia (1.4 mio.), Greece (250.000), or the Povolozjje region on the territory of Russia (3 mio.). The *Bulgarian diaspora* in Canada, USA, Spain, Belgium, Germany, UK, or even the Republic of South Africa, a result of the massive exodus after 1990, may have to be rationalized in some cosmopolitan conceptual frameworks. Most Bulgarians are deeply devoted to their motherland and suffer nostalgia irrelevant to the “modern nomadic” soul. This is a demand to redefine shifting national and collective identities in a changing global world.

### **Trust in the Compatriot**

An important component of any political culture relates to the “horizontal identification with the compatriot”. It concerns the feeling of integrity, which the individuals have towards other members of the system. Bulgarians are less commonly characterized as disintegrated, even though they often give an expression of mistrust to their immediate social surrounding. This rarely turns into hostility, however. One of the factors for this is the Bulgarian family and the character of Bulgarian paternalism. Both are deeply rooted in the traditions of communal life.

The values of mutual respect and recognition, as well as a notorious *tolerance towards others* (no matter of religion, race or nationality) have been cultivated for ages. This may be considered as precious cultural experience in a divided opposed and uncertain world. It loses some “idealism” in the frameworks of some modern multiculturalism imposed in the years of transition. Ethnic hatred is rare to witness even rarer is religious hatred.

The limit of the *civil-cooperative* spirit of the Bulgarians may still be defined as stricter and more demanding as compared to other peoples and nations. A Bulgarian is rarely tempted to “spread out of his rug” (in the sense of overestimating his material status). His life gravitates close to his family, neighbourhood, or closer circle of friends.

Bulgarians are rather sensitive to issues like “origin of capital”. This is often a reason for moral accusations even towards closest relatives. Most people agree, however, that it is of greater importance, what purposes this capital has been used for. Nearly 30% of Bulgarians agree on this, while 49% support the idea that it may be useful to “nationalize capitals” from those that have illegally enriched themselves in the years of transition. This attitude has focused in recent years on oligarchs and quasi-corporate groups, which have re-monopolized private sectors from the state, in addition to ruining thousands of small independent businesses.

### **The Church**

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church has the support of approximately 40% of the Bulgarian citizens enquired (1998). This attitude is not influenced much by the political orientations and preferences. The state is separated from the church and has rarely allowed itself to intervene in its independent scopes even in the years of totalitarianism. Several splits from 1990 on (e.g. the

ongoing process at the Strasbourg Court as related to disputes on land property by an "alternative" patriarch) have very much questioned trust in this institution. Even though the majority of Bulgarians seem to adhere to Christian Orthodox values and traditions, this is considered an embedded part of some own cultural identity. Secularism is broadly spread though and some "atheist" perception of the social reality prevails.

Whether and how much this institution may contribute to the establishment of a proper civic society in the country remains widely questioned. There has been criticism that the Bulgarian church has not been actively engaged in social problems as compared to other churches in a newly perceived European context. The tendency of some "return" to the values of Christianity in the present secular Bulgarian society after 1990 is consistent. Even though religious values do not have an impact as significant as in most cultures in the West, they may be considered as pillar of civic cultural homogeneity.

### **The Family**

The Bulgarian family plays a kind of supplementary role in a still centrally regulated system of education and political socialization. The latter is today less orientated to some socially homogeneous society, dominated by "collective" values than it used to be. The emerging of a number of private schools after 1990 has changed an old tradition in this respect. Most social researches show that the Bulgarian family bears significant qualitative changes. In the early 80s not more than 2/3 of the Bulgarian families were "nuclear", as still 1/3 lived with the parents of one of the spouses. The husband is still most often considered "head of the family" (74%). Only in 17% of families both partners declare that they decide mutually on important questions or even discuss them with their children. The traditional Bulgarian family is more paternalistic than authoritarian. The child is widely recognized as an object of educational influence though. It does not enjoy independence as in most western countries, being very often a sheer "executor" of parental "advice" or their will.

The political class in Bulgaria in a way reflects this pattern and still follows some "clan tradition" of political involvement. *Nepotism*, rooted in the last 45 years still has certain impact; even though it is diminishing as a meritocracy – a result of education abroad and intensive cultural exchange – is being formed. We might expect that this civic culture may go beyond the traditional patrimonial involvements into politics. A modern family is very much associated with the model of emancipated partners, though in

a way "coloured" by a southern type of traditionally suppressed role of women in politics.

### **Ethnic Tolerance**

The Bulgarian state is a conglomerate of diverse ethnic and ethno-social groups, integrated to a different extent into its system. The ethnic groups (ethnic Turks, Roma, Jews, Armenians and others) played an insignificant role in the political life until 1989. The present constitution proclaims the right of every Bulgarian citizen to use and study his or her mother tongue. The study of the Bulgarian language made compulsory by the Constitution proclaims the right of every citizen to have a culture in accordance with their ethnical belonging. Hence, in the political life of Bulgaria, the foundation of parties on ethnical basis has been prohibited. This has been widely disputed as an obstruction of the integration of minorities into the system of politics and governance. Others give credit to social, educational, qualification etc. factors, which impede the full realization of this process.

A "bird view" on 4 neighbouring Balkan countries (Macedonia, Turkey, Greece and Romania) shows the more restricted character of ethnic attitudes as compared to Bulgaria. This concerns higher levels of tolerance among Bulgarians to the use of other languages in public. More restrictive, but rarely repressive estimations are addressed to Roma people. This refers less to the ethnic Turk minority (except for nationalistic claims against the Movement for Rights and Freedom) and its involvement in the structure of regional and central government.

The highest tolerance is given to the right of minorities to confess freely their religion. This reflects long traditions of peaceful coexistence of Orthodox, Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria. Ethnic prejudices and xenophobia are less of concern though specific segments of the younger generations are vulnerable to populism and nationalisms of a new breed. These stem from consistent failures of youth policy, education, growing unemployment and loss of social perspectives among specific ethnic groups.

### **The Media**

For a period of 76 years (before 1990) censorship over the Bulgarian press has dominated. Bulgaria passed through 25 years of direct police censorship, 110 years of some "preliminary control", and 7 years of severe military censorship. The notion that there is censorship over the national media, remained for quite a while after the change. Several improvements in the law on electronic media (from 1996 on) contributed for the establishing of

an independent press in the country. Its rapid merchandizing, but also a higher political competition, as well as other factors (interest groups influences,) reflect most of the deficits. Local media seem still to be more inspired to produce political “signs and symbols”, less to promote democratic values by means of competent, rational political persuasion. The widely spread notion that the local journalistic guild and especially new media barons tend “to go after the winner”, that public polemics have a more sensational and less objective style, as well as cynical attitudes towards the media and what “the press” has to say, reflect a pragmatic shift in public interest. There is still a long way to go until media become competent, independent and fully aware of their decisive role in a properly functioning democracy and civic society.

### **Political Participation and Civic Competence**

Diminishing interest in politics (very much media manipulated), as registered by demoscopic surveys in the last decade, may have shifted to some “return to politics”. The latter seems motivated by a most demanding pragmatism. This correlates with frequent crises in the interaction of the individual with his political object. The disappointment in politicians of all “featherings”, massive decline in institutional trust, the sense of deprivation of levers of significant change, in addition to the incapacity of local governments (especially in small towns and villages) to influence the highly centralized government and its politics, reconfirm a traditionally “alienated” political involvement.

This has been reflected in many surveys on political “*anomie*”. Things seem very much to be changing, however. Exclusive instruments of political power and non-transparent decision-making processes are no longer tolerated in a newly perceived post accession EU context. A more aware citizenry is not so much on an old “desperate” verge of helplessness against “invisible walls” to be crashed down through radical street protests or riots. As the Bulgarian political system has obviously failed to confirm the advantage of a *centralized model of government*, this civic culture is exploring new entry gates and forms of political participation. Decisive steps have been made through new civic groupings (ecological, feminist, or students movements). These agents of significant societal change run practically through all sectors of society. Their new center of gravity is a proper European status, in one way or another acquired but hardly guaranteed by ruling elites. The latter has been projected in many ways as hazardous market solutions and rather populist visions of some welfare society that could be achieved in short term through rent seeking strategies, but with less commitments.

Deeply perplexed petty entrepreneurs, not to mention their oligarch and quasi-corporative patrons have very much lost on civic credentials given in the early days of transition. A rather “exhausted” democracy is in desperate search of a “second breath”. But this is neither a Marathon, less even some public mass event as schematized by new-old street leaders, nor is it a product of PR scenarios and “insider deals” of a highly polluted political culinary.

Time has come not just to assess the modest “outputs” of a most disputed transition in Bulgaria but also to put order in one’s own yard. Civic culture seems very much motivated to steer the correction of its deviated orbit of European gravity “per hand”. Auto piloting of new/old elites turned out to be a most dangerous risk in an even more turbulent global world. This may be a route to new perspectives. It is measured not so much by ringing tones of political watches in Brussels, less even in Moscow. It rather reflects a new willingness of society to catch up with its European status with respect to civic rights and new responsibilities.

Civic cultures have rarely been related to “what happens in politics”, but much more to “what people think that happens”. The Bulgarian political culture may have reached a new decisive turning point. It refers to the notion of “what should happen”. This is an imperative of a new quality. It has both the soft and hard ware for a significant and long desired societal change to be imposed by democratic and no other means.

## **4. Conclusion: Trends and Perspectives**

As the experience of the last 20 years shows, a variety of *hybrid political cultures* shaped in the transitory nexus of the European Southeast which has increased political entropy and uncertainty. Most of these are in support of democracy and market economy, but still prefer to lean on old (or even recycled) ideas and schemes of protectionism. Bulgaria may be exemplary in this respect. This reinforces a *status quo* where significant and desired societal change is being postponed or even redefined.

The kind of escapism that has overwhelmed the initial democratic hopes and revolutionary energy of Bulgarian threatens to deviate it from some initial European gravity considered as guarantee for modern democratic and social advance. The state – or what is left of it – turned into a mere intermediary between disputable actors of a badly tailored political system, used on “leased” terms by less certain governments. Through its paternal-

ism and political illiteracy the fragmented and perplexed political culture not only tolerated but also in a way fertilized shadow schemes of illegal re-allocation of public wealth, accumulated in the years of "real socialism".

The idea that this is just a transitory stage of some metamorphoses of capitalism with a human face, which might sooner or later pay its social due to masses, seems even less persuasive. Capitalism on this side of Europe proved to be a most tasteless and rather repulsive "*ornament of Satan*" (Max Weber).

The malfunctioning of the hard- and software of democratic development in Bulgaria is not just a product of some internal contradictory social nature of its own, less it seems an output of its fragile civic culture. It is propelled by a façade democracy related to a most protruded and teasing transition bound to traditional paternalisms. Oligarchs and globally networked neo-feudal corruptive patronages are just one argument for this. Several other trends can be stated in this respect:

- The political culture in Bulgaria does not to comply with the idea of a "*democracy for the few*".
- It seems even less inspired by some *polyarchy*, steered by national elites obsessed by the ultimate free market forces.
- Neo-liberal values do not have a chance with grass roots in this society, nor can they flourish in an environment of sustained "competitive scarcity".
- As vague as this civic culture appears to be, its capacity to challenge the mainstream of coercive power in control of captured public domains is not to be underestimated.
- In as far as money is not considered a substitute of democratic politics, the discontent among the citizens is growing.
- A sobering shift to the ideas of modern nationalism and thus a retrieval of the captured state may turn out to be a most likely consolidating fundament.
- This is a decisive shift towards a civic consciousness and democratic awareness of a new quality.

People have "learned" simple, but effective strategies to reach democratic aims through civic pressure on the system. This refers mostly to demands for more transparency and social responsibilities of institutions, operating on the premises of European standards and norms. Institutional entanglement in conflict of interests, lack of administrative capacity, not to mention lack of competence to

meet rising social needs, but also deeply abused social justice and market uncertainties (organized crime, corruption, institutional fraud etc.) concentrate energy of change in new forms.

National movements of different breed may be expected to create a new critical mass of this long delayed and even hampered significant change. However, in as far as they remain still vulnerable to populisms, perform through "parallel" quasi-political and corporate groups or even through street riots and pressure, political dilettantism could very much hinder the identification of a modern democratic civic culture within this public scenery.

Resignation and apathy remain a source of traditional escapism, which has until recently guaranteed the comfort of ruling coalitions. Shifts to activist pressure on governments and the political class by ecologist, environmentalist, trade union or even marginalized groups very much change this nexus.

The moral dilemma of this late phase of Bulgarian transition, related to the obvious failure of specific segments of the ruling elite to keep in pace with modern democratic as well as proper market development may turn out to be decisive for a self-disciplining process that Bulgarian political culture has to pass through. This process is inevitable for the "taming" of some unleashed market "shrewds", very much interfering with the interests of society in their longer term.

The problem is that most Balkan cultures inherit a traditional antagonism related not only to their near communist past. They tend to "crush" dissent in their own naïve and rather enthusiastic way and are still less bound to the values of individual merits. Their social solidarity is a hybrid of some old structured collectivism and most volatile communitarism that emerged in marginal segments of their systems in transition. The latter often leads to protuberances of destructive activisms, less bound to political rationalism. Appeals for a "strong hand" may be symptomatic. As the years of transition in a wider Eurasian context have witnessed, quasi-democracies can generate only authoritarian regimes, even though they seem sophisticated and Europe friendly.

What some historians call "domestication" of national elites in a new European context may well be the long term road to overriding new uncertainties, crisis of identities, or even legitimacies in a highly challenged European Southeast. This is a mission to be fulfilled only on the base of common values and intertwining life styles of mutual respect and responsi-

bility. Political cultures seem more than ever a matter of rationale choice in a rapidly changing world and a chance indeed. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has changed old paradigms.

From within the initial chaos of Bulgarian “transition” a new critical rationalism seems to emerge, shaping modern European structures of social and political life. Europe can flourish only as a creation of sovereign participants, as it undertakes the role of arbiter of its own destiny. Thus, political cultures turn into political priority. They have to be considered as markers and conditional premise of the shaping new European integrity. They must be even more referred and assessed by their own capacity to generate proper democratic values and add new quality to political life. A civic culture of an activist, participatory type seems the only force to foster significant and desired change, which may raise Bulgaria up to its European future and new responsibilities.

As an intermittent type of culture, the Bulgarian political culture has passed through three forms of political life – *monarchy*, *republic* and a sort of “*Balkan despotism*”, related to the years of the near past. What some sociologists have defined as a “packed society” is very much to be referred to the past. Bulgarians not only “perform” but live and work in an European environment. This is a chance both for its politics and culture, in so far as they operate in sovereign, but also more responsible patterns of civic engagements to a common European cause. In conclusion, a Bulgarian civic agenda can be defined as follows:

- A decisive push to *new political alternatives* both for left and right parties is needed in order to abandon niches of “quasi-pluralism” that have shaped in the last decades.
- The most eccentric breeds of local neo-liberalism promoted as premise of market transition are less relevant to the present mix of the political culture of this nation.
- A return back to a *socially responsible state* to restore institutional trust and some idly neglected own Bulgarian statecraft tradition is to be propelled through modern forms of self-governance.
- The economic crisis of late 2008 might be a chance to abandon old illusions, as well as to restore previously lost fields of trust.
- A publicly backed policy to restore the “rule of law” and a deeply abused *social justice* in the present Bulgarian society is crucial for its European future.

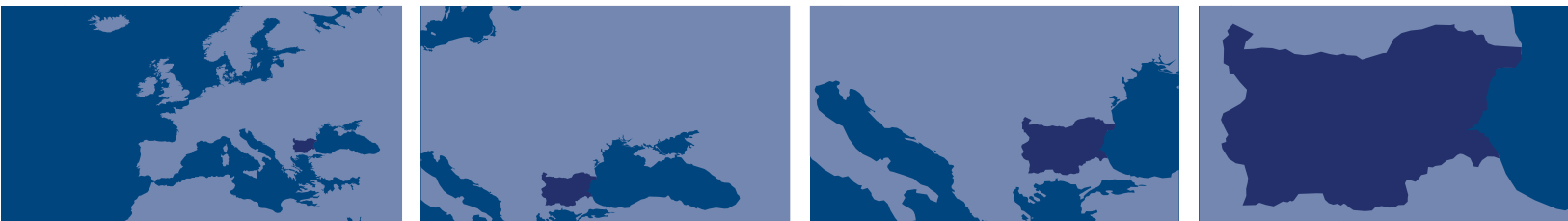
- Civic movements, NGOs and other non-state actors are essential in support of raising Bulgaria up to a full European status.

Bulgarians are still confronted with the need to search for more efficient forms of public control and monitoring over their state and institutions. This is a great challenge for a new participatory and activist civic culture interlinked with other European countries and their common perspective. Rationalizing this in a pragmatic way, choosing between so many temptations in a highly competitive, but still vulnerable global world, may be considered as the only realistic way out of the present Bulgarian dilemmas.

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