

Bulgaria on the Path towards Elected Autocracy: How Far Have We Gone?



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During the transition towards liberal democracy and a market economy, some countries from the former Eastern Bloc managed to successfully mimic the model that had already been proven to be successful in the West – a multiparty democratic system, combined with mostly free market capitalism.

Some, however, were less successful – especially in the democracy department – and several decades later ended up with a form of a *façade* democracy, which in reality conceals a type of oligarchic rule that shares little of the characteristics of a genuine liberal democracy.

Political science has dubbed this concept *electoral authoritarianism*, and it is present to a degree in a number of post-Soviet countries. A quite telling thing of its presence is the de-ideologization of real politics, while maintaining an outside stance – usually a populist and nationalist one – accompanied by the consolidation of the party system and marginalization of the opposition. Such a phenomenon occurred also in Bulgaria, which is why it is worth examining the development of the Bulgarian party system and government ideological lean through the lens of the concept of electoral authoritarianism and tracing how far towards the establishment of this model of government Bulgaria has gone in the past three decades.

ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM: WHAT IS THAT?

Before we proceed to the specifics of the Bulgarian case, it is necessary to define the concept of electoral authoritarianism, as it is the starting point of this evaluation of the development of electoral politics in the country. A very popular definition comes from Bogaards (2009), whose work focuses particularly on the transformation of the countries from the third wave of

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democratization into hybrid regimes, and the failure of some of them to develop fully functional democratic institutions¹. While those types of definitions often also include assessments on the quality of markets and economic competition in the studied countries, here we focus primarily on the political side of the matter.

Contrary to the cold-war clear-cut distinction between democracies and dictatorial regimes, Bogaards points out that in the wave of transition after the 1990s, many countries now exist in a “gray area” between the two. These typically have *façade* democratic institutions modelled after the fully functional Western democracies, particularly when it comes to holding elections, but in practice have entrenched political elites that capture all the institutions and political power that are pitted against puppet opposition as well as compromised civil liberties.

Moreover, Bogaards points out that there are quite a few terms coined for this type

¹ Bogaards, M. (2009) “How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism”, [in]: *Democratization*, Vol. 16(2), pp. 399-423.

of regime – “semi-authoritarianism”, “illiberal democracy”, “liberalized autocracy” to name just a few, each with its own specifics and differences. In short, he provides a spectrum, from functioning democracy to full-blown totalitarianism, with electoral authoritarianism in the middle of it.

Bogaard’s two-pronged approach to the definition of the concept also points to the primary indicators to be taken into consideration when identifying the regime – the freedom of elections, political participation, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and effective government. Apart from that, he emphasizes that the concept of *electoral authoritarianism* focuses chiefly on the role of the electoral process. Here, however, let us use a less strict definition, borrowing somewhat from the broader concept of *defective democracy*.

The need to go beyond the electoral process and study institutions in a broader sense in order to properly classify regimes is also stressed by Snyder (2006)². He views regime classification not as clearly defined groups, but as a spectrum. In his view, it is possible to have competitive democracy from the legal perspective, combined with captured institutions and lack of real opposition.

Meanwhile, Howard and Roessler (2006) offer a more traditional approach to the matter, focusing on the electoral process itself, and the presence of true pluralism and the rule of law in truly democratic regimes, with electoral authoritarianism retaining the electoral process, but lacking those two features³. They stress the importance

² Snyder, R. (2006) “Beyond Electoral Authoritarianism: The Spectrum of Nondemocratic Regimes”, [in]: *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, pp. 219-231.

³ Howard, M. M., & Roessler, P. G. (2006) “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes”, [in]: *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol.



AMONG THE THIRD WAVE OF DEMOCRATIZATION COUNTRIES, RUSSIA IS OFTEN POINTED TO AS AN EXAMPLE OF WORKING ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM

of opposition and their ability to leverage elections as an instrument and overall liberalization. Howard and Roessler’s findings, however, are more relevant to slowly democratizing authoritarian regimes than to former full democracies declining towards electoral authoritarianism.

This brings us to the cases of electoral authoritarianism in the former Eastern Bloc. Among the third wave of democratization countries, Russia is often pointed to as an example of working electoral authoritarianism. Gel’man (2013) enumerates all the characteristics that rank it among those regimes: widespread abuses of power, full control of the media by the ruling elite, marginalized and weak opposition, and almost complete capture of the institutions by the ruling party.⁴ To this we may add electoral

50(2), pp. 365-381.

⁴ Gel’man, V. (2013) “Cracks in the Wall: Challenges to Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia”, [in]: *Problems of*

fraud and active targeting and suppression of the opposition, from the more recent years. While Gel'man stresses that the country is far from a completely captured authoritarian state, it still appears that true liberalization of political life and genuine competition are far off.

The phenomenon is also present among the countries which managed to become members of the European Union (EU) – most notably Hungary, as demonstrated by Ágh (2015), among others⁵. The scholar clearly demonstrates how the ruling elite infiltrated the institutions, changed key “rules of the game”, and marginalized the opposition. An important note on the role of the EU institutions in constraining the expansion and full capture of the Hungarian state by the currently present hybrid regime, however, is made by Bozóki and Hegedűs (2018)⁶. According to them, the EU has a dual role in this case, as it also serves as a source for external legitimacy for the regime. Parallels with Hungary will thus be quite common as it is the country with the closest conditions to Bulgaria, both historical and present, internally and relative to the EU.

TOWARDS DE-IDEOLOGIZATION: DEVELOPMENT OF THE BULGARIAN PARTY SYSTEM

In any study of the *de facto* (as opposed to *de jure*) nature of a democratic political system, it is necessary to pay very close attention to the development of the party system, its chief ideological cleavages, and the makeup and ideological lean of the governments. The reason for this is that, more

often than not, truly democratic country's party systems include ideologically diverse parties, which are actually divided along the lines of ideological differences, while authoritarian ones (especially in more economically developed countries) only provide an ideological *façade*, while the dividing lines between the parties are focused on obtaining and maintaining political power – especially for currently ruling parties.

As is typical for the post-socialist space, the traditional cleavage for the Bulgarian party system is the socialism versus liberal democracy divide. The past three decades have brought about the deterioration of this cleavage, and while its dampening over time is quite typical for post-socialist systems, it has not been replaced by some of the other cleavages characteristic of mature democratic systems – such as urban versus rural or working versus capitalist class, as exemplified by Whitefield (2002) in relation to the post-socialist space⁷. Therefore, the current party system is shaped primarily by power distribution and struggles, not by ideological clashes.

The most value-driven parliaments in modern Bulgarian history were the two at the beginning and end of the 1990s. The first one marked the most intensive debates on the formation of the new political and economic systems of the country, while the second confirmed the geopolitical path towards the country's integration in the Western world, through its accession in the EU and NATO.

One could argue that the 1995 government, led by the former communist party, is also quite ideologically-driven as many of its policies were attempts to restore the features of the planned economy of the previ-

Post-Communism, Vol. 60(2), pp. 3-10.

⁵ Ágh, A. (2015) "De-Europeanization and De-Democratization Trends in ECE: From the Potemkin Democracy to the Elected Autocracy in Hungary", [in]: *Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 8(2), pp. 4-26

⁶ Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018) "An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime: Hungary in the European Union", [in]: *Democratization*, Vol. 25(7), pp. 1173-1189.

⁷ Whitefield, S. (2002) "Political Cleavages and Post-Communist Politics", [in]: *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 5(1), pp. 181-200.



THE TRADITIONAL CLEAVAGE FOR THE BULGARIAN PARTY SYSTEM IS THE SOCIALISM VERSUS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY DIVIDE

ous regime (resulting in the worst economic crisis in the contemporary history of the country). From this point onward, ideological concerns gave way to more “practical” ones.

THE UDF AND ITS SUCCESSOR PARTIES

Fundamentally, the right-wing alliance of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was built as an opposition to the communist party – not as a monolithic political entity, but rather as a loose alliance of small organizations united as an opposition to the previous socialist regime⁸. Its founding organizations come from the entire political spectrum – from labor unions and greens, through agrarian parties and social democratic organizations, all the way to conservative politicians and business circles. Its only uniting principle was the opposition of the previous regime and the successor party of the Bulgarian communist party, which

changed names to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) at the beginning of the transition, but retained many of its members. Additionally, some key leaders insisted on the retention of a largely state-run economy, albeit combined with a competitive electoral democracy.

This heterogeneity is in a large part the reason why the union did not last very long in its original form, and did not manage to retain many of its original member organizations. A major breakup came as early as the discussion of the new, post-communist constitution of the country.

Soon after, the first free National Assembly election saw four separate anti-communist parties, former members of the UDF competing. One of them, considered to be the successor of the original anti-communism movement called UDF, managed to win the elections and steer the first few years of liberal democracy towards the establishment of free market institutions, land restitution, and privatization of the vast state property. On the international scene the country’s lean is evident in its accession to the Council of Europe, demonstrating its intent to join the family of Western democratic countries.

The party had its most important time during the third parliament, when it formed a government led by its most emblematic leader, Ivan Kostov. His government was tasked with fixing the major economic and social damage done by the Videnov government in the 1995-1997 period, and confirming the European and Atlantic orientation of the country.

This was also the time the UDF managed to solidify its party structure, if only for a short while. The key measure during this government was the introduction of currency boards, pegging the Bulgarian lev first to the German mark, then to the euro, aiming to

⁸ The section on the history of the party system is based on the seminal work on Bulgarian parties, Karasimenov (2006) and newer editions, as well as data from the Manifesto project on the party’s ideological leans. See: Karasimenov, G (2006). *The Bulgarian Party System*, Gorrex Press.

control rampant inflation and stabilize the economy, and continuing privatization. At the same time, the country formally joined NATO and worked on fulfilling its conditions for joining the EU.

After losing the 2001 elections, the UDF movement – in an attempt to unite – split into several factions, all positioned center-right on the Bulgarian political spectrum, with none of them ever holding a dominant position over the landscape. Some of them did join ruling coalitions during the following two decades, but were never influential

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THE BULGARIAN SOCIALIST PARTY

The longest-surviving political party in Bulgarian history is the direct successor of the communist party, and for a significant part of its post-socialist history it has maintained political inertia, slowing down the transition – and, in some cases, even reversing the liberalization policies. This was especially true for the 1990s, when the country's orientation and international stance was being decided, and its economic model was under development becoming less prominent after the country became and a EU member.

The most telling period for the original ideological lean of the BSP is the 1995-1997 Videnov government, which, in practice, halted the entire transition of the country for two years, and even reversed some of the previous progress. Officially, the reversal was marketed as socially-oriented market economics, but instead proved to be an attempt to return to central planning by introducing price controls on more than half of the goods sold, while heavily subsidizing state-run industries – even though those operated at heavy losses. Meanwhile, privatization was basically halted, and as a result of these policies, inflation ran rampant, savings were destroyed, the country hit a record in terms of most costly banking crisis in transition countries (of about 42% of GDP)⁹, and the winter of 1996-1997 is remembered for its lack of basic goods, including food.

However, the leanings towards planned economy were fairly short-lived. The Stanishev government in the late 2000s is remembered for its introduction of a flat, 10% corporate and income tax, and it was

⁹ Tang, H., Zoli, E., and I. Klytchnikova (2000) "Banking Crises in Transition Countries: Fiscal Costs and Related Issues", [in]: *World Bank Working Paper* 2484.

then that the accession to the EU was finalized. Even more importantly, the traditional stance of left-wing parties to favor workers' rights and fight for increased social spending and redistribution was mostly relegated to the large trade unions. Where some ideological traces remain, it is in the party's international lean and its preference towards maintaining good relations with Russia and its favor to large Russian infrastructure projects, particularly in the energy sector.

It must be noted, however, that lately the socialist BSP party has been facing decreasing electoral support and significant internal tension, which has resulted in its ongoing marginalization. While this process is by no means finished or irreversible, it appears more and more likely that the BSP will be a less important factor in Bulgarian politics in the coming years.

ASSORTED NATIONALISTS

An array of smaller nationalist parties has been a mainstay in Bulgarian politics in the past two decades, usually playing the role of a junior coalition partner to one of the primary political forces, or as a minor member of the opposition. Two of them are particularly notable – the Inner Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) and Ataka (Attack), mostly due to their resilience. The former has played a role in the anti-communist coalition, and has overall presented more moderate nationalist policies, while the latter came to prominence at the beginning of the 21st century, on the back of more radical nationalism and opposition to Bulgaria's EU membership.

In the past decade, these forces have been riding the nationalist wave that has risen throughout Europe. However, at the same time, ideologically they have converged more toward the political center. As far as the stance of the nationalists is concerned, much like their European counterparts, it is



GERB HAS RUN BULGARIA FOR THE PAST DECADE, MINUS A YEARLONG HIATUS WHEN THE SOCIALISTS TOOK POWER

based on Euro-skepticism and a strong emphasis on national interest combined with populist positions on minority rights. Also notable are their close relations and lean towards Russia and the Putin regime, widely considered to be the archetype of the electoral authoritarianism government type. This is particularly true for Ataka, which is the patron of many pro-Russian organizations and benefits heavily from the pro-Russian vote.

GERB – THE POPULIST CATCH-ALL

GERB has run Bulgaria for the past decade, minus a yearlong hiatus when the socialists took power, but were ousted by sweeping protests, which lasted for the better part of a year. The party is centered on its leader, a former Sofia mayor and chief internal affairs secretary, Boyko Borisov, and owes most of its success to his charisma and popularity. Apart from him, no one member of the party appears to be a mainstay, and so far it has failed to produce other significant political figures, especially ones that stay in politics long-term.

It is very hard to pin down the ideology driving GERB. While the party is nominally a part of the conservative family in the European parliament, the only constant in its policies is the pro-EU position. In the past few years, the Borisov government has relied heavily on the EU as a source of legitimacy. It has also used anti-Communist rhetoric, but this comes only when convenient and is used as a tool for confrontation with chief opposition.

Apart from this, GERB can only be defined as a populist party; its policies are hardly based on any inherent values, but rather reactions to changes in the current political conditions. These vary from holding back energy prices as a tool for reducing social pressure, to committing to no tax raises for an entire period in government. Notable are the party's many changes to the Electoral Code, the conditions of which change constantly in order to adapt to the current political landscape and maximize election results.

Additionally, in the past few years, GERB has attempted to foster an image of a "true" conservative party, chiefly by supporting (both officially and unofficially) conservative circles and organizations, which in turn provide legitimizing positions and arguments to government policies.

SOME OTHER PLAYERS

It is impossible to consider the development of the Bulgarian party system without mentioning its most resilient member – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which has taken part in every single parliament since the beginning of the transition. While formally recognized as a liberal party, in practice, the MRF represents the interest of the Turkish minority, and has always relied on the electoral support of compact Turkish (and some Roma) communities.

The party has played the role of a junior coalition partner in a number of governments, and has proven to be quite an effective opposition in blocking government initiatives when put in that position. Apart from GERB, it is the one constant factor in Bulgarian politics that appears unlikely to diminish in importance in the coming years, as its popularity among its tight electoral base remains virtually unchallenged.

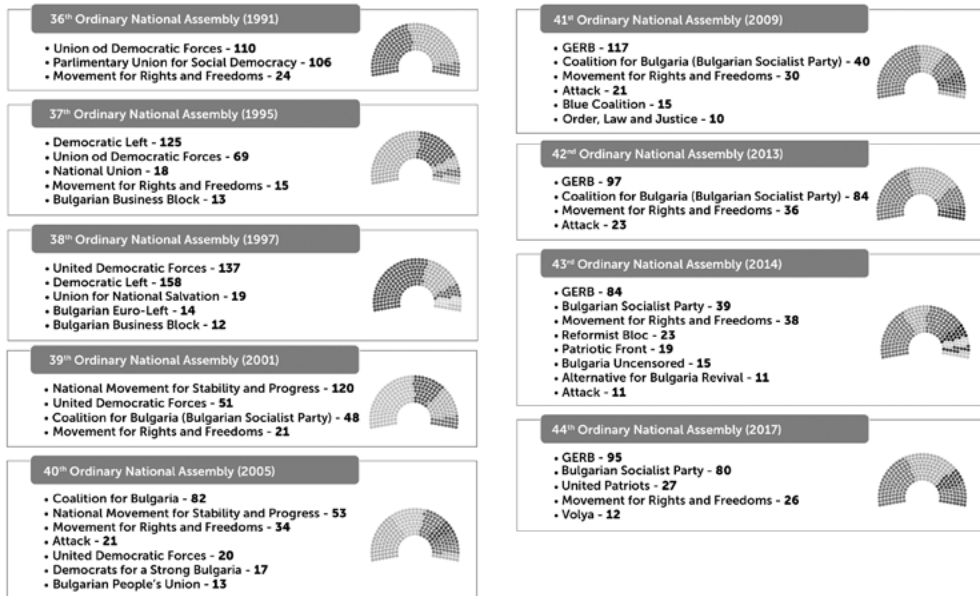
The role that the party of the last Bulgarian king's heir Simeon II played is also noteworthy. It was instrumental for the removal from power of the UDF, and, while relying on a populist platform, attempted to govern in a pronounced technocratic fashion. This was, however, short-lived, as this approach was not appropriate for the time period. Nevertheless, it was later adopted by GERB, which largely applies the same policy towards appointing officials and members of the administration.

A more modern phenomenon is the intermittent appearance on the political scene of small parties, which attempt to mimic Boyko Borissov's populist rhetoric and behavior, most often led by businessmen or media personalities. Although none of them has so far managed to emulate his unparalleled success, the fact that such "clones" exist is a testament to the attractiveness of such an approach.

CHANGES IN POPULAR SUPPORT, PARLIAMENT, AND GOVERNMENT MAKEUP

The dynamics of government and parliament makeup and the electoral support for the parties in Bulgaria are undoubtedly worth analyzing. As may be seen quite clearly in Figure 1, it would be pretty difficult to claim that party diversity has changed significantly over the 30-year period. If anything, today there are more parties in the Bulgarian parliament compared to the 1990s. This

Figure 1: Parliament composition and government makeup (1990-2019)



Source: Central Electoral Committee data, IME calculations

being said, the parties in the lead are far less ideology-driven than the ones from the first few democratic governments.

The distribution, however, must also to be put into the context of the popular support for those parties. While the makeup of government and opposition usually ends up similar, Figure 2 presents the vastly different popular support shared as obtained on legislative elections by those parties.

The “nationalists” group takes together several formations. Newer data on the UDF group together its significant successor parties.

This figure provides more context to the dynamics of the support and position in the party system of the various parties, especially when it comes to the success of GERB. Here, it becomes quite clear that the

very high levels of support that the party has maintained over the past decade have been almost unparalleled.

At the same time, although both the BSP and the UDF have enjoyed higher levels of popular support in the 1990s, their rivalry never allowed one of the parties to stay on top for long. This is, of course, partially a result of the significant drop in turnout – from 84% to 54% in the last election in 2017 – allowing a lower number of votes being converted into more support. The long undisputed support for GERB, however, does indicate a significant decrease in the competitiveness of Bulgarian elections.

CHECKING THE CONDITIONS – HOW FAR HAVE WE GONE?

Bulgaria’s party system started the transition as a quite diverse and ideology-driven one, but has more recently become rather

consolidated, akin to those of some other post-socialist countries, particularly Hungary. At this point, it is worthwhile to return to the conditions that define the concept of electoral authoritarianism, as it is clear that ten years of rule of Mr. Borisov and his party have set the country down this path. The key conditions that allow classifying the country among the hybrid regimes include:

1) Free and fair elections – while in the past years there have been numerous changes to electoral rules (and even more proposals for radical changes such as introducing a completely majoritarian system), the electoral process has remained largely unchanged.

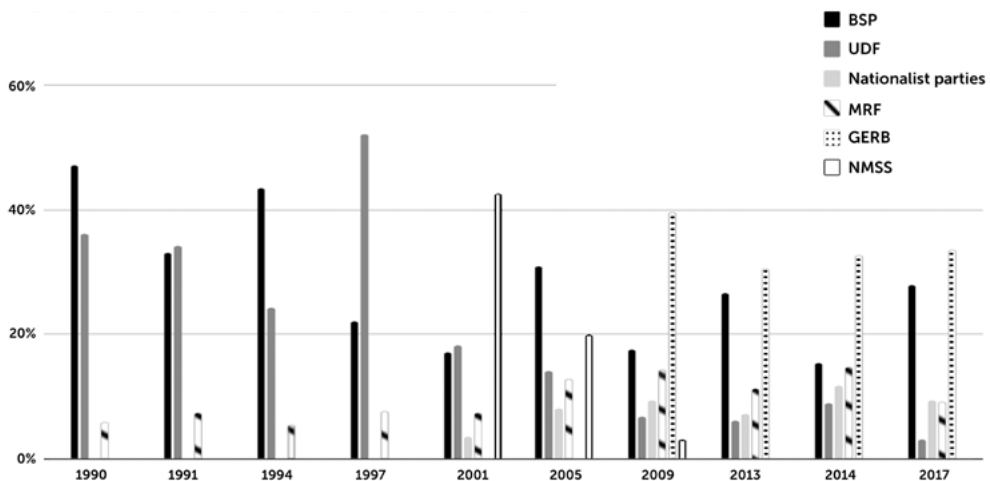
Usually, amendments to the Electoral Code become a full-flagged struggle between all the parties in parliament, and much of them get reversed in quite a short order. Vote purchasing remains a significant problem, however, but as it does not benefit one party or the other specifically, it can hardly be claimed that it is used as a tool for ensuring

the continued rule of the dominant party. Even if it desires it, GERB has not been able to amend election rules to such an extent that it would be clearly favored in the electoral process (i.e. the Hungarian reform adding bonus seats to the largest party).

2) Media freedom – the state of media freedom in Bulgaria has lately been deteriorating significantly, as can be seen in the development of the country's score in the RSF's *World Press Freedom Index*.

Particularly worrying is the trend towards consolidation of media (online, paper, and television) in the hands of groups with ties to various political parties. While the largest media conglomerate is tied to the MRF, lately GERB has also been expanding its influence in the media space, particularly in television. Some disconcerting tendencies might also be seen in the persecution of investigative journalists and trials of journalists from opposition media.

Figure 2: Change in popular support over time for the largest parties and groups (1990-2017, % of the vote at legislative elections)



Source: Central Electoral Committee data, IME calculations



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3) State of opposition – among the more worrying factors is the state of the opposition, particularly that of the BSP. Its continued loss of support and internal conflicts mean that GERB is left without its most significant and credible political rival. At the same time, the MRF has demonstrated that if its economic interests and electoral control are not disputed, it would prefer not to present significant opposition.

It is also notable that in the past years smaller parties (the nationalist ones, and the GERB-clones) have flocked around the government party, and support most of its initiatives. The

only credible and vocal opposition, uniting the remains of the original anti-communist coalition and groups of civil activists gathered around the fight against government corruption, has fringe support and at best doubtful ability to influence the political process, even if it makes it to the parliament after the next legislature elections.

4) Rule of law – there have been numerous voices putting the rule of law in Bulgaria into question, including reports from the European Commission. Overall, the independence of the judiciary, mostly due to the uncontrolled Prosecutor Chief's role (enshrined in the constitution), is among the weakest points of the Bulgarian system of governance, and there are reports on cases of state capture with prosecutors, law enforcement officer, and even some key judges.

This phenomenon goes hand in hand with rampant corruption, and there has hardly been much improvement in this regard in the past decade – on the contrary, observers point to deterioration, which can be exemplified by the Freedom House downgrading the country to a *semi-consolidated democracy* last year.

5) Freedom of expression and civil rights – among the indicators taken into consideration, this is the one where Bulgaria performs best. There is little resistance against civil society, and no active persecution for criticism of state policy (of course, this would, in general, be rare in a European country). However, while there are no active attempts to suppress civil society, its influence on political decision-making is also quite limited.

This list can be continued with such matters as personal freedoms and government efficiency and effectiveness. The above, however, appear to be sufficient to demonstrate the conditions of government created

by a decade of (almost) continuous rule of GERB – while there is some evidence for centralization and merger of party and government in authoritarian style, those developments have not gone as far as in some other former post-socialist states.

CONCLUSIONS

It is not inconceivable to consider a future for Bulgaria in which the country slides down the path towards electoral authoritarianism, or a similar form of imperfect democracy. This appears to be an ever-present threat in many post-communist countries, and some of them have already wandered too far down this road.

Considering the Bulgarian case, however, only the first symptoms are present – the political system appears to have become devoid of ideology, and in the past decade, there has been a clear domination of a single political party, which has managed to entrench itself in a number of institutions.

The real danger today is that opposition parties become more and more marginalized, with no party left or right of the center political party to oppose the control of GERB should the party attempt to legislate its way into complete control and establish a true

façade democracy, concealing an autocratic regime of the party's leader, with Russian-style dependence of the judiciary. Thus, the viability of the opposition is key. This can come as a return of the socialists to their former stability, or as a consolidation of the opposition parties on the right. At the same time, the country can benefit greatly from heavier involvement of civil society in the policy-making process, as an additional balance against the expansion of government and party power.

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