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Ups And Downs of Social Democracy in Bulgaria

■ The democratic political life in Bulgaria has been marked by a long series of deep and painful convulsions...The Session of the 47th Congress of BSP held in October 2009 was marked by the deep crisis of the party's leadership. Will the party's current ideological and organizational crisis become still another case in the series of fatal political convulsions in democratic Bulgaria?

■ Bulgarians are very much dissatisfied with the quality of the political life in the country. They have good reasons to be skeptical and critical since cases of corruption have been identified in all political parties... As seen from another point of view, Bulgarians are strikingly inactive in socially relevant voluntary activities in the same time. Thus, BSP and all other Bulgarian political parties and coalitions have to cope with threatening local effects of the global crisis and with a series of specific local problems. Some of them have long history while others have been mostly caused and reproduced by the badly conceived and implemented reforms after 1989.

■ One should see the heated discussions just as an indicator for the profound problems facing BSP, the social democratic ideology and politics in Bulgaria and, first of all, the development of Bulgarian society. The problems concern the desirable and possible political agenda of social democracy under the new conditions of global insecurity, the difficulties in the European integration and the shaky grounds of economy, politics and culture in a country which belongs to the global semi-periphery and the European periphery.

■ There should be political will for moving the party leadership together with the party's rank and file away from factional and interpersonal struggles towards clarifying priorities for the development of Bulgarian society and Bulgarian state in the dynamic domestic, regional and global environment. This is the precondition for the meaningful specification of the social democratic visions of freedom, solidarity and justice into aims and means of social democratic politics. The task is not new at all in this general formulation but permanently new in its specific local implementation.

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1. Notorious Instability of the National Party System

The democratic political life in Bulgaria has been marked by a long series of deep and painful convulsions. At the beginning of the reform process in 1989 it seemed that the human and social capital was mostly incorporated in the organizations of the Bulgarian Communist Party which was soon renamed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). In fact, unlike the party development and electoral results in other post-socialist societies, BSP managed to attract the support of nearly half of the voters in the first democratic elections held in 1990. However, the disappointments from the two short-lived BSP governments thereafter opened the way to the electoral victory of the right-wing Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) in the next year. The SDS did not have the qualified personnel needed for efficiently governing the country. An interim government took the responsibility to prepare the next elections. The BSP won the elections held in 1994 and returned to power with the promise for stability and prosperity. Instead, a second transitional crisis shook the national economy and politics. In 1997 the SDS could win the parliamentary elections for the second time with a political landslide due to the same promise for stability and prosperity.

Economic stability was achieved but the voters were once more disappointed by the slow increase of the living standard. Since the governments of BSP and SDS failed to fulfill their promises for a fast improvement of the living conditions of the

Bulgarian population two times each, the voters desired and expected a miracle. It immediately came about with the return of the former king Simeon II to Bulgarian political life. After a smashing electoral victory in 2001 he became the next Prime Minister. SDS massively lost public support for a while or probably in the long run. However, the government of Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha also failed to substantially improve the material situation of Bulgarian households in 800 days as it was promised in his electoral campaign. The electoral defeat of Coburggotski's party in 2005 was pre-determined. But the election results were inconclusive. Only a paradoxical governing coalition turned out to be possible. It was lead by the traditionally anti-monarchist BSP which had as partner the former king's party, the electorate of which was mostly pro-monarchist and anti-socialist. Another partner was the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Its electorate still remembered the "revival process" carried out by the BSP's predecessor BCP during the eighties of the twentieth century.

The historical achievement of membership in the European Union in 2007 notwithstanding, the coalition parties lost the elections in July 2009. The clear winner was the Mayor of Sofia Boyko Borisov and his party GERB. The victory of this new star on the Bulgarian political horizon was accompanied by the heavy defeat of the former king's party. It could not enter the Parliament and has probably no chance to recover. However, the major loser in the elections was actually

the Bulgarian Socialist Party despite the respectable 18 percent of the votes it received. BSP managed to attract to itself all criticisms against the administrative inefficiency, corruption scandals and even alleged pro-Turkish policies of the coalition government. The Session of the 47th Congress of BSP held in October 2009 was marked by the deep crisis of the party's leadership. Will the party's current ideological and organizational crisis become still another case in the series of fatal political convulsions in democratic Bulgaria?

The questions do not concern just one of the many political formations in the country. In various organizational forms BSP and its predecessors used to symbolize the major left-wing ideological orientations and political platforms in the country. Are they also profoundly questioned by the political development as the political support to BSP actually is? A definite answer is not possible yet. But some elements of this very much needed answer could be already identified by analyzing changes in political platforms and political preferences.

2. The Roots of Bulgarian Social Democracy

Social democratic ideas, political platforms and political practices have a long tradition in Bulgarian society. However, when Dimiter Blagoev and his fellow young socialists established the *Bulgarian Social Democratic Workers' Party* in 1891, the public opinion was massively skeptical about the prospects of the new political forma-

tion. Intellectuals and politicians regarded it as pure mimicry of Western European ideological and political fashions. Blagoev had to rhetorically answer the question if there was any "soil" for social democracy in Bulgarian society indeed. The evidence was provided by the economic and political processes themselves. They confirmed Blagoev's assumption that Bulgaria was going with some delay along the same path of historical development which brought about and sustained the Western European social democracy. Controversial processes of industrialization, urbanization and deep structural differentiation in society became the background for the spread and strengthening of social democratic ideas and organizations in the country.¹

Complexities and conflicts in the social processes themselves together with the intensive disputes in the German and Russian social democracy determined the early split of moderate and radical Bulgarian social democrats in 1903. The moderate social democracy under Yanko Sakazov, Krastyo Pastuhov and others gained some political prestige and participated in several coalition governments. But it was the radical wing in the Bulgarian social democracy headed by Dimiter Blagoev, Georgi Kirkov and later Georgi Dimitrov which took the upper hand in the public impact and political activities. After the First World War the radical social democrats known as "narrow socialists" changed the name of their party to Bulgarian Communist Party in 1919, joined the Third International

¹ See Genchev, Dimiter (2006) *Parvoapostolite na ideala* [The First Apostles of the Ideal]. Sofia: Hristo Botev.

and became the second strongest political force in the country. Going through periods of legal and illegal activities they substantially influenced Bulgarian politics in the interwar period. The political impact of the moderate social democrats remained limited to intellectual circles.

During the Second World War the Communists were the major organizers and victims of the resistance. Their influence rose together with the changes in the geostrategic situation. As the Soviet Army entered the country in September 1944, the membership of the illegal Bulgarian Workers Party (Communists) was small. But its impact on the political processes was overwhelming. This was due to the records of the party in the resistance and to the full support it enjoyed on the part of the Soviet military authorities. The moderate Social Democrats used to be politically split and did take part in the resistance only peripherally. After September 1944 they could not rely on mass support. In comparison with other Eastern European countries, it was relatively easy to unite some of them with the rapidly expanding Communist Party in 1948. It ruthlessly eliminated all political adversaries ideologically, politically and physically. In contrast to the development in other Eastern European countries, some legitimacy of the concentration of political power in the hands of the Communist Party came from the specifics of Bulgarian history. The re-establishment of the modern Bulgarian statehood in 1878 was the result of a Russian-Turkish war. In the efforts to establish and stabilize an authoritarian regime the Communists could

profit from this historical memory of close relationships with Russia. This memory provided arguments supporting the development of particularly tight relationships of Bulgaria with the Soviet Union.²

The regime which was established after 1946–1947 slowly evolved in the direction of a relatively moderate authoritarian type of government during the seventies and the eighties. The policies of the ruling party for attracting intellectuals to the party line turned out to be efficient. Oppositional intellectuals became public figures in Bulgaria only at the end of the eighties. At no point of time explicit propagation or representation of social democratic alternatives could be possible between 1947 and 1989. However, there were leading politicians in the ruling party who had reform visions along social democratic principles. This became manifest immediately after the political turn on 10 November 1989. It was organized by functionaries of the Communist Party itself. They immediately started to argue in favor of universal human rights in the heated debates marking the break with the violent assimilationist ethnic policy of Todor Zhivkov's regime during the second half of the eighties. Social democratic ideas were openly represented and partly materialized in the policies animated and implemented by Andrey Lukanov who happened to be Prime Minister of two short-lived BSP governments in 1990. The cautious reorientation of the Socialist Party towards social

² See Kalinova, Evgeniya and Iskra Baeva (2002) *Balgarskite prehodni 1939–2002* [The Bulgarian Transitions 1939–2002]. Sofia: Paradigma, p. 38 f.

democratic principles in the ideology and politics was implemented under the guidance of Aleksander Lilov who was Chairman of the BSP during this first phase of the turbulent transition period. Movements and groups in the party like *Road to Europe*, *Demos*, *Alternative Socialist Alliance* and others put their pressure on the party's leadership for more radical and faster re-orientation towards social democratic principles and policies. Some ideas and the literary talent of the then editor-in-chief of the party newspaper "Duma" Stefan Prodev very much facilitated the ideological re-orientation of BSP.

It was in this turbulent domestic political situation that the Round Table discussions of the leaders of the Socialist Party with representatives of the opposition organized in the Union of the Democratic Forces³ had to be conducted in the spring of 1990. The situation in the country was tension-ridden, the international pressure for fast changes was immense. Nevertheless, the leadership of BSP managed to channel the discussions with the opposition towards a peaceful evolutionary transition to political pluralism, market economy and interethnic understanding. This was a political achievement of both the BSP and of the emerging counter-elite. BSP started its step by step distancing from the ideology and organizational practices of the still influential radical communist tradition in the party and in the country. The preservation of some ideological and political links of BSP with

the radical leftist past undoubtedly delayed the ideological re-orientation of the party.⁴ But the slow ideological and political re-orientation also prevented dramatic organizational splits and thus the possible rapid and substantial loss of the party's political influence.

The attempts of young ambitious politicians to establish their organizational autonomy by splitting from the BSP were predictable. This happened first with the *Alternative Socialist Alliance* headed by Nikolai Vasilev. It evolved into *Alternative Socialist Party* and joined the oppositional SDS. In the wake of the defeat of BSP in the second democratic elections (1991) and under the influence of the vigorous anti-communist propaganda and policies of the first government of the liberal Union of Democratic Forces the former faction *Demos* in the BSP evolved into a separate political formation *Bulgarian Social Democracy* lead by Aleksander Tomov. The formation later changed into the electoral coalition *Citizens' Alliance for the Republic* (GOR) and further into the *Bulgarian EuroLeft* (BEL). It provoked many expectations and caused severe disappointment. The formation still exists as the politically irrelevant party *Bulgarian Social Democracy*.

Both the *Alternative Socialist Party* and the formation GOR (BEL) tried to establish cooperation with the social democratic groups and organizations which appeared or re-appeared in Bulgaria in the early nineties. Immediately after the political turn it was Petar Dertliev who

³ The Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) was established in December 1989.

⁴ See Karasimeonov, Georgi (2003) *Novata partiynna sistema v Balgariya* [The New Party System in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Gorex Pres, p. 136 f.

seemed to become the promising leader of the re-vitalized moderate *Bulgarian Social Democratic Party*. Dertliev had impressive personal records of stable anti-authoritarian attitudes and behavior in the decades before 1989. Moreover, he was a charismatic speaker and could gain influence in the Great National Assembly which was preparing the new democratic Constitution. Dertliev became one of the heroes of the political moment when the Constitution was passed by the Assembly on 12 July 1991. However, mostly due to his consequent support to the politically well-balanced Constitution he was increasingly regarded as too moderate by the radical anti-communist leaders of the Union of Democratic Forces. He was gradually isolated and politically marginalized. The small Social Democratic Party lead by Yordan Nihrizov remained the only representative of the right-wing social democracy in the SDS. He and his organization shared its rise to power in 1997 and the rapid decline of its political influence following the smashing electoral defeat in 2001.

After all these controversial organizational developments, international sources identified 43 leftist political organizations in Bulgaria in 2005⁵. Taking a broad definition of social democracy as a criterion for selection, some 13 or 14 of them could be more or less clearly identified as social democratic organizations. They are present in all kinds of political coalitions.

However, among the various social democratic organizations it is only the Bulgarian Socialist Party which has broad and stable public support and political relevance so far. The party still has larger membership than the membership of all other parliamentary parties taken together. Party organizations are present in all municipalities of the country. The electoral basis of BSP proved to be quite reliable during all organizational ups and downs of the transformation period⁶. The massive efforts to persuade parts of the party's hard electorate to vote another left political formation like the *Bulgarian EuroLeft* (BEL) or the *United Block of Labor* failed in the long run. The organizations which split from the BSP used to search for coalitions with it in order to retain some influence or just to survive in the political landscape. Gradually they all lost public support and political relevance.

One of the many explanations of this remarkable stability of the electoral basis of BSP is the ideological tradition of party members and party followers to value the unity of the party high. Deeper going explanations stress structural factors determining the attractiveness of egalitarian ideas and practices in Bulgarian society. During the whole twentieth century it has been basically characterized by the influence of large groups of poor peasants and workers and their understanding of egalitarian justice. The rapid economic and social differentia-

⁵ *Leftist Parties in the World. Bulgaria* (Last update: September 28, 2005). <http://www.broadleft.org/bg.htm> (16.05.2009).

⁶ See also Spirova, Maria (2008) 'The Bulgarian Socialist Party: The Long Road to Europe'. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41, pp. 481-495, p.486.

tion between rich and poor during the transformation period after 1989 could only strengthen this traditional culture and its leftist political implications.

The international reputation and recognition of BSP became undisputable after it was accepted as member of the Socialist International in 2003 and as member of the Party of European Socialists in 2005. In domestic terms, the BSP was the leading political force in the coalition which governed the country between 2005 and 2009. The parliamentary elections held in July 2009 substantially changed the political configuration by leaving BSP with only 40 members of the National Assembly having 240 seats. Nevertheless, it is a widely shared point of view in the country that it is only the BSP which is currently an influential political force on the left side of the political spectrum. It is also a common knowledge that the BSP has ideologically and politically abandoned radical socialism and has firmly accepted the typical ideology and politics of the European social democracy.

This outcome of the post-socialist political transformation requires some specific explanations since there were some rather difficult periods in the development of the BSP during the last two decades. Besides the hard probe after the political turn in 1989, BSP had to manage a long series of other challenges. The economic situation of the country got so bad during the first Lukanov's BSP government in 1990 that Bulgaria was not able to pay back its international indebtedness. The decision to impose moratorium on the

debt payments was unavoidable but the consequences turned out to be worse than expected. The country got isolated from the international financial markets in a moment in which financial support to the costly profound reforms was existentially needed. During the next Lukanov's government in the second half of 1990 large segments of society were struck by rapid and massive impoverishment due to the high inflation. Social unrests broke out. The political opponents were quick to lay the blame for all negative developments on BSP. Key elements of the program of the first anti-communist SDS government lead by Filip Dimitrov envisaged repressive measures against the BSP. Proposals to outlaw it were under discussion. They could find parliamentary support and even some public acceptance. Just the collapse of the SDS government made all slogans for radical measures against BSP as successor of the BCP politically irrelevant.

The next BSP government headed by Zhan Videnov came to power following the parliamentary elections of 1994. The new government raised high expectations for overcoming the transformation crisis but ended up with the economic and political catastrophe of 1996–1997. The public support to BSP reached the lowest point after 1989. After the failure of Videnov's government there was mostly the move to social democratic ideology and political practices which step by step gave the BSP new public legitimacy. The move was prepared by the activities of the party faction *Alliance for Social Democ-*

racy lead by Chavdar Kyuranov but was practically implemented by the new party leadership headed by Georgi Parvanov. The leadership managed this ideological re-orientation in intensive polemics with the BSP factions *Open Forum* and *Marxist Platform* and being supported by another influential faction *Movements for Unity and Development*. The *Open Forum* gradually lost popularity, the *Marxist Platform* left BSP and the *Movement for Unity and Development* dissolved itself after its aim to initiate and support a re-orientation in the domestic and international politics of BSP was achieved.

The election of Georgi Parvanov for President of the country in 2001 made it obvious that the return of BSP to a leading role on the political scene was ahead. The new challenge came with the success of the party in the parliamentary elections held in 2005. The party became once more the first political force but the electoral results could not allow it to govern alone. The only possible solution was the governmental coalition of BSP, the political party of the former King Simeon II NDSV and the Turkish dominated party DPS. Many regarded the coalition as unnatural, doomed to be inefficient and short-lived. Contrary to these prophecies, it was exactly this coalition government which managed to prepare the country for membership in the European Union. The Chairman of BSP Sergey Stanishev signed the Agreement for the membership of Bulgaria in the European Union as Prime Minister of the country in 2007.

At first glance, all these ups and downs in the status of BSP as governing party or oppositional force and in its political performance after 1989 seem to be mostly the outcome of fluctuations in politics. This would be a false conclusion. The fate of the BCP and its successor BSP historically represented and currently represents the dynamics of long-lasting economic and political structures. In the area of politics this applies to a deep and persistent political cleavage in Bulgarian society. The cleavage became manifest in the bloody right-wing *coup d'état* of June 1923. The ruthless suppression of the leftist uprising in September 1923 deepened the cleavage. The tragic events in April 1925 and the repressions against leftist organizations after the *coup d'état* of May 1934 became other milestones in the reproduction of the same cleavage. The resistance movement during the Second World War and the heavy repressions against the wartime-elites together with the suppression of the opposition forces after 1944 marked other extremes in the political split of the national society. In this long-lasting historical experience families, clans, settlements and regions developed emotional and organizational links to BCP and later to BSP. Besides these specifics of the national history, the Eastern European experience of badly regulated and functioning capitalism systematically strengthened and strengthens leftist political preferences. They have their social roots as ideological and political reflections on the economic status of large groups in the economically divided Bulgarian society. This is the background

of the expectation that in one or another organizational form leftist ideas and practices will remain attractive and influential in the country in the long run.

3. Organization, Membership and Electorate of BSP

One of the major reasons for the relative organizational stability of the BSP, for its repeated electoral successes and for its fast recovery after heavy defeats was and still is the influential organizational continuity with the BCP. Before the change of the name its membership reached 983 899, which made out roughly one in 7 voters in the country. BCP was a strongly centralized party with organizations in all industrial and agricultural enterprises, in state institutions, in educational and health care establishments, etc. In addition, the party had territorial organizations in all settlements and districts. After the organizations of BSP were expelled from the enterprises and other institutions, they re-appeared as clubs of interests. Thus, immediately after the start of the changes BCP/BSP was not confronted with the task to be organizationally re-built after political prohibitions or self-dissolutions as this happened in other post-socialist countries. Retaining its organizational continuity with BCP, BSP got a strong advantage in comparison to all newly emerging movements and organizations in Bulgarian political life. Despite getting weaker and weaker due to the reduction of the party membership and its aging, this organizational advantage of the BSP is still a key factor for the stability of its electorate.

There was and still is another human factor influencing the continuity and stability of the electorate of BSP. For decades after the Second World War the positions of decision-makers at all territorial levels and in all sectors of social life in the country were filled in with BCP loyalists. Some of them were discredited and lost political influence or moved to other political forces. But many remained linked to BSP in one way or another and influential in their local environment. They could and still can raise political support for BSP in their interpersonal networks even under the conditions of the aging of the party membership, of general organizational disarray of the party and the dissolution of a large number of its basis organizations.

After all sharp turns in Bulgarian political life after 1989, the number of the regular members of the Bulgarian Socialist party was announced to be 191 601 (54% males, 46% females) at the end of 2007. This is just one fifth of the membership of the BCP at the beginning of the changes. Some 11% of the BSP members have their occupations in the industry, 6.5% in the agriculture, 7% in the science, education and culture, 6.9% in trade and services, unemployed 7.4%, students and university students 1.5%. The pensioners are reported to be 52.4%. The educational structure of the party membership includes 21.3% of the members having completed only primary school, 47.2% with secondary education and 31.8% with tertiary education. As to the age structure 9.8% are below 35 years, 17.2% between 35-50 years, 22.5% between 50 and 60 years and 47.8% 61

and older.⁷ The negative parameters of the age structure of BSP notwithstanding, the efforts of the party functionaries to attract young party members have been relatively successful. This is an achievement given the general lack of interest among young people to get politically organized. The

inflow of young members is a signal that BSP is still regarded as a promising lift to political and administrative positions. This assumption is confirmed by the permanent parliamentary presence of BSP, its largely varying and generally declining electoral results notwithstanding.⁸

**Table 1: Electoral results of the major political parties in Bulgaria
(Parliamentary elections 1990–2009, % of the valid votes)**

Party	June 1990	October 1991	December 1994	April 1997	June 2001	June 2005	July 2009
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and electoral alliances	47.15	33.14	43.58	22.07	17.15	30.95	17.70
Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) and electoral alliances	36.20	34.36	24.17	52.26	18.18	7.68	6.76
Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BZNS)	8.00	3.90	–	–	–	–	–
Movement for Rights and Liberties (DPS)	6.03	7.55	5.43	7.60	7.45	12.81	14.50
National Movement Simeon II (NDSV, NDSP)	–	–	–	–	42.74	19.88	3.02
Ataka – National Union Attack	–	–	–	–	–	8.14	9.36
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)	–	–	–	–	–	6.44	–
Bulgarian National Union Alliance (BNS)	–	–	–	–	–	5.19	–
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	–	–	–	–	–	–	39.70
Order, Legality and Justice	–	–	–	–	–	–	4.13

The data concerning the social composition of the electorate of the BSP fluctuates substantially due to changing political situations, fluctuations of the party's electoral results are due to its changing

electoral coalitions. Briefly summarized, the electorate of the most recent electoral coalition of BSP consists predominantly of elderly people with slight over-representation of inhabitants of small towns and of

⁷ See *Otchet na Visshiya savet na BSP pred 47-ya Kongres na BSP 22-23.11.2008* [Report of the Higher Council of BSP to the 47th Congress of BSP 22-23.11.2008 (2008) Sofia: BSP, p. 7ff. The information is not statistically perfect.

⁸ The data stem from the official Bulletins of the Central Electoral Commission in Sofia.

the group of the lower educated. Voters of Turkish ethnic origin are strongly under-represented in the party's electorate, while Roma are over-represented.

Table 2: Social profile of the electorate of Coalition for Bulgaria (BSP and coalition) in the parliamentary elections in July 2009 (in per cent)⁹

a) By type of settlement

Sofia	Regional Town	Small Town	Village
17.7	16.8	21.4	18.3

b) By age

18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61+
8.2	8.6	11.8	21.8	36.6

c) By education

Higher/ University	High School	Primary and Lower
18.1	16.5	24.7

d) By gender

Male	Female
16.8	19.9

e) By ethnic group

Bulgarian	Turk	Roma	Other
20.1	3.4	29.7	11.8

4. Evolution of the Party's Ideology and Programs

It is a quite challenging task to compare three programmatic documents of the Bulgarian Socialist Party published at three symbolically crucial points in the recent national history. The first document is the Electoral Platform of the BSP for the first democratic elections held in June 1990. The Platform was published in April 1990 and contained the condensed

experience after the sharp political turn on 10 November 1989. In the spring of 1990 the BCP successfully completed the Round Table discussions with the opposition and went through difficult internal developments preparing the change of its name into BSP.¹⁰ The second document is the first Program of the BSP after the changes. The Program was approved

⁹ The data has been collected and processed by the Alfa Research agency for market and social research in Sofia.

¹⁰ See *Predizborna Platforma na Balgarskata Socialisticheska Partiya 1990* [Electoral Platform of the Bulgarian Socialist Party 1990] (1990) Sofia: BSP.

by the 41th Congress of BSP held in June 1994.¹¹ The major task at that time was to spell out the outcomes of an intensive learning process which the national society and the party had gone through, to unite and mobilize the party for the forthcoming parliamentary elections at the end of the year and to roughly outline the policies of the BSP government after the expected victory in the elections. The third document under scrutiny is the second Program of BSP after 1989. It was passed by the regular 47th Congress of the BSP held in November 2008. The document refers to processes which basically completed the post-socialist transformation of Bulgarian society. It has been opened to global markets and politics, re-integrated in economic, political and cultural terms, has become member of EU and NATO and was facing serious new challenges. They are very similar to the challenges all countries having achieved this domestic and international status have to cope with. But there are also challenges which are specific for Bulgarian society.¹²

The electoral platform of BSP of April 1990 was an achievement in terms of both political substance and literary style. The new ideological and political self-definition of the party was clearly related to the history of its predecessors and to the history of the country. The political achievements in interethnic appeasement and in the institutional democratization after 10

November 1989 were convincingly presented. The outstanding political problems were precisely outlined. The messages concerning the strategic aims and the tactical means of the party were conveyed in an understandable manner to the party membership and to society. The Marxist heritage and Marxist self-understanding of BSP were explicitly underlined. The party used to be defined and was intended to be further defined as the party of the working people. The strategic aim of the party was the reformed democratic socialism defined as free of bureaucratic deformations. The leadership argued for an organizationally strong state needed for managing the difficult reform processes. The reforms were envisaged both as continuing democratization of political institutions and as opening of the national economy to various forms of property. No strategy for introduction of large-scale private property was outlined. Obviously, neither the party nor the Bulgarian society was ripe for a strategy of privatization at that time. The maximum of possible clarity was the programmatic announcement of equal legal treatment of all forms of property.

The vision of BSP concerning the speed of the economic reforms put the stress on "accelerated" but not "shock-like" reforms. The goal was the establishment of a regulated and socially responsible market economy. Protection of the national culture from the pressure of the market was promised together with strong support to the educational system. The party kept to the vision of health care free of charge and argued for urgent improvement of the environmental situation, for social support to the pension-

¹¹ Programa na BSP "Novi vremena, nova Balgariya, nova BSP" [Program of the Bulgarian Socialist Party "New Times, New Bulgaria, New BSP" (1994) Sofia: BSP.

¹² Programa na Balgarskata Socialisticheska Partiya za Balgariya – svobodni grazhdani, spravedлива darzhava, solidarno obshtestvo [Programme of the Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria – Free Citizens, Just State, Solidarity in Society] (2008) Sofia: BSP.

ers, mothers, young people, etc. There was a special stress on the need to implement the reforms without confrontation, for strengthening the republican institutions, and particularly for the unity of both great ideas of democracy and socialism as united in the vision of democratic socialism. The policies for protection of human rights were underlined. The statement that the agricultural land should belong to the people who cultivate it should be regarded today as too general. Obviously, there was no clear concept yet of what new legal regulation of the ownership and the use of the agricultural land could or should be introduced. Today it sounds striking but one may have understanding why the BSP still wanted to keep to the membership of Bulgaria in the Warsaw Treaty Organization. It was assumed to be self-evident that no other realistic guarantee for the international security of the Bulgarian state and society was available or in sight at that time.

As seen in a retrospective, the political strategy of BSP adequately corresponded to the realities in April 1990. The strategy envisaged constructive solutions to the most burning issues of the country at the beginning of the nineties. However, the development of Bulgarian society moved away from these visions. Now it might be taken for granted that the weakening of the state due to neoliberal ideological influences and to political confrontations facilitated the repeated economic crises, political instability, rise of crime and cultural disorientations.¹³ In more specific terms, the hasty liberaliza-

tion of markets was badly prepared and had long-term negative impacts on the employment and the living standard of millions in Bulgaria. The rise of unemployment and impoverishment pushed large numbers of emigrants to leave the country. However, one should not forget that some badly designed and implemented reforms had at least temporary or partially the support of the weakened and disoriented BSP. This holds true, for instance, for the rather important reforms of agriculture. They started with the Law on the Ownership and Use of the Agricultural Land¹⁴ which was supported by the BSP in the 7th Great National Assembly. This and some other false political decisions and actions notwithstanding, the major achievement of the party activists was that they managed to stabilize the organizational structures of BSP and its traditional electoral support under very difficult conditions of economic decline and political confrontation. The coalition policies consequently carried out after 1991 brought about the result that together with several small coalition parties BSP could achieve a parliamentary majority after the elections of December 1994.

The platform for the then upcoming elections was based on the new Program of the BSP. It outlined a clear distinction between BSP and the ideology and politics of the authoritarian socialism. The strategic aim of BSP for the future remained the democratic socialism. But it was already understood in the traditional social democratic conceptual framework of liberty, justice and solidarity. There was no reference to class struggle and revolutionary action

¹³ See Genov, Nikolai (2001) *The Bulgarian State at the Turn of the Century*. In: Theodore Caplow Ed. *Leviathan Transformed. Seven National States in the New Century*. McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston – London - Ithaca, 2001, pp. 172-192.

¹⁴ See Darzhaven vestnik [State gazette] N 17 of 01. March, 1991.

any more. The social basis of the party was defined broadly. The visions for the desirable future were focused on the social market economy and the parliamentary democracy.¹⁵ In this way, BSP moved one important step forward in the direction of the incorporation of the ideological and organizational principles of modern social democracy. In practical terms the party mostly aimed at stopping the destructive processes in the economy and society.

During the first year of the government of Zhan Videnov it seemed that both the strategic and tactical aims of BSP as defined in the Program "New Times, New Bulgaria, New BSP" were confirmed by the development of the country. In reality, the gap between the Program and the economic processes was deepening. Bulgarian economy, society and BSP were moving towards a severe crisis. The causes of the crisis were domestic and international, economic and political, organizational and ideological. One of the major issues for public concern was the relationship between the ruling groups of BSP and the new Bulgarian business strata. The topic itself was not new. It was raised many times during the two BSP governments of Andrey Lukanov in 1990. However, the economic reforms had not really started at that time. In 1995 the major winners of the privatization were already known. Some of them used to keep manifest or not that visible links with BSP organizations or functionaries. This was hardly an asset for the party. In many cases and in various aspects the activities of the new rich people were unacceptable for the

public opinion in legal and moral terms. The consequence for the BSP was the very questioning of its position in Bulgarian politics. Was the party going to become mostly the party of the successful business people? Were these links of BSP functionaries with business structures among the important factors which caused the deep economic and political crisis in 1996 and 1997?

This was an entirely new situation which put the social identity of the party in question and had far-reaching organizational consequences. In spite of some splits from BSP and the appearance of other social democratic formations, in the first half of the nineties BSP stood unchallenged on the left side of the political spectrum in the country. This position of the party was loudly questioned in 1997 for the first time when several popular functionaries of BSP left it in critical times and gave a new push to the popularity of the *Bulgarian EuroLeft*, (BEL) headed by Aleksander Tomov. It seemed that the influence of this new party would continue to rise. One rather important reason for this impression was the widely discussed symbolic and practical support to BEL, provided by the Party of the European Socialists at that time. One could interpret the situation in the sense that without this internationally legitimizing support BSP could only retain some peripheral and limited local relevance for a short period and then would vanish. It took time for BSP to accumulate domestic and international experience in order to change this threatening development.

It was the new leadership of the BSP around Georgi Parvanov which took the crisis as an opportunity in order to move

¹⁵ See Programa na BSP "Novi vremena, nova Balgariya, nova BSP"..., pp. 14-15.

BSP programmatically and practically further on in the direction of social democratic political principles and patterns of political action. Parvanov and his supporters could capitalize on the nationally responsible decisions of the leadership of BSP in the times of the acute political crisis at the beginning of 1997. In addition, BSP took the initiative to establish working relations with other parties and groups having social democratic orientation like *BEL*, the *United Block of Labor*, headed by Krastyo Petkov and the *Political Movement Social Democrats*, headed by Nikolai Kamov. Thus, the time had come to organizationally consolidate the social democratic turn of BSP. This happened most impressively at the 45th Congress of BSP, held in 2002. At least partly this became possible due to the strengthening of the international connections of BSP and the improvement of its image in the international social democratic circles. Since *BEL* did not manage to enter the Parliament after the general elections held in 2001, the symbolic and practical support of the Party of European Socialists was pragmatically re-oriented from *BEL* to the BSP. Thus, domestically and internationally the BSP was already fully legitimized as a social democratic party. More precisely, it was legitimized as *the* only one politically relevant social democratic party in Bulgaria.¹⁶

In practical terms, the 45th Congress prepared the political come-back of BSP as major actor on the national political scene af-

ter the elections of 2005. In their outcome, the party became the senior partner in the ruling coalition with NDSV and DPS. It was during the government of this coalition that the strategic national goal of membership in the European Union was achieved. Thus, given the accumulated rich experience under the conditions of market economy and political and cultural pluralism, it is a challenging task to analyze the manner in which this new experience was presented in the new Party Program of November 2008.

One important similarity of the new Program with the above mentioned previous programmatic documents is immediately visible. Similarly to the self-definition at the beginning of the profound changes in 1990, in 2008 BSP also laid programmatic stress on the continuity in its long institutional history which started with the founding of the *Bulgarian Social Democratic Workers' Party*. The continuity is mostly seen in the consequent political representation of the principles of social justice and solidarity, egalitarianism, republicanism, patriotism and internationalism. However, the new self-understanding of BSP as a *left people's party* radically deviates from the traditional self-understanding of its predecessors. They used to define themselves as revolutionary Marxist parties of the working people or even more restrictively as Marxist parties of the working class. Another major similarity of the three programmatic documents concerns the definition of the political goal of BSP. In all documents it is the democratic socialism. But in the most recent interpretation of this political goal some elements of the European integration appear which were impossible in 1990 and 1994. The

¹⁶ The ideological and political background of the turn to social democratic ideas and practices is very well represented in the discussion published under the title *Sotsialdemokratsiyata v noviya vek. Perspektivi za balgarskata levitsa* [Social Democracy in the New Century. Perspectives for the Bulgarian Left] (2002) Sofia: Fondatsiya "Solidarno obshtestvo", Tsentar za istoricheski i politologicheski izsledvaniya.

goal is defined in 2008 in pragmatic terms as “shaping of a social state according to the European models and the new significant transformation in them and by taking the Bulgarian specifics into account”.¹⁷

The stress on the social state sounds rather convincing against the background of the ruthless diagnosis of the outcomes of the reforms after 1989 given in the Program. It presents an alarming picture of the present day situation of Bulgarian society: conflict-laden social differentiation; poverty and crime; lasting demographic crisis; capitalism in its worst incarnations. It is a new programmatic element that this diagnosis of the national situation is conceptually placed in the broader diagnosis of the “new global age” and in the context of the contradictions of the present day global capitalism. The Program identifies the major reasons for the destructive development of the present day capitalism with the neo-liberal ideological domination of economy, with the economic polarization, democratic deficits and injustice on the global scale. Special stress is put on the impact of the neo-liberal economic policies for the collapse of the financial system of economically and politically leading countries.

The alternative embraced by BSP refers to the international left. The argument reads that the political struggle for leftist political values requires global and regional solidarity together with a global political regulation of the economic processes. This is an entirely new line of argumentation as compared to the Electoral Platform of 1990 and the Program of the BSP passed in 1994.

In some points the argumentation might be compared with slogans of the Third International about the historically unavoidable world-wide proletarian revolution. However, the value-normative framework of the Program is not focused on particularistic class values but on universal human rights and universal issues of sustainability. Along this line of universalistic value-normative argumentation the preservation of the natural environment is not defined as a national task alone but as a subject matter of global concerns and cooperation. The reference to the European Union as an organizational framework for the implementation of common social policies in the fields of employment, life long learning, high quality health care, child protection, tolerant inter-ethnic relations, etc., is entirely new.¹⁸ BSP programmatically underlines the necessity to prepare and implement a *strategic program for the development of the country*. In the framework of this program special attention should be given to the *long lasting demographic crisis which has the potential to evolve into catastrophe*.¹⁹ This latter formulation is new in this form of alarm but too general to suggest any specific political measure against the large-scale emigration from the small country which has already lost nearly two millions of its population of 1989. Still another strategy should be focused on the fostering of scientific research and technological development together with reforms of the higher education.²⁰ The need is stressed for a new policy of strategic forecasting, programming and indicative

¹⁷ *Programa na Balgarskata Sotsialisticheska Partiya za Balgariya...*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, 20-24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

planning at state level in order to design and apply clearly defined industrial and export policies.²¹ A new strategy for guaranteeing the security of the country should also be developed.²² The strategy is explicitly related to the organizational and political framework of NATO and to the policies of the European Union for security and defense. This is the clear recognition of the substantial changes in the geostrategic positioning of the country and of the BSP as compared to the situation in 1990 and in 1994.

Some of the above visions and proposals sound strikingly similar to the style in which party politics used to be strategically defined and propagated in the times of the party-state rule in Bulgaria before 1989. As seen from another vantage point, however, the whole domestic and international situation is so obviously different now that the similarities of formulations do not imply any intended similarity in the policies. Such practical similarities are impossible. For instance, strategic state planning is very much needed now since planning was dramatically neglected during the pretty long period of neoliberal ideological dominance. It was accompanied with the lack of political will and lack of resources needed for strategic planning and its implementation. This was one of the major reasons for the general institutional and value-normative instability which long prevented the economic, political and cultural recovery of Bulgarian society after the start of the profound institutional changes. The stress on planning is definitely focused on the need *for indicative* and definitely not

for directive state planning. In this sense, the stress on the need of long-term planning in Bulgaria perfectly fits the current political mood in Europe and in the world.

Analyzing the Electoral Platform of BSP of April 1990 and the Programs of BSP of 2004 and 2008 in comparative terms the reader is particularly struck by still another surprising similarity. All three programmatic documents of the party of working people (Electoral Platform) and party of democratic socialism (the Programs) lack any discussion on both trade unions (syndicates) and civil society. This omission cannot be just an accidental mistake and requires explanation. It refers to the specifics of the institutional development of Bulgarian society after 1989.

The lack of programmatic reference to the trade unions (syndicates) is easier to explain. Shortly after the start of the political reforms the leadership of the still powerful and rich "old" Bulgarian Trade Unions (BPS) was changed. They were also renamed to Confederation of the Independent Syndicates of Bulgaria (KNSB). The functionaries of BSP were well aware of the fact that the independent syndicates could not be any more 'transmission belts' of the party ideology and politics. But they sincerely believed that the BCP and later BSP should and would keep friendly and constructive relationships with KNSB. This assumption was widespread not only because of the long traditions of cooperation of the trade unions with all predecessors of BSP. The expectation seemed to be realistic since the persons elected at the top of the new syndicates had long records of party functionaries. However, political circumstances, organizational interests and personal ambitions

²¹ Ibid., p.30.

²² Ibid., p. 36.

made the coordination of policies between BSP and KNSB difficult at least for a while. The issue became even more complex and difficult due to the appearance of new syndicates. The major new syndicate "Podkrepa" had a clear political orientation against the BSP. As a result, the very topic concerning working relations between the syndicates and the BSP disappeared from the Electoral Platform of 1990. Despite personal changes and changes of organizational policies, the topic did not return into the programmatic documents of BSP of 1994 and 2008. In reality, everyday political life required contacts of the party functionaries with all syndicates and coordination of the policies of BSP with the activities of the syndicates. This could be managed more or less successfully on the case-by-case and day-by-day basis.

The programmatic neglect of the cooperation with the syndicates in the Program of the BSP of 2008 has still another explanation. Party functionaries carefully observed and analyzed the decline of the membership of the syndicates and their diminishing impact on Bulgarian political life. This made the syndicates less and less relevant as political partners. All explanations notwithstanding, the very omission of discussion on the relationship with the syndicates in the programmatic documents of a social democratic party can only meet astonishment. The issue will be certainly a subject for considerations and new decisions of the BSP governing bodies further on.

The relationships of BSP with the civil society are even more complicated than its relationships with the syndicates. There were numerous voluntary or semi-voluntary associations and organizations of civil

society in the country before 1989. They all were politically guided and closely supervised by structures of the party-state since civil society itself was rather weak under state socialism in Bulgaria. The major social-structural reason was the presence of an economically weak and politically irrelevant middle class. Given the full nationalization of the industrial property and trade and the nearly full collectivization of agriculture, there were no economic grounds for a strong traditional ("old") middle class based on property and income. The new state socialist middle class consisted of state employees in the education, health care, research and development, etc. Thus, middle class as carrier of autonomous civil activities was only *in statu nascendi* in Bulgaria before the changes in 1989. The functioning of civil society associations and organizations which could be autonomous partners or even control state institutions was just a matter of wishful thinking. As far as existent, the civil society was expected to play the role of supportive organizational mechanism of the political will of BCP like the trade unions.

The situation changed rapidly after 1989. Many organizations which were influential under state socialism were quick to specify their goals and structures in order to better serve the interests of age groups and professional groups or of the environmental protection. But they still typically lack the strong economic and social basis which would allow them to be active and valued autonomous partners of state institutions and political parties. The enlightened well-to-do middle class as bearer of civic initiatives is still rather weak in the

country. Nevertheless, the interaction of the representatives of civil society with organizations or functionaries of BSP is a matter of everyday politics. Therefore, the reference to civil society in connection with the politics of BSP would be most natural in the programmatic documents of a party which has the ambition to act according to social democratic political principles and understands itself as a left-wing people's party.

The issue has still another specific dimension. A variety of environmental organizations, foundations, think tanks, etc. appeared immediately after 1989 on the basis of generous funding from abroad. The obvious intention of the donors was to establish and support them as political counterbalance to the state which was believed to be still very much under the control of BCP/BSP at that time. Most of these internationally supported representatives of the civil society kept to manifestly anti-communist or anti-socialist ideology and politics. Consequently, the activists of BSP used to regard them as unfriendly at least and as not prospective for political partnership as a rule. The political situation has changed in the meantime. Neither anti-communism nor the extremes of neo-liberalism are fashionable any more. In practical terms, the non-governmental organizations which survived need coordination of their activities with the activities of all leading parties in the country, BSP included. This is still another reason to think that the discussion on this potential for coordination of activities of BSP with the activities of actors from the civil society in the programmatic documents of the party would be necessary. This would be the formal recognition of the relevance

of polyarchic democratic political structures and processes of decision-making and of democratic political control.

5. BSP in the Present Day National Party System

At the beginning of the reforms the Bulgarian Socialist Party tried to capitalize on the experience and initiative of leading party functionaries in order to smoothly adapt to profoundly changing international and domestic circumstances. It seemed that the efforts were pretty successful. The electorate gave support to the continuity of BCP and BSP and to its electoral program which promised evolutionary economic reforms at low social costs. This promise could not be kept after the first democratic elections in June 1990 under the conditions of strong international pressure and domestic political confrontation. The party was not able to mobilize strong political will in favor of reforms due to struggles between the factions in the party itself. As a result the GDP and the living standard dropped fast and deeply. The second BSP government headed by Andrey Lukanov lost the legitimacy to govern the country which badly needed well prepared and implemented reforms.

The interim government of Dimiter Popov (1990–1991) included politicians from BSP together with representatives of the oppositional political forces and technocrats. The task of the government was to start the economic reforms and prepare the general elections to be held in the autumn of 1991. Since BSP had already failed in guiding the reforms it was logical that

the oppositional liberal coalition Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) should make its try in guiding reform politics. In fact, the SDS won the elections with a small margin ahead of BSP. The predominant support to BSP was obviously diminishing. It seemed that a bipolar model of rotation of the two large parties BSP and SDS was emerging.

This assumption was confirmed by the turbulent developments which followed. The SDS had no parliamentary majority. Neither the Union as a political organization nor its leading functionaries were prepared to govern the country successfully. The administrative weakness of the government could only temporarily be excused with the situation of the political confrontation. Instead of laying the stress on the national agreement in favor of very much needed reforms, the leadership of the SDS and its government headed by Filip Dimitrov opted for intensive confrontation with the BSP. The political radicalism of the government provoked side effects by spoiling its relationships with the moderate forces in the SDS. They were mostly represented by the President Zhelyu Zhelev. The tensions between the two institutions evolved into an open conflict concerning the aims and means of the reforms. In reality, economic reforms were put on ice. The living standard continued to decline. This particularly applied to the living standards of the ethnic Turks whose major source of income was tobacco growing. Since the former Soviet markets were not accessible any more, the well developed national tobacco industry was deeply affected. However, no state support was provided to the suffering tobacco grow-

ers. This became the formal reason for the DPS to withdraw its support to the SDS. The agony ended with a vote of the Parliament which was initiated by Filip Dimitrov himself with the intention to get a vote of support. It turned to be a vote of rejection.

A second intermediary and non-party-affiliated government with Lyuben Berov as Prime Minister was established (1992-1994). Berov's government could only function with the support of the BSP. This put the party in an advantageous position in the preparation for the new parliamentary elections announced for the end of 1994. In the meantime the new leadership of BSP under Zhan Videnov had managed to consolidate its position in the BSP. The party passed its first Program after the start of the profound changes and seemed to be organizationally fit enough in order to take the responsibility for governing the country in the period of emerging economic and political stabilization. The memories of the outspoken failure of the SDS government were fresh in the memory of the electorate. There was no other political alternative in sight than the BSP. Consequently, the electoral support to its re-election was overwhelming. One important reason for the electoral success was the stress put in the party's electoral campaign on the memories of the social stability and the higher living standard under the government of BCP before the changes. The promise of BSP to re-establish this stability and economic security seemed to be plausible since some signs of economic recovery were visible. In fact, the first year of the new BSP government was marked with a small positive GDP growth for the first time after 1989.

However, time-bombs were in-built in the national economy and were already ticking. The first one was the high budget expenditure for support to losing industrial enterprises which could not be privatized due to the lack of promising investors. The second was the unavoidable bankruptcy of numerous private banks which were established at the beginning of the nineties without any capital of their own. The stabilization or closure of the losing industrial enterprises and the streamlining of the banking system was practically impossible without financial support from abroad. Formally, the IMF offered it under the conditions of rapid privatization and cutting of social expenditures. In reality, the World Bank and the IMF were hesitating in their negotiations with a socialist government which wanted to conduct independent domestic and international politics. The reaction of the Videnov government was the announcement that it would manage the financial situation without the support of the international financial institutions. Under the conditions of large payments to international debts this was impossible. The financial collapse and the high inflation were the unavoidable effects. The Videnov government of BSP lost the support of the electorate together with the support of the party itself. One of the major reasons was the strong accusation of unclear relationships between the government and representatives of the newly emerging national capital. Thus, the BSP had to resign from government under rather critical circumstances. One outstanding achievement remained in its records, however. The Videnov government

managed to submit the documents for the candidacy of Bulgaria for membership in the European Union in December 1995.

A third interim government was appointed in order to stop the social unrests in the beginning of 1997. After the failure of the BSP government the rotation of power to the Union of Democratic Forces did not have any alternative. The elections of April 1997 brought about the second government of the Union of Democratic Forces under Ivan Kostov. It took the responsibility to implement very much delayed economic reforms. The government immediately introduced the Currency Board which was already proposed by the Videnov government. Following the requirements of the Board, severe limitations were imposed on consumption. The restrictive measures stabilized the state finances. Privatization was carried out at a high speed. The international activities of the country were focused on the membership in NATO and in the European Union. However, the second SDS government was shattered by internal conflicts and splits. Several ministers and other high administrators were involved in a long series of scandals connected with corruption in privatization deals. Besides its achievement in implementing the economic recovery, the government turned out to be not sensitive enough to the social consequences of the economic differentiation in Bulgarian society. The improvement of the macro-economic situation did not have the expected trickle-down positive effects. Some privatization deals like that of the national air carrier "Balkan" in 1999 were so badly prepared and implemented that the trust in the government declined

fast. Nevertheless, Ivan Kostov firmly believed that his achievements in stabilizing the national economy would make his reelection in June 2001 unquestionable.

He was false in his assumption. The SDS lost the elections dramatically. Splits and defeats accompanied the political development of the Union thereafter until it reached its present day marginal position in Bulgarian political life. This convulsion of the national party system came about after the hasty return of the former king (tsar) Simeon II to the Bulgarian political scene. He had lived in exile after a referendum in 1946 and had limited knowledge about the intricacies of the Bulgarian political realities. So, he believed to be able to become a respectable President of the country. However, this option was closed for him due to political decisions under the influence of the SDS President incumbent Petar Stoyanov. The surprising reaction of Simeon Saxe-Coburggotski was the registration of a new party called National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) just before the parliamentary elections. He managed to understand what Ivan Kostov did not: the intensity of dissatisfaction in the country was very high. The dissatisfaction did not concern the SDS government alone but the bipolar political model and the rotation of BSP and SDS as well. The disappointments with the three governments of BSP and with the two governments of SDS after 1989 were so deep that large groups of the Bulgarian electorate expected and wanted miracles.

The expectations related to Simeon II and his party were very high. Many believed that the new government and mostly the new Prime Minister Simeon II will be able

to stabilize the economic situation of the country by attracting large foreign investments. Moreover, the NDSV government was expected to consequently improve the functioning of the state administration and most importantly – to substantially improve the living standard of Bulgarian households in 800 days as Simeon II promised to do during the election campaign. If objectively judged, the achievements of the NDSV government in almost all of these political fields were respectable. The country became a member of NATO as a major condition for its international security. The GDP used to rise stably between 2001 and 2005. The country received a road map for membership in the European Union. But the very much desired rapid rise of living standards could not come about. Since this was the major motivation of the basically republican Bulgarian electorate to vote for an offspring of the Saxe Coburg-Gotha dynasty, NDSV could only suffer a serious defeat in the parliamentary elections of June 2005. The next convulsion of the party system was unavoidable.

Still another miracle happened at the end of 2001 with the election of the then Chairman of the Bulgarian Socialist Party Georgi Parvanov for President of the Republic. Parvanov already had the reputation of a moderate politician with strong social democratic inclinations. But he could only be elected under the impact of the electoral catastrophe of the SDS and the following splits of its leadership and confusions of its electorate. Whatever the reasons for this hardly predictable political turn, it signaled the possibility for return of the already social-democratic BSP to a

leading position in Bulgarian political life. This trend was only partly materialized with the parliamentary elections of 2005. There were no miracles in sight and SDS was in a catastrophic shape as organization. So, it was mostly BSP the electorate could reasonably vote for. But the results of the vote could only allow a coalition government.

The leading force in the coalition government 2005-2009 was the BSP. Its Chairman Sergey Stanishev became the Prime Minister. The events during the period support the argument that the social democratic re-orientation of the party was already accomplished. The first evidence for the unquestionable adaptation of BSP to the democratic rules of the political game was its handling of the electoral results. After intensive internal discussions the party leadership was pragmatic enough to decide to take the major responsibility in the ideologically and politically unusual coalition of BSP, NDSV and DPS. The leaderships of all three parties managed to overcome the mutual reservations and the delays in the negotiations. The stake was high: the coalition government had to prepare the country for membership in the European Union according to the negotiated schedule.

It was clearly defined in the program of the coalition government that the preparation for membership of Bulgaria in the European Union required accelerated economic growth since the country was and remains one of the poorest in Europe. This goal was basically achieved. In 2007 the national economy at last reached its GDP level of 1989 after a deep and prolonged recession. The GDP growth of 6-7% per year was among the highest in Europe. Tremendous

organizational efforts were invested in order to prepare the legal institutions and the state administration for membership in the Union in January 2007 as was announced. This major national task was achieved as the result of a long effort which started with the Application of Bulgaria for membership in the European Union submitted by another BSP government in 1995. The country achieved the highest level of FDI per capita among the new EU member states in 2007. The unemployment declined substantially during the rule of the coalition government.

Thus, in the context of relatively favorable international conditions the economic policies of the coalition government turned out to be basically effective. Given the economic progress, the government was able to pay more attention to the social sphere which used to be more or less neglected by the previous governments due to financial limitations. This applied to the old age pensions first of all. They still remain low in European comparison but are no more as dramatically low as they used to be many years after 1989. The real incomes of households increased faster than in any comparable period after the political turn in 1989. The time span of the paid maternity leave was prolonged. Larger funding was made available to the primary, secondary and tertiary education. The funding for research and technological development increased substantially as well.

A positive mark should be given to the leadership of the BSP for the style of presentation of these results achieved by the coalition government. The propagation of its success did not preclude the sober assessment of the real situation of the popula-

tion in the country.²³ It was and still remains stricken by mass poverty. The public opinion polls funded by the EU show unmistakably that Bulgarian households are massively confronted with economic problems, corruption and crime in their everyday life. After a series of economically successful years

they still define themselves as predominantly rather poor and unhappy. It was only in the crisis stricken Hungary from all 10 new Eastern European member states of the EU that the assessment of the economic situation of the households was as negative as in Bulgaria at the end of 2008:²⁴

Table 3: "How would you judge the current financial situation of your household?"

Answers	BG	CZ	EE	LV	LT	HU	PL	RO	SI	SK
Very good	2	6	3	3	2	1	5	3	6	5
Rather good	32	63	70	55	54	24	55	41	56	56
Rather bad	41	26	24	32	37	50	28	40	29	33
Very bad	21	5	2	9	6	24	8	13	7	4
DK	4	1	1	1	1	1	4	3	2	2

Bulgarians are very much dissatisfied with the quality of political life in the country. They have good reasons to be skeptical and critical in this respect since cases of corruption have been identified in all political parties. Two key BSP ministers of the coalition government had to leave the government under the suspicion of corruption. The suspicion could not be supported by legal evidence but the cases are indicative for the widespread reservations concerning the legal and moral foundations of party functionaries. As seen from another point of view, Bulgarians are strikingly inactive in socially relevant voluntary activities in the same time. Thus, BSP and all other Bulgarian political parties and coalitions have to cope with threatening local effects of the

global crisis and with a series of specific local problems. Some of them have long history while others have been mostly caused and reproduced by the badly conceived and implemented reforms after 1989. Together with the long record of successful policies like the keeping of the interethnic peace in the country or the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union, these problems mark the present day identity of Bulgarian society²⁵ and will determine its development in the long run. Given the relevance of the long-term effects of political action it is quite indicative for the cultural and political situation in the country that the Bulgarian public mind is rather uncertain about the positive or negative effects of the profound reforms after 1989 for the personal wellbeing:²⁶

²³ See *Politicheski доклад na Sergey Stanishev pred 47-ya kongres na Balgarskata Sotsialisticheska partiya* [Political report of Sergey Stanishev before the 47th congress of the Bulgarian Socialist Party] (2008) Sofia: BSP <http://old.bsp.bg/fce/001/0097/files/Doklad-kongres-finalRN.doc>

²⁴ *Eurobarometer 70* (2008) Table QA4a.5 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_annex.pdf

²⁵ See Genov, Nikolai (2006) 'Bulgaria's New Identity'. *South East European Review*, N 3, pp. 43-57.

²⁶ *Eurobarometer 70*, Table QC 1.3.

Table 4: “In 1989, the fall of the Berlin wall marked the end of the Iron Curtain that separated Eastern from Western Europe. Please tell me to what extent you have personally benefited or not from the fall of the Iron Curtain?”

Answers	BG	CZ	EE	LV	LT	HU	PL	RO	SI	SK
Benefited to a great extent	6	25	11	7	8	11	11	9	6	14
Benefited to some extent	18	46	17	24	13	19	27	15	16	46
Not really benefited	20	13	21	15	13	30	22	19	14	14
Not at all benefited	36	3	43	43	54	37	31	39	54	13
DK	20	13	8	11	12	3	9	18	10	13

The above data is not particularly encouraging. Obviously, Bulgarian society is still in a situation in which the expectations and the requirements concerning the political forces are very high and remain unmet in the practice. Given the exceptionally long history of BSP and the stable support it used to enjoy during the whole transformation period, its responsibility for the present day and the future of the country was and remains particularly high. This is the major reason why the electorate was not going to reward the achievements of the coalition government highly. To the contrary, it was widely perceived as organizationally weak and involved in economically inefficient or directly corrupt deals. Particularly strong accusations in this respect were focused on the activities of DPS.

In the meantime, a new party-movement “Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria” (GERB) informally headed by the Mayor of Sofia Boyko Borisov appeared on the Bulgarian political scene. Using strong populist vocabulary, Borisov established himself in the public mind as the next savior of the Bulgarian state and

nation from the malfunctioning and the corruption among politicians and state administrators. His electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections in July 2009 had some anti-BSP, anti-DPS and nationalist overtones which were well received by the electorate. In the effect, Boyko Borisov and his leader’s party GERB became the clear winner in the elections. Obviously, the Bulgarian electorate still desires and expects miracles. The outcomes of the elections brought about still another deep convulsion of the Bulgarian party system. Besides the triumph of GERB, the elections provided evidence that the nationalist party *Ataka* stabilized its public support and parliamentary presence after its surprisingly successful performance at the parliamentary elections in 2005 and the presidential elections in 2006. Formally, the major loser is NDSV since it did not manage to enter the new Parliament and is probably going to disappear from the political scene. This requiem could be basically foreseen since this party is too strongly identified with the personality of the former king who had largely lost public confidence and political support. The

losses for BSP are also very substantial not because of the unexpectedly low electoral results alone. Due to the circumstances, the party attracted all criticisms concerning the coalition government and particularly the criticisms concerning real or alleged corruption of politicians in the coalition government. After the election it seemed that the party and its leadership were very much disoriented about the future party strategy and its implementation.

6. The New Turning Point for BSP

The Session of the 47th party congress held on 18 October 2009 provided political analysts with new evidence about the critical situation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party after the lost elections in July and the rapid rise of the GERB party to power. The first surprise was the over-personalized report of the party Chairman Sergey Stanishev called "My Confession". This style of reporting was obviously intended to manage a deep organizational crisis. Another clear indication of critical circumstances was the difference between the announced and the real agenda of the Congress Session. No election of party Chairperson was mentioned in the draft of the Session Program. Nevertheless, election took place following the proposal by the incumbent himself. Moreover, the election between four candidates representing a variety of visions about the strategy and tactics of BSP became the core of the debates during the Session of the Congress. Thus, extraordinary approaches were obviously needed in order to secure the legitimizing support for the leadership. As it could be

expected under such circumstances, the incumbent was re-elected but with less than two thirds of the votes. Competitors made the slogan for a new left political program topical. Whether this slogan might have implications for the organizational unity of the BSP – this will become clear in the foreseeable future.

One may focus the analysis of the current ideological and organizational situation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party on specific uncertainties and disorientations. Another relevant topic for analysis could be the general loss of trust as the most respected party functionary and famous actor Stefan Danailov put the diagnosis of the Congress Session.²⁷ However, what should be most urgently drawn as a conclusion from the turbulent Session is another general lesson. Only on the surface were the congress discussions focused on the assessment of the achievements and the failures of the coalition government, on the results of the European and Parliamentary elections and on some interpersonal tensions and conflicts. Properly placing these rather pragmatic discussions in the broader context of the Bulgarian national development, the European integration and the global processes, the analyst should see the heated discussions just as an indicator for the profound problems facing BSP, the social democratic ideology and politics in Bulgaria and, most of all, the development of Bulgarian society. The problems concern the desirable and possible political agenda of social democracy under the new conditions of global

²⁷ Danailov, Stefan (2009) *Veche sam star da ticham sled tramvai* [I am Already Old to Run after Tramways]. Interview with Daric News, 19.10. http://dariknews.bg/print_article.php?article_id=418868.

insecurity, the difficulties in the European integration and the shaky grounds of economy, politics and culture in a country which belongs to the global semi-periphery and the European periphery.

Together with most national economies in Eastern Europe, Bulgarian economy was badly hit by the global economic crisis despite the long-term restrictive budgetary policy implemented by various governments. The continuing crisis questions the good results in the GDP growth, in attracting foreign direct investments and in reducing unemployment. Bulgaria remains rather poor country with continuing mass emigration. The failure of the state administration to secure full-scale and legally responsible absorption of the EU post-accession funds provoked the European Commission to impose rather unusual sanctions on the use of the European funds by the country. Bulgaria is still far away from the clear definition of its position in the division of labor in the European Union and in the global technological and economic processes. The social structure of Bulgarian society is rather unstable and this is the major reason for the striking fluctuations of voters' preferences and voting behavior. It is a public secret that beyond the talks about the successful Bulgarian ethnic model there are many open questions. They are related to the monolithic political representation of the Bulgarian Turks by the Movements of Rights and Freedoms and to the very much needed inclusion of the Roma population in the national economic, political and cultural life. The very fact that the GERB party could achieve its remarkable electoral success in 2009 by using nationalistic slogans is quite

indicative for the real situation of the inter-ethnic relations in the country. Moreover, the *Ataka* party stabilized its parliamentary representation on the same ideological basis of interethnic intolerance.

This quite selective list of the much larger range of challenges facing Bulgarian society and the political parties in the country convey a clear message. All national governments will continue to be confronted with these challenges in the long run. It might become fatal for BSP if, instead of focusing the party debates on the above issues the party leadership would continue with personalized quarrels. The fate of the Union of the Democratic Forces and of the king's party NDSV should be a signal what the outcome might be. After the lost elections BSP is in isolation and will have the difficult tasks to overcome it in order to efficiently play its role of parliamentary opposition in a political environment in which rude expressions and actions are the rule and not the exception.²⁸ Therefore, there should be political will for moving the party leadership together with the party's rank and file away from factional and interpersonal struggles towards clarifying priorities for the development of Bulgarian society and Bulgarian state in the dynamic domestic, regional and global environment. This is the precondition for the meaningful specification of the social democratic visions of freedom, solidarity and justice into aims and means of social democratic politics. The task is not new at all in this general formulation but permanently new in its specific local implementation. It requires a clear definition of the new priorities to be dealt with by the

²⁸ See *European Socialists Slam Bulgaria PM over BSP Prohibition Remark* (2009) Sofia News Agency, 21.10., <http://www.novinite.com/newsletter/print.php?id=109135>.

Bulgarian state under a future social democratic government.²⁹

Thus, the conclusions of the brief overview of deep political changes during the period of democratic development of Bulgarian society and about the role of the BSP in them are rather sobering:

First, despite the clear democratic rules of political competition, decision making and implementation of decisions formulated in the Constitution of the country passed on 12.07.1992 and in the Act on the Political Parties,³⁰ the party system in Bulgaria is still rather unstable. The repeated radical changes of electoral preferences due to the search for new miracles and the ensuing collapse of each governing party provide the evidence for deep disappointments of the electorate with the party system and the political parties in the country.

Second, the major reason for the instability of the political preferences of the voters and for the ensuing convulsions of the party system in the country is the instability of the social structures. They are still in flux which makes the efforts to achieve clear definitions of “left” and “right” in the Bulgarian political life often a meaningless endeavor.³¹

Third, against this somewhat discouraging democratic experience it is obvious that the only political force in the country which has so far basically succeeded in sustaining its historical continuity and ideological identity, its long-term organizational potential and electoral support is the Bulgarian Socialist Party. As a surprise for

many, BSP recovers regularly after organizational disasters and electoral defeats. It managed to critically overcome the radicalism of its own Marxist and communist past and to embrace a social democratic ideology and political practice. The party was already rewarded by the voters for this ideological and political re-orientation and will most probably continue to be rewarded in the foreseeable future as well. One may only hope that the new generation of young leaders and functionaries of the party who have been politically socialized in the context of the social democratic turn of BSP will be successful in managing the new challenges facing the BSP and the country. It has been recognized that the goal is difficult to achieve under the relatively stable conditions of Western Europe.³² The goal is even more difficult to achieve under the conditions of cultural uncertainty, institutional instability and widespread dissatisfaction in Eastern Europe in general and in Bulgaria in particular. However, there is no other constructive and promising alternative in sight.

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²⁹ See Eppler, Erhard (2009) *The Return of the State?* London: Forumpress, p. 61 ff., 183 ff.

³⁰ *Zakon za politicheskite partii* [Act on the Political Parties] (2005) *Datzhaven vestnik* [State Gazette], N 28, 01 April.

³¹ See Pirgova, Mariya (2002) *Balgarskiyat parlamentarizam v usloviyata na globalen prehod* [The Bulgarian parliamentarism under the conditions of global transition]. Sofiya: Paradigma, p. 96 f.

³² See Merkel, Wolfgang et al. (2006) *Die Reformfähigkeit der Sozialdemokratie. Herausforderungen und Bilanz der Regierungspolitik in Westeuropa*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.



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