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Challenges Facing the Consolidation of Democracy in Bulgaria

■ The evidence, which the public opinion hears and reads, testifies to the fact that the Bulgarian parliamentarians fail to perform their major function of law-makers in the name of the common good to a sufficiently high standard. What their functioning rather reveals are personal, family, and corporate interests, despite the pressure exerted by the European Union demanding stronger judicial control with respect to corrupt politicians.

■ Since the very beginning of the country's transition, the pressure on the judicial system has been enormous, both on the part of organized crime and on the part of corrupt groupings belonging to the political class. To date, it is under this pressure that the judicial system finds it hard to stay both its independence and effectiveness in the capacity of a guardian of civic interests.

■ In an economic system where the idea of social justice has been undermined, the formation of a democratic political culture is belated and what is created instead is an environment nourishing anti-democratic orientations and political practices.

■ A universal phenomenon afflicting all Bulgarian political parties is the lack of internal party democracy, or where it is present, it is nonetheless exceptionally weak. However regrettable this state of affairs can be, it should be admitted that it is this phenomenon precisely that generates authoritarian conduct and action.

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1. From Crisis Democracy to Consolidated Democracy

Political science literature makes use of the notions *transition to democracy* and *consolidation of democracy* in order to differentiate between two stages in the development of political relationships in societies making the transition from authoritarian or totalitarian regimes to a democratic form of political system.

The first stage denoted as *transition* refers to the period of establishing the first major democratic institutions. The principal element of this first stage is the so-called constituent or founding elections, when the political parties after the fall of the totalitarian/authoritarian dictatorship compete to gain positions in the representative institutions. In most general terms, it is in this first stage that societies embarking on the path of transition create the rules that prescribe the way in which the new democratic institutions will function, and it is these rules that they subsequently enshrine in their new constitutions.

After the fall of the totalitarian regimes, Central and Eastern Europe woke up in quite a peculiar situation, which had a specific impact on the course of the democratic changes. The main differences in the process of consolidating democracy in the post-totalitarian societies, compared to other regimes undergoing transition from authoritarian and other forms of political dictatorship, are that within the post-communist region two major tasks had to be solved simultaneously. The first one was connected with the transition to a democratic regime, and the second one – with the imposition of a radically new economic system based on the principles of market economy. It is the combination of these two major tasks that underlies the complexity of post-communist transition to democracy, marked also by the historical traditions, the political culture, and the economic stability in each of the various countries of the region.

In principle, a democracy is deemed to be consolidated when the main democratic institutions enjoy the confidence of the majority of the population in a given country, and there are

neither significant political forces, nor public attitudes standing for the replacement of democracy by authoritarian forms of governance. In other words, using the metaphoric expression of the US scientist Juan Linz, a consolidated democracy comes to existence when *democracy is the only game in town*.

Consolidated democracy is far from being a constant feature, because it is accompanied by interim stages, which political science qualifies as *initial, partial, temporary* consolidation, etc., thus defining the transitory stages in the process of consolidation. Besides, every democracy consolidates in the course of decades and even of centuries, in order to develop its democratic institutions. The longer the major democratic institutions and democratic civic culture exist, the more stable a given democracy is, although – under the impact of a number of factors – phenomena may occur that can undermine democracy. In other words, the transition to a consolidated democracy is not necessarily a consistent and ever ascending process.

What has been sometimes observed in the post-communist countries is some regress in their political development connected with the infringement of significant principles of liberal democracy. The most recent example to this effect is the experience of the FIDES party in Hungary, which has been governing the country since 2010. This party passed a new Constitution, which violates a number of liberal democratic values. This is the reason why the European Commission drew the attention of Hungary to this issue and demanded that its institutions amend the respective constitutional provisions, as they contradict the EU *acquis communautaire*, especially those concerning the independence of the judiciary, the Central Bank, and the country's Ombudsman. (1)

Another clarification, however, should be made. Bulgaria does not aspire to establish the so-called *procedural democracy*, which in most general terms observes the principle of governance by majority rule. Instead, it is striving to adopt the so-called *liberal democracy* as the most developed form of democracy, which has emerged and is

established in the countries of Western Europe and the United States. In comparison with procedural democracy, liberal democracy brings to the fore the civic rights and freedoms as a basis for the functioning of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy itself guarantees the observance and consolidation of civic liberties and freedoms through the principle of the rule of law.

One of the principal factors for the consolidation of democracy in Bulgaria is the effective functioning of the major institutions of state, which have been enshrined in the Constitution in the capacity of pillars of the political system based on the principle of separation of powers.

The Constitution itself, despite the fact that it was hastily passed in 1991, as a whole remains as it was adopted in view of its principal premises, namely the preservation of the separation of powers within the limits of the parliamentary republic. A number of amendments to the Constitution have been proposed over the years to the purpose of making the functioning of the major institutions of state more effective. In general, these amendments concern the following aspects: enhancing the powers of the presidential institution, taking the prosecutor's office out of the judiciary and binding it with the executive branch of power, adopting financial frameworks for the budget policy of the government, etc. Thus far, however, there have been no amendments to the Constitution in all these areas, which is also due to the fact that certain cardinal amendments, of the separation of powers principle for instance, require a decision passed by a Grand National Assembly.

At the same time, the different "powers" themselves are facing a number of challenges, since their legitimacy is far too low in the eyes of Bulgarian society. The major representative institution – the National Assembly – has enjoyed a low confidence rating for years. According to an opinion poll survey held by BBSS Gallup International in February 2012 on the confidence rating enjoyed by the political institutions, Parliament ranks last with a 19 percent confidence rating. The institutions of the judiciary – the law-court and the prosecutor's office – are also at the bottom of the

ratings scale and the confidence they enjoy stands at 19 and 20 percent respectively. (2)

This state of affairs is a consequence of two factors at least. First, it is due to the negative assessment public opinion has given to the legislative activity of the National Assembly, which in many respects is chaotic, substantiated by a short-term orientation, and inadequate as regards the long term requirements of society. Numerous legislative acts are subject to repeated amendments, thus creating instability in societal relations. Many reforms, which the country badly needs, are delayed on account of the legislative body precisely. According to data disclosed by the *Legal Barometer* Non-governmental Organization, the Social Security Code has been amended 14 times over the 2010-2011 period of time. For its part, the Criminal Procedure Act has been amended 5 times in the course of a single year. (3)

Second, the overall negative assessment, which the Bulgarian Parliament receives, has been transferred from the parliamentary work of the people's deputies to their image as politicians. Thus, the MPs are affected by the general mistrust in the political class at large, as well as by the accusations – be they genuine or alleged – of corruption and clientelism. It is political clientelism namely, which has emerged in consequence of the "unhealthy" symbiosis between economic and political interests and has brought about the disregard for the interests of civic society, that underlies the formation of predominantly negative attitudes in Bulgarian society.

The facts, which the public opinion has witnessed, provide sufficient evidence that Bulgarian parliamentarians fail to perform their main function of law-makers in the name of the common good. Their legislative activity is permeated by private and corporate interests, despite the pressure exerted by the European Commission for enhanced judicial control with respect to corrupt politicians. It is not by chance that corruption ranks very high as a major problem of society in the opinion poll surveys, which pollster agencies regularly hold among the Bulgarian citizens. (4)

A specialized department for combating corruption, which will target top politicians and civil

servants, was set up with the General Prosecutor's Office in February 2012. The repentance of the General Prosecutor that such a unit was being set up far too late (5) testifies to the magnitude of the difficulties and obstructions, which law-enforcement has been facing in its efforts to combat corruption. Over the 22 years of transition to democracy, corruption has acquired a systemic nature and has become not only resilient to the attempts to be curbed, but has also created specific public attitudes, which both justify and conceal the acts of corruption. (6)

The lack of a Lobbying Act and the ineffective functioning of the Parliamentary Conflict of Interests Committee are another feature of the overall inadequacy of the country's anti-corruption policy and the incapacity of the political class to uproot and smash the foundations of corruption on the highest level within the system of the various institutions of state.

The executive branch of power is embodied by the government. After 1997, all governments completed their full term of office in comparison with the preceding period and thus at present we can speak about a state of stability in the executive. Various types of governments were formed over time – from single party to coalition governments. This indicates that the democratic procedure in Bulgaria has been enriched and the political parties and the politicians – although finding themselves in tough situations – are capable of preventing a crisis-prone development of the political process.

In 2005, the major political parties managed to set up a tri-partite coalition government in the name of national priorities among which the adherence to the EU. At the same time, however, the actual division of spheres of influence among the three governing parties (according to the notorious formula of 8:5:3) contributed to the weakened position of the Prime Minister in his capacity of the person in charge of the Cabinet on one hand, and to the encouragement of corrupt practices within the separate governmental spheres on the other. The weakened control on the part of Parliament also contributed to such a state of affairs.

The legislative branch of power, the National Assembly – in its capacity of a supreme body of representative power in fact remains in subordination to the executive branch of power. This has occurred in result of stringent party discipline on one hand, and on the other – it stems from the determination of the executive to impose its own "will power". This is the reason why one of the principal functions of Parliament, which is to exercise its parliamentary control, does not play its role of a corrective to the actions of the executive to the necessary and sufficient extent.

This phenomenon has been manifested by all governments of the post-totalitarian transition in Bulgaria, whereby this manifestation was especially prominent after 1997, although the governments of this period have differed in terms of both form and structure (e.g. one-party governments, coalition governments, minority governments). To various degrees, this phenomenon leads to demeaning the role of the parliamentary opposition and to the so-called "*tyranny of the majority*", which has been described by one of the founding fathers of the USA, James Madison, as a threat for democracy equal to the danger of political dictatorship. Referring to the situation in this country, the researcher of Bulgarian transition, Nora Ananieva, wrote to this effect: "It was not we that discovered the subjugation of the legislature to the supreme executive power. But we have come to take it almost for granted that Parliament should automatically "ratify" the bills passed by the government, and that the objections of the opposition should be qualified as boring procrastination of the legislative process, even though the underlying motives for these objections are connected with infringements of the Constitution." (7)

The incumbent Bulgarian government headed by representatives of the GERB Party failed to alter this non-democratic line of conduct and has been ignoring the parliamentary opposition even to a greater extent than previous governments did. The very form of governance, including the political vocabulary of Prime Minister Borissov, has put the stakes on confrontation, thus infringing the line between conflict and

consensus and provoking clashes with the political opposition, including verbal exchanges with the presidential institution, which were typical for the early periods of the country's transition.

The last two year of President Parvanov's term of office (which expired in January 2012), were characterized by an increasing number of mutual attacks and conflicts between the President and the Prime Minister, which contributed to destabilization of the political process in the country. Such a type of relations between the executive and the President undermines the non-partisan role of the President and his major function of a guarantor of both the national unity and the stability of the political system. The 2011 Report on Bulgaria of the renowned US NGO – *Freedom House* – mentions the adverse nature of this situation as follows: "*Political infighting and the excessive politicization of the Presidency have compromised both the credibility and the effectiveness of the national government ...*". (8)

The concentration of power within the executive and in the Prime Minister in person is most visibly manifested by the manner in which the Cabinet of the GERB Party functions. It is a one-party government, which was set up despite the lack of an absolute parliamentary majority. Initially, GERB relied in on the support of the parliamentary faction of the Attack Party. Subsequently, it managed to win over on its side MPs who had left other parliamentary factions, and this is precisely what has guaranteed the relative comfort of the governing party to date.

The Cabinet itself is functioning in a situation where the ministers have limited freedom of action, coupled with the looming threat for their being dismissal from the respective posts at any point of time, should the Prime Minister decide to do so. The frequent changes of ministers and deputy ministers, which can be observed in the GERB Party's government, has never been encountered in the political experience of the country in the entire period after 1989. This approach to the activities and performance of ministers, either because they are randomly selected or because they are incapable of coping with the tasks they have agreed

to perform, undermines the authority of the Council of Ministers. It leads to serious flaws in the day-to-day governance of the country. In consequence, major reforms in key economic and public spheres have been delayed.

A GERB Party representative was inaugurated as President in January 2012, which means that the Parliament, the government, and the country's President are in essence "under the umbrella" of one party, which portends risks for the democratic process. The lack of any genuine control to the decisions made by the government on the part of the other institutions, Parliament in particular, coupled with the disregard of the opposition, creates prerequisites for uncontrolled power to be concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister. This could provoke the phenomenon of "*creeping authoritarianism*", which political scientists and journalist have already effectively described. In other words, this is an adequate name for the phenomenon of *covert authoritarianism*, in the absence of a sufficiently effectual counter-power in the political institutions and the media. Given the low level of democratic culture and the existing consciousness of submission and subservience among the larger part of the Bulgarian population, creeping authoritarianism could find a fertile soil¹, especially when it is accompanied by populism and demagoguery, which feed up the paternalistic vision of the government.²

The Judiciary within the separation of powers has turned out to be the Achilles' heel of the country's institutional infrastructure. This is quite comprehensible, since the judicial system is situated on the "exit" of the political system and is summoned to be the guarantor of the rule of law and the observance of civilian rights and freedoms.

In the capacity of an independent power, the judiciary is obligated to apply most stringently the principles of rule of law. The judicial power is

¹ In 2006, the British journalist Simon Jenkins qualified Tony Blair's government in terms "creeping authoritarianism" because of its attempts to curb media criticism with respect to the government's stance on the conflict in Iraq. /9/

² The Hungarian sociologists and political scientist Ivan Szelenyi has adequately qualified the regimes in Southeastern Europe as "neo-paternalist regimes". /10/

called upon to restore justice and the legal order whenever they have been infringed or abused.

This is the reason why the pressure on the judiciary has been enormous ever since the beginning of the country's transition to democracy – both on the part of organized crime and on the part of corrupt groups from within circles of the political class. Thus far, the judicial system has found it hard to stay its independence under this pressure and to preserve its effectiveness in the capacity of a defender of civic interests at the same time.

In one or another form, representatives of the law-court and the prosecutor's office have repeatedly been accused of demonstrating passivity or partiality in favor of the interests of organized crime and corruption in the high corridors of power. This is the finding recorded in all the monitoring reports of the European Commission issued thus far under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. What the latest February 2012 Interim Report points out reads as follows: "...Implementation of the reformed Judicial System Act – designed to apply transparent and objective procedures to judicial appointments, promotions and appraisals, and to prioritise integrity – has not yet delivered the changes expected. A reform of the election process of the Supreme Judicial Council is needed to enhance the Council's transparency and integrity and as an important step towards a fundamental reform of the judicial system. The track record of decisions and penalties in cases related to high-level corruption, fraud and organised crime under investigation and in court does not yet provide the convincing results needed to provide effective dissuasion." (11)

What lies in store are new re-shuffles on the high levels of the judiciary, which involve filling in the vacancies at the Supreme Judicial Council, the election of a new General Prosecutor, plus a new Chairperson of the Supreme Court of Cassation. Given the current set-up of the political forces and the amount of power concentrated within the GERB Party, the apprehensions that political pressure may be exerted in the selection and election process are quite sensible. Besides, over the past few years, the executive branch of power em-

bodied by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, has made repeated attempts to "squeeze" the judiciary to produce faster and more effective decisions, which infringes the separation of powers principle and the independence of the judiciary. There is a stack of statements made by Tzvetanov against the law-court at large and against individual judges in particular, some of whom he accused of being connected with organized crime without any sufficient substantiation. It is in this sense precisely that the 2011 *Freedom House* Report on Bulgaria makes the following critical remark: "*The pressure on the judiciary to deliver results may present a potential danger to the rights of citizens and the country's basic constitutional framework.*" (12)

The findings of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee on the state of human rights in Bulgaria included in its 2012 Report are even harsher than the pronouncement of *Freedom House*. According to the Deputy Chairperson of the Helsinki Committee, Margarita Illieva, the policy of gaining control over the law-courts pursued by the GERB Party and the Minister of Interior, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, in particular has totally exceeded any permissible limit, especially after the direct threat that the Ministry of Interior has started naming its police operations after the Christian names of judges, the decisions and rulings of whom have proved inconvenient for the police. (13)

Specific events, which have affected **major freedoms of the Bulgarian citizens**, have come to the fore during the last few years.

Gross violations have been committed with the deployment of police task forces in the investigation of criminal acts. On the one hand, police coercion is incommensurately used, which infringes the right of defense of the Bulgarian citizens suspected of having perpetrated criminal acts. The principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty is often circumvented by the prosecutor's office with the assistance of the police. Besides, actions humiliating human dignity are committed upon the detention of suspects. The police right to search and arrest has been repeatedly used in contravention to the permissible limits provided for by the law.

The cases of police violence are exceedingly disturbing and therefore the task of a paramount significance facing the Ministry of Interior is to stridently react against such behavior on the part of its employees. This was the comment made by Prof. Ognyan Gerdjikov, a prominent jurist and ex-Speaker of the National Assembly, in an interview for the Darik Cafe radio program.

The growing number of police violence cases prompted the establishment of an ad-hoc inquiry parliamentary committee in February 2012, which includes six GERB Party MPs and one independent MP. According to the opposition, this committee will prove ineffective, because the governing party rejected to adhere to the parity principle of establishing such committees, which provides for the involvement of MPs from all parliamentary factions. This was the reason why the opposition refused to sit on this committee altogether.

Another phenomenon connected with curbing the right of Bulgarian citizens to elect is the so-called "vote purchasing" at election time. Despite the measures endorsed by the governmental institutions and especially the criminalization of such vote purchasing, this phenomenon continues to accompany national and local elections, thus infringing one of the major constitutional rights of Bulgarian citizens. This ugly fact in the development of Bulgarian democracy is a testimony to both the degradation of political ethics among certain social strata and the weakness and inadequacy of the state bodies entrusted with the task of monitoring the legitimacy of the election process.

This weakness was manifested at the 2011 elections once again, when the presidential and local elections were accompanied by serious infringements of the right of citizens to vote. According to the assessment of the European Commission, the number of invalid ballots at the 2011 elections was 6 percent, accompanied by a great number of organizational infringements, including illicit canvassing, controlled vote, and vote purchasing. "*Hundreds of thousands of voters failed to exercise their legitimate right to vote*". (14)

The number of Bulgarians who say they would sell their vote at local elections has remained sustainable over the past years and stands at 12 percent. A similar result was achieved by an October 2011 survey, which was carried out by the Alpha Research Pollster Agency to order of the Transparency International Association. (15)

The freedom of the press and the electronic media is one of the fundamental freedoms in liberal democracies. This freedom namely underlies the onset of the Bulgarian transition to democracy as it provided the vehicle for expressing political pluralism, which replaced the communist political monopoly. This is the reason why the current state of the freedom of the printed and electronic media at large is a key criterion for the development of the democratic processes in the country. Each attempt to infringe the freedom of the media is a direct encroachment of the very foundations of the democratic regime.

What has been observed over the recent years, however, is the following fact: two mutually connected processes have been undermining media freedom. On one hand, there has been a monopolization of the media market by corporate groupings, which usually turn the media into a weapon for the promotion of their own economic and political interests. This limits the expression of free speech on the part of both journalists and citizens, who find increasingly fewer impartial media covering events in the country and abroad. On the other hand, the complete subjugation of the media to the market principle often turns them into a territory of predominantly "yellow" information and sensational news based on speculative opinions and self-interested motives, which is frequently accompanied by fabricated "facts" and purposeful libels against political and other public figures.

The latest 2011 Report of the respected *Reporters Without Borders* NGO also pays attention to the degradation of the media environment and the diminishing freedom of the press and electronic media in Bulgaria. According to the press freedom index data compiled by the organization, in 2011 Bulgaria has moved nine ranks below its 2010 position and now

ranks 80th among the 187 countries monitored by the *Reporters Without Borders* NGO. This is the worst assessment the country has ever received since this annual index rating began to be published.

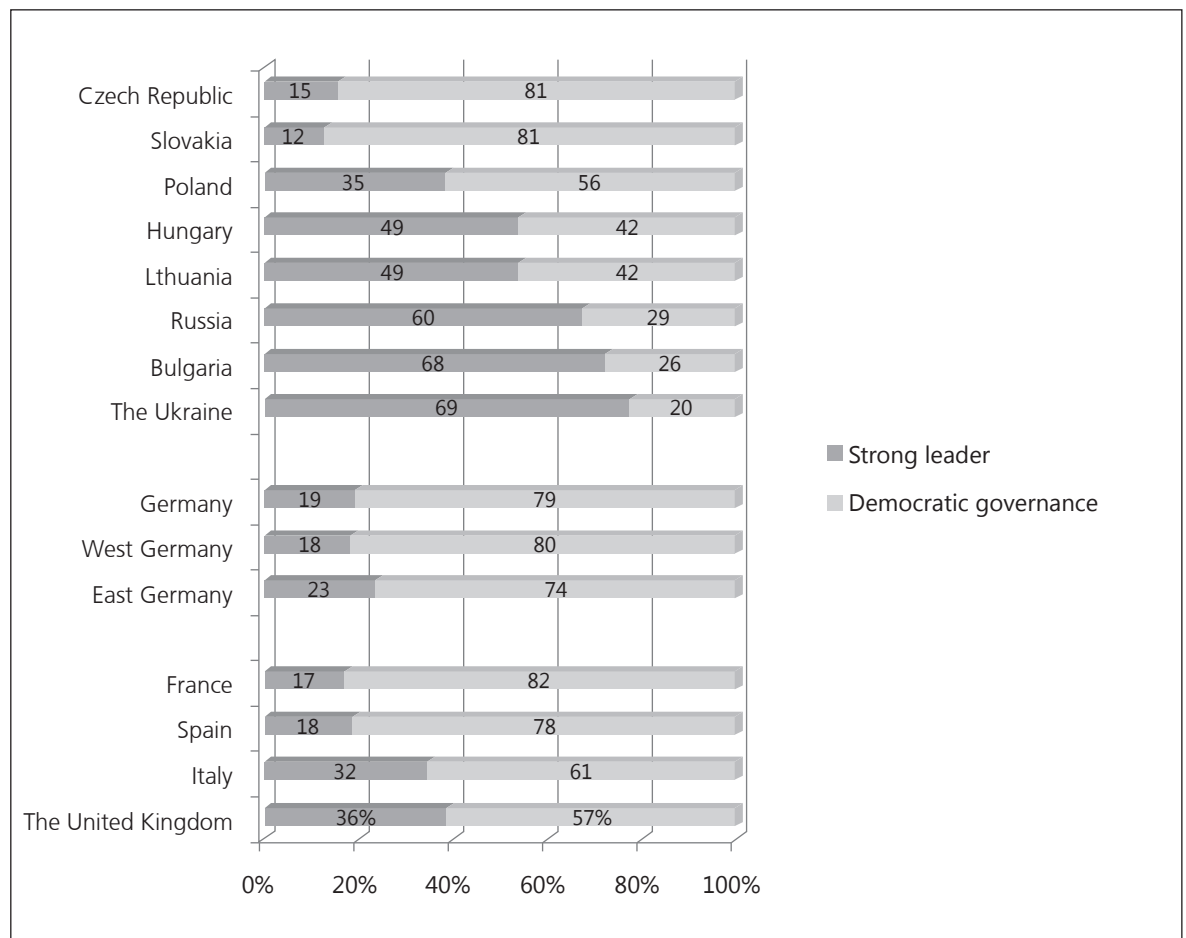
With this 80th press freedom rank Bulgaria has hit the bottom in the whole of the European Union. This is what the annual *Reporters Without Borders* report literally says: “*The past year in Bulgaria was marked by targeted attacks and threats for the life of journalists, which increases the apprehensions about the pluralism of the press*”.⁽¹⁶⁾ As early as October last year, the organization expressed its serious concerns in relation to the worsening situation with the freedom of the press in the country. The political pressure on the media has been tangibly growing as well.

At the same time, the impact of civil society on the political process remains limited in comparison

with the developed democracies. To a large extent this is due to the fact that Bulgarian citizens are poorly acquainted with their own rights and freedoms, while a growing portion of them has increasingly been manifesting its disappointment with the democratic procedures. Furthermore, there is a part of society, which comes to express a yearning for the “strong hand” with the expectation that it could solve their problems more effectively than democracy is capable of doing so. This indicates how fragile the democratic culture of Bulgarians is, given the fact that for 22 years now they have been struggling with escalating difficulties and problems in their personal lives.

In a survey held by the US *Pew Research Center* in a number of European countries in 2009, the respondents gave the following answers to the question whether they had a preference for a strong leader or for democratic governance:

Table 1. Democracy versus a Strong Leader



Source: *Pew Research Center, 2009*

Despite the above findings, a positive phenomenon has been observed as well, namely the manifestations of civil society activity and the organization of protest rallies by means of the social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. Most impressive was the protest of several thousands of citizens, mainly young people, against the proposed ratification of the ACTA international treaty, which restricts the use of Internet contents. This demonstration was preceded by other protest initiatives, such as those on account of the appreciating petrol prices, police violence, etc. The Trade Unions also enhanced their activity and organized a number of strikes and protests throughout 2011 and the first months of 2012.

On the whole, however, in comparison with other democratic countries, Bulgarian society is far too passive and finds it hard to act, especially when its basic civic rights and freedoms have been affected.

2. Economic Foundations of Democracy

A major factor for the consolidation of democracy is the social and economic situation in a given country. The stability of advanced democracies is based on developed economies enjoying a high standard of living. There is a generally accepted argument, although its absolute validity has not been proven yet, which runs as follows: the higher the living standard in a given country is and the better its citizens are socially secured, the more stable its democratic system is. And vice versa, in countries of a low living standard, where the citizens are close to the line of poverty and survival, democracy finds it difficult to thrive. In such countries democracy is unstable and often goes through ordeals, having been put to the test by authoritarian political tendencies.

The countries enjoying a high living standard are characterized with the presence of a numerous "middle class",³ which is the social

base of democratic systems and of liberal democracy in particular. According to different calculations, the middle class in the developed democracies encompasses between 60 to 80 percent of the population. This is a disparate social group sharing a specific type of consciousness, which in principle excludes any extreme and radical political stances.

All this comes as a consequence of the high living standard and stable income, which are the guarantee for a certain degree of welfare. It is the middle class that is the social base of the major political parties in the developed democracies, the political platforms of which assert the values of liberal democracy. The middle class gives support to mainly democratic parties of a center-left or center-right orientation.

Sociologist Nikolai Tilkidjiev underlines that the dependence between the economic situation in the households and the degree of accepting democratic values has repeatedly been confirmed in the comparative data of an international survey entitled "Democratic Values". He goes on to say: *"First, in all surveyed countries, professionals stand most positively and most categorically for the democratic principles as an aggregate of ideas and norms. Second, what has been observed in specific proportions is the well-known status hierarchy, which corresponds, as a rule, to the attachment to democratic values – the higher the status of the group, the higher is the share of those who 'fully agree' with the above mentioned way of thinking, and vice versa – the low status groups demonstrate a markedly lower degree of agreement with the premise that democratic principles are always something good."* (18)

The distinguished and popular American political scientist, political economist, and author Francis Fukuyama in a recent interview for the German *Der Spiegel* magazine said the following to this effect: *"What you are going to see in a democracy with a weaker middle class is much more populism, more internal conflict, an inability to resolve distributional issues in an orderly way"*. (19)

According to some researchers, the middle class in Bulgaria amounts to 4 and 8 percent of

³ According to sociologists, the middle class, on a more general and abstract plane, is a macro-social group encompassing those social strata of individuals who – because of their specific overall social status and mostly because of their specifically acquired socio-economic status – rely (wholly or predominantly) on their own resources, such as: qualities, capital – mainly knowledge, expertise, and qualification, organizational skills, property, etc. They depend on their own labor, on their relatively greater autonomy and personal freedom in their direct labor activity, which is carried out within the respective legally regulated framework (17).

the working population. This analysis was carried out to order of the Ministry of Economy. According to the explanation given by the leader of the team entrusted with the analysis, Evgeniy Dainov, the results were obtained under an exceedingly restrictive definition of the term "middle class". The reason why was that the purpose in the initial stage of the survey was to make sure that the analysis would truly get to the core of the so-called middle class and encompass it in full.

"This figure (between four and eight percent) may well constitute a visible middle class community, but it is far too insufficient to dictate the tone in Bulgarian society", is the summary made by the same political scientist. (20)

According to other researchers there is a well-formed middle class in Bulgaria, which represents 20 percent of the overall population of the country. This figure has increased three times in the course of five years – from 6 percent in 1999 to 19 percent in 2005. This is precisely what the data compiled in an opinion poll survey indicate, which was carried out by the Mediana Pollster Agency under the title of "The Two Bulgarias", its focus being to examine the processes of social stratification in Bulgarian society over the 1999 – 2005 period of time. (21)

Despite the difference in the data compiled by the sociologists, in comparison with the developed democracies the middle class in Bulgaria is rather limited in number, which makes it incapable of playing a leading role in the political process in the way the middle class plays such a role in the developed democracies.

In the post-communist context and especially in Bulgaria, according to other criteria – mainly psychological, the major social group may be qualified as the "loser" from the transition. In accordance with various calculations, it amounts to 60 - 70 percent from the active population. These are social groups, which have lost their previous social status and income levels from the time of socialism and have proved unprepared to meet the challenges of a market economy. This results in the disappearance of their former social environment and brings about the formation of negative attitudes.

In the opinion of Krustyo Petkov and Atanas Vladikov, the Bulgarian transition and its practical interpretations "do not encourage social equality, on the contrary – they produce and deepen inequality, they do not alleviate poverty, but rather deepen it during each successive crisis". (22) On the basis of extensive data they maintain that the transition has created the bases of income stratification, which results in an "extreme polarization between the poor and the rich citizens of the country; while the **middle class** is left without any economic space and prospects for development." (23)

According to the latest Eurostat data, Bulgaria ranks last in terms of its average per capita income, and this income amounts to 19 percent of the average per capita income in Europe. (24) According to Eurostat 2012 data again, 41 percent of all Bulgarians are threatened by poverty, and poverty is the indicator, according to which Bulgaria ranks first in the European Union. (25)

An inquiry held by the *24 Hours Daily* in 2012 has arrived at the following results – the question "How will you get out of the crisis: as a loser or winner?" was answered by the respondent as follows: 82 percent said "loser", 18 percent said "winner". (26)

The political behavior of the "loser class" underlies and gives rise to political instability and to the considerable cyclic fluctuations in the political process. This is mostly expressed in the frequent changes of electoral attitudes, which leads to the emergence and further rise of new and often populist parties on one hand, and, on the other, to the loss of electoral influence and decline of other parties, including such parties that had previously occupied dominant positions in the country's government.

According to one of the best renowned researchers of transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy – the US scientist Adam Przeworski, – "... *the guarantee for the stability of democracy is the establishment of an economic system, which supports the political efforts for democratic consolidation*". In his opinion: "*The most rational and humane economic system is one that relies on regulated markets to*

allocate resources and on the state to assure a minimum of material welfare for everyone. This system may still involve a lot of inefficiency and inequality, but I find none better". (for such type of a transition, - note of the author) (27)

The arguments of Przeworski underline the principled view that in an economic system where the idea of social justice has been undermined, the formation of democratic political culture gets delayed and a fertile soil is created for anti-democratic orientations and political practices.

3. Challenges Facing the Parties and Party Democracy

Political parties play an extremely important role as a specific intermediary between civil society and governmental institutions. To a large extent it is through them that democracy becomes legitimate and the new principles of democratic government gain the necessary foothold. It is their role of an intermediary precisely that gives rise to the particular responsibility of political parties as a major factor of democratic consolidation.

Although after 2001 a certain stabilization of the party system in this country has been observed, the latter continues to be subject to transformations owing to the unstable social structure and the fluctuations in the social and political attitudes of the citizens.

One of the major challenges the political parties are facing stems from their functions connected with the representation of the interests and values of civil society.

Parties in this country continue to be **little dependent on civil society**. This results from the way, in which they have emerged and continue to emerge. The majority of them were initiated "from above" as circle of friends, which means that they were not the product of any pressure exerted on the part of massive societal movements. The political parties only sporadically reacted to the pressure of civil society in order to harness it for their own ends in given periods of time, namely in 1990 – 1991 and subsequently – in 1996 – 1997. The pressure of civil society played an auxiliary role in the realizations of their

goals. In result of the sporadic and unorganized nature of these massive movements, the political parties hastened to forget the "commitments" they had made to the public, while, for their part, the movements stopped being a source of pressure on the parties any longer.

One of the factors underlying the disengagement and estrangement of the parties from civil society is the weakness of civil society itself. It continues to exert a merely weak impact on the parties, which sometimes grows into a passive protest rather than into a constant pressure and control. Predominantly, **the political parties lean on a very thin stratum of activists of their own** who, through the respective parties, pursue their own ends, such as a rise in their own social status, an access to certain privileges, and a gain of material benefits.

The political parties are actually guided by a specific party caste, which political science has defined as partocracy. The latter strives to dominate the public environment and to impose its own interest under the guise of public interest. Civil society finds it hard to penetrate this self-encapsulating caste, as partocracy is interested in preserving its privileges and positions, in reproducing the latter in its decisions and actions, including in the country's legislation in particular.

Another group of challenges stems from numerous **adverse processes in the functioning of the parties in their capacity of "governing parties"**. A typical "childhood disease" of Bulgarian democracy is the presence of few professionals in the upper echelons of power. When the parties come to office in the capacity of governing parties, they lack any serious resource of professional politicians and administrative figures. In their greater majority, the cadres they have at their disposal are party functionaries who have made a rapid party career and have risen in the party hierarchy, but whose experience in state governance is only minimal. This phenomenon often leads to a cadre crisis, poor effectiveness, errors in governance, and even to downright failures.

Numerous examples can be given to this effect over the past years, when circumstances

quite often prompted the executive to make re-shuffles in the respective governments. Such frequent replacements undermine the effectiveness of governmental activity and diminish the capacity of governments to cope with the intricate problems generated by the country's transition to democracy. The GERB government did not deviate from this "model", on the contrary – one of its typical traits has become the initiation of numerous re-shuffles, replacements, and resignations of top administrative figures and other civil servants.

Corruption is one of the most characteristic "diseases" of the governing parties. In a peculiar way, it is also a consequence of the fact that the country's **governmental institutions and the public administration especially** feed party functionaries of dubious ethical values and norms of conduct who have quite accidentally landed in politics and the institutions of state. The lack of democratic culture, as well as the temptations of power and office, have turned corruption into an especially acute problem, which endangers the democratic institutions themselves. The parties in office themselves are often involved in the corrupting process and in their turn "infect" not only individual politicians, but also the entire political process with procedures and combinations "behind the scenes", which are both harmful for democracy and undermine the legal order and the very rule of law.

Therefore, the major challenge facing political parties, which have made it to the government of the country, is to decisively increase the professionalism in the areas and activities of the politicians who personify these activities. The parties are one of the main channels through which professional politicians are molded. What it takes to come on top of this challenge is the amassment of considerable governing skills and respective education, as well as the instilling of a high degree of integrity in the process of carrying out governmental commitments by one or another party functionary.

To a large extent, the political parties in Bulgaria continue to be **leader's parties** as a consequence of the way in which they have

emerged – i.e. parties based on friendships and parties set up by people connected with one or another leader. This is demonstrated both in the "old" and the newly-emerged post-2000 parties, such as the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the National Movement Simeon II (NMSII), Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), the GERB Party, the Attack Party, the Order, Legality, and Justice Party (OLJ). What is symptomatic for the crisis of party formation is the fact that the tendency for the emergence of centralized and non-democratic parties in terms of their organization and activity has enhanced over the last several years.

The parties are also facing serious challenges with respect to their organizational activity. A common phenomenon for all Bulgarian political parties is the lack or the presence of **weak internal party democracy**. And it is this weakness that generates authoritarian behavior and action. The lack of internal party democracy blocks the functioning of the political parties by limiting the impact of broader social groups over their activities. In principle, this has an adverse effect on the functioning of the democratic order and on inter-party relations, as the latter become relations between leaders rather than relations between parties in their capacity of representatives of disparate public interests.

Irrespective of the type of organizational structure, which the political parties have chosen to establish, the presence of internal party democracy is a guarantee that they will not be severed from the impact of civil society and that when they come to office they will not forget the commitments they have made to their voters. This is the reason why internal party democracy is not merely a matter of party statute provisions, it is rather much more a matter of democratic party culture. The lack of internal party democracy blocks the political parties and their activity becomes sclerotic – they turn insensitive to the aspirations of civil society and, in the final account, this brings about a crisis in their legitimacy. The activity of the majority of political parties in Bulgaria depends on the decisions, actions, and – frequently – on the whims of one or another party leader.

This chain of thought brings about two questions. Could the political parties perform their role and function, if their internal structure were non-democratic? Could a party, having been governed in a non-democratic way “from within”, be subsequently capable of governing a country in a democratic way, suppose it had to form a government or take part in a governing coalition?

Political parties based on non-democratic organizational principles become major political instruments conducive to the abuse and violation of democracy and thus they are much more inclined to implement authoritarian practices when they come to office.

Historical development has shown that the seeds of totalitarian regimes are usually sown by non-democratic and authoritarian parties. The lack of democracy “inside” a given party also frequently leads to the lack of democracy “outside” it – on the territory of the political system. In the modern conditions, the lack of internal party democracy brings about corruption, clientelism, declining membership, and reinforcement of populist parties at the expense of democratic parties.

It is not by chance that in 1967 the West German Bundestag (the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany) passed a special Political Parties Act, which contains to date a concentrated expression of the experience, which the country had amassed in the post-Nazi period. This is the most profound, detailed and significant Political Parties Act that has ever been passed in a country with developed democracy. It is this Act namely that raises certain requirements intended to secure the democratic process within the parties. The Act disallows the registration of parties structured in an authoritarian way. Some of the parties that are now present in the contemporary political life of Bulgaria would have never been registered, had such an Act existed in this country.

The situation of political parties in Bulgaria indicates that it is precisely when a given party is internally non-democratic and when its party statute fails to restrain possible non-democratic

tendencies, that such a party and its leaders will manifest these same tendencies as soon as they come into office.

The better developed internal party democracy is, the stronger the connections between the party structures and the electorate become. The confidence of the population in the activities of the political parties and in their representative function rises. More stable relations are established among the parties, their representatives at Parliament, and the other representative institutions. The transparency of the political process increases and the confidence in the results it produces also grows. The party leadership gets legitimacy as being more distinct and responsible. The democratic political culture of the party elites and grass-root membership gets reinforced. A better developed internal party democracy restricts the clientelist processes, the corruption and patronage in any given party.

Internal party democracy is one of the factors furthering the role of political parties as laboratories for the formation of democrats and democratic practices. Thus, parties can turn into a significant instrument for the export of democracy to the other major institutions, such as parliaments and the institutions of the central and local authorities.

An analysis of the state of internal party democracy in Bulgaria indicates that – in accordance with their party statutes and their practical activities – the majority of the parties in this country are non-democratic. They do not provide for any actual rights of the party opposition, while the rights of the membership are exceedingly limited and party members are incapable of influencing the party line and its cadre policy in particular. (28)

Another important challenge facing the political parties is **the formation of their ideological and value-oriented image**. The major political parties need an ideological platform, through which they can define their own identity. For the time being, for many parties this happens in an artificial way – by “implanting” the postulates of the West European parties. This is the reason why in their search for a place of their own in the

ideological and political environment, they must be able to impart a specific Bulgarian flavor to their basic values and translate them into their actual political practice. A clear-cut ideological image will make it possible for multi-party democracy to develop in a qualitatively new way, which – in turn – will make it possible for the Bulgarian citizens to gain a clearer orientation about the political line of any given party.

Last but not least, a major challenge both to parties and multi-party democracy is the establishment of **civilized inter-party relations**. Such relations are the main criteria “measuring” the maturity of democratic changes. The principal deficiency of today’s party system is its acutely confrontational nature, which rules out any normal political dialog among the ruling and opposition parties. The model of a party system, which has emerged in Bulgaria, encumbers the political process and, more specifically, hampers the opportunity of placing the interests of society above party interests, especially in situations when the fundamental issues of society have to be solved.

Party bias and defending party interests at all costs hamper the normal functioning of democratic institutions. The parties stimulate the divisions and oppositions in society rather than encourage its consensus on nationally significant issues – in the way such consensus was observed on the issue of the country’s EU membership. It is in this sense that one of the most complicated issues of party policy and inter-party relations is the chance of attaining the necessary **balance of conflicts, the clash of interests, and consensus in politics**. The capacity to find this measure is one of the most characteristic traits revealing the level of maturity of a country’s democracy. The more political parties manage to make the main public priorities into leading priorities of their own policy, the more successful the functioning of all democratic institutions is bound to be.

What has been observed throughout the period after 2001 is some positive changes in this

direction, but after the 2009 general election there has been certain regress in the inter-party relations. This is an indication of the fact that finding the measure between consensus and conflict is an extremely rare phenomenon in Bulgarian political life. In this sense, the establishment of a **civilized dialog among the major political parties**, especially among the largest of them, is one of the major challenges facing Bulgarian democracy. This is connected with **the assertion of the culture of political pluralism**, the basis of which is the ability to find the appropriate balance of interests and to take into account a wide spectrum of values represented in society by the various political parties. The more the culture of pluralism comes to play a leading role in the policy parties are pursuing, the more stable the development of Bulgarian democracy will be. Only thus the risks of unnecessary confrontation will be avoided, because such a confrontation undermines the legitimacy of the country’s principal political institutions.

For some time now, all opinion poll surveys reveal a trend of **growing distrust in the political parties** and a rising discontent with their role, especially in their capacity of governing parties. The crisis of legitimacy experienced by the political parties has been distancing the citizens from them. This is revealed in the phenomenon of “absenteeism” (the unwillingness of voters to go to the polls) and in the widening rift between civil society and political parties. The crisis of confidence has provoked the protest vote of citizens, who channel it in favor of populist parties, anti-democratic parties included. For the time being, the impact of these parties in Bulgaria is limited, but if the crisis of legitimacy of the major parties deepens, we may witness an enhanced reorientation of the popular vote to radical parties of a new type, the platforms of which challenge the democratic principles. This has already happened in a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe and its manifestation in Bulgaria was the emergence of the radical Attack Party.

Table 2. Support for Multi-Party Democracy

Countries	1991	2009	Change
Eastern Germany	86	82	-4
Czech Republic	87	79	-8
Poland	80	71	-9
Slovakia	69	66	-3
Bulgaria	73	53	-20
Lithuania	76	50	-26
Russia	54	50	-4
Hungary	80	46	-34

Source: *Pew Research Center, 2009*

All challenges mentioned above put to the test the key role, which the political parties play in the consolidation of Bulgarian democracy. The extent of this consolidation over the coming years will depend on the way they perform their functions with respect to both civil society and the governance of the country alike.

Bulgaria has already completed its transition to democracy and, at the time being, is going through the period of its consolidation. Democracy is subject to numerous challenges both of a political and socio-economic nature. Provisionally said, the country is still in its early stage of consolidating democracy. What is of a particularly great significance for its further consolidation is the existence of a favorable external geopolitical environment.

At the same time, such a beneficial geo-political environment on its own does not suffice to guarantee the irreversibility of the democratic process. In comparison with past periods of time, major political institutions now provoke distrust – a growing lack of trust at that – which exists in the attitudes of the country’s population. Although, on the whole, there is no danger of regress to authoritarian forms of governance, the likelihood that the political process may take such a course has not been completely averted yet. However slight, the hesitation is rooted in the presence of authoritarian tendencies both in the way the state institutions function and in the behavior and activities of the political parties themselves.

This is the reason why the next several years will be of a crucial importance for the development of Bulgarian democracy, which will be taking place on the background of the serious cataclysms within the European Union and the substantial amount of misgivings concerning the support for democracy in the public attitudes in this country.

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