

The Bulgarian political elite in the period of transition

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Introduction

The main objective of the research of the political elites in Bulgaria is to analyze the processes of genesis and regeneration of the political elites since the change of the political system in the 90-ies of the twentieth century. The relevance of the topic is largely determined by the very characteristics of the object of the research itself - the political elite. An elite is a dynamic community that almost continually undergoes changes in its structure, especially in periods of transition from one political system to another. The structure and role of the political elite in Bulgaria during the period under consideration suffer considerable changes, the majority of which cause a qualitative change in both the managerial potential of the elite and the public attitude towards its role. The elite has been changing much faster than the societies in the two countries and the analysis of the processes proves it. Another reason for the relevance of the topic is the fact that the Bulgarian political elite has not been included in any comparative studies of the political elites worldwide. In that line of thought, this comparative study will be the first of its kind and a serious contribution to political science.

The main research objectives are as follows:

- to classify the forms of genesis and transformation of the political elite;
- to analyze the role of the elites in the process of consolidation after the political transformations and the changes in the economic system;
- to analyze the process of emergence of bureaucratic elites and their role in making managerial decisions;

Methodologically this study uses several basic methods: the method of reconstruction of the events and processes of the period; the analytical method, which makes possible the identification of coincidences and contradictions during the examined period, as well as the establishment of the cause - effect relation between different events and their effect on the elite. The research will also make use of empirical data, statistical information, a secondary analysis of the survey results, etc.

Expected scientific results:

- systematic presentation of the main authors, approaches and publications in the researches on the political elite in Bulgaria;
 - classification and analysis of the forms of genesis and transformation of the elites in the context of the processes of the transition period and the relations between the two elites;
 - analysis of the role of the elites in the process of decision making;
 - verification of the hypotheses about "temporal elite" – an elite dependent on the surrounding conditions;
- The specifics of this study necessitate several methodological caveats regarding the relation between 'political elite' and 'democracy.' Firstly, the composition of the elite directly impacts the quality of democracy in Bulgaria. In theory, a political elite should be construed as a superstructure, an assembly which essentially sublimates the representation of various interests and groups. In Bulgarian practice, however, the elite is a substructure, the most organized part of society, openly aspiring for control over state governance, and the theoretical rationale yields to the ambition of the elite to arrange the political and public space according to its needs and expectations. This engenders the difficulties in the relationship between elite and non-elite: the elite creates its own periphery, circles and lobbies, which are strictly goal-oriented, while that part of the non-elite which remains outside them is left with the impression of having no representation. State governance becomes permanently alienated from its legitimate grounds, from citizens' interests¹. This imbalance naturally leads to a confrontation between the two groups, to the necessity for populist decisions, to difficulties in achieving a critical mass for governance consensus different from the one needed for the use of power and the division of zones of influence. Secondly, an elite is an emanation of power; it cannot exist without power. The empowerment of an elite through the mechanism of elections legitimizes the elite as the holder of power; elections are precisely what makes the elite an elite, and power, governance. In this sense, 'each examination of elites starts from the premise of power, whether articulated or not' (Кръстева, 1996). Thirdly, in a situation of transformation of the political system, the elite provides the basis for the choice of the type of state governance and its implementation, and consequently bears full responsibility for the efficiency of the democratic regime, its stability, and compliance with the rules of society. Elites that take part in the establishment of the constitutional treaty and new institutions introduce such procedural mechanisms that would protect their political power and autonomy from any interference by the locus of power (Kaminski, Kurczewska 1995).

¹ Charter for the Dissolution of the Plutocratic Model of the Bulgarian State: www.harta2013.eu (Dec 2013)

The concept of 'elite' on the following pages should be interpreted within the paradigm of functionalism, as 'citizens who, via elections, come to hold a legally regulated office in the governance of the state, and consequently acquire institutional power in the determination and implementation of state policies.' Whenever we consider elites, we must also consider the questions of their recruitment and legitimization (Маринов 2004). In this context, the *quality* of an elite may be broken down to answering two questions: How does one come to occupy an 'elite' position? How do elites exercise power? The first question basically also addresses the matter of 'how does an elite arise?', i.e. it necessitates an analysis of elite recruitment. The second questions pertains to the responsibilities of an elite, to its strategies and the effects of their implementation on governance and on society as a whole. Through the implementation of these strategies, an elite acts as an intermediary between the institutionalized mechanisms of governance and the political expectations of the public. Without analysing the role of political elites in political processes, it will be hard, if not impossible, to gain an insight into the development trends of a country, whether we examine its contemporary state structure and governance, its historical and political evolution, or the actual practical production of policies.

Studies of Bulgarian political elite

The collapse of communist regimes in 1989 provided a considerable but relatively brief impetus to the studies of political elites; some of them included the Bulgarian elite, although infrequently (Szelenyi, Treiman 1993), (Bozoki 2002). As a rule, Central and Eastern European studies have focused on elites in terms of their role in the processes of changing the political system (Bozoki 2003). Consensus between elites regarding the rules of politics and the values of democratic institutions is perceived to be crucial for the stability and indeed survival of democratic regimes (Best, Cotta 2000). Examining intra-elite relations has resulted in the proposition (Higley, Gunter 1991) that at the beginning of the transition, it was important for elites to agree on the major evolutionary directions of democracy; this in turn determines the importance of formal and informal relations between elites, which contribute to the emergence of specific trust. A consensus-oriented elite is the most important prerequisite for the attainment and maintenance of a lasting stability for a given socio-political system, which also stems from the opportunities of representative of various interest groups to access the decision-making process as well as the openness of elites to any new conflicts. Consensual unity derives from adherence to common principles and rules, within the

framework of accepting the rule of law and the role of institutions in the state. The demarcation line between consolidated and non-consolidated democracies coincides with that of consensual unity of elites, hence there is a relation between the stability of a regime and the structure of an elite. Most unstable countries are dominated by disunited elites, which are in conflict with one another, reaching as far as one elite denying the right of the others to exist. Such structuring of elites often occurs in societies that are in the process of transition from a totalitarian to a democratic system, including the Bulgarian one. The lack of unity and consensus about the development trajectories of the state is a major feature of the Bulgarian political elite.

The first attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the Bulgarian political elite on these terms belongs to Petya Kabakchieva and Duhomir Minev (Кабакчиева, Минев 1995), who regarded political elites in the context of transformation towards democracy and focused on their strategies to maintain control over government and society. The role of elites was examined within the general framework of the modernization process in Bulgaria: from the accumulation of modernization stresses and economic failures during socialism to the transformation of the role and status of elites in a society undergoing democratization. The authors outlined four strategies employed by the new elite to implement its interests and carry out the transformation of political into economic capital. The first one consists of strengthening the ties between the elite, 'the political peak,' and the (predominantly economic) groups related to it, which, during crises, become the major pillars that provide the shade for the evolution of grey economy and organized crime. Second, the new elite finds stronger support for its power outside Bulgaria than within it; it occupies levels and structures isolated from the public and, accordingly, develops its own mode of conduct aimed at winning more power and control means. The elite tries to overcome this alienation by populist and nationalist discourse as well as by stimulating the bipolar confrontational political model. Third, this alienation discourages the elite from pursuing policies 'in favour of national interests,' and it starts looking for ways to implement its private interests, mostly through reintegrating the country into the world economy by exporting capital. '... in effect, the struggling East has started financing the struggling West,' the two authors observed. The fourth feature of the elite's structuring is that it occurs among a lack of authentic political parties that could offer different visions about the transition and the evolution of Bulgaria. The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) have employed the same strategy: using political power in order to accumulate economic power, which turns

them into identical mirrors. Consequently, the concepts of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ have been based primarily on an ideological construction of differences between the two parties, which has led to an ideological construction of the transition and of elites. Thus, Left and Right have become ‘Bulgarized’; the chief demarcation line between them remains their attitude towards the past—anti-communism—rather than the market and the economic role of the state. Such strategies have been rendered possible mostly due to the absence of civil society and an effective political opposition in Bulgaria.

Dmitriy Varzonovtsev’s (Варзоновцев 1994) and Evgeniy Daynov and Deyan Kyuranov’s (Дайнов, Кюранов 1999) collections include interviews and testimonies by participants in the political events from the early 1990s, which helped shape the process of establishing a democratic regime. These personal recollections clearly confirmed Kabakchieva and Minev’s propositions about the structuring of the political elite, including its behavioural patterns, manner of discussing, perceiving and explaining the events from that period². The interviews and stories of the political elite demonstrated one thing mostly: that recollections of events differ, including events attended by several interviewees. There are a few major elements present in the accounts of all representatives of the political elite. One, demythologization of the past before the 1989 changes; two, mythologization of the present, after the changes; three, mythologization of one’s personal participation or perspective on the events from the transition period. It is worth noting that a common account for the introduction of a particular person into the elite ran like this: “we were drinking together and discussing who would handle best this or that, and then someone proposed Mr...”

Andrey Raychev and Kancho Stoychev (Райчев, Стойчев 2004) offered their own interpretation of the theories about the ‘second network’ in totalitarian societies and its inheritance by the young democracies, regarding it as a major source of power potential for the new elites. The authors voiced their doubts about the extent to which the transition occurred in the most socially beneficial manner, given the active and deliberate policy of transforming the old totalitarian elite into a new economic and thus political elite.

² ‘We must have been the worst possible amateurs taking part in elections Secondly, a great part of the people who stood as candidates were, to put it mildly, politically ignorant. To say nothing of some leaders’ purely partisan pushes to have their candidates selected at any cost. These were election slates based on party quotas, and some of them had major blunders. There were people, especially in the Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union, who were just good for nothing. They were old, obtuse, and so on.’ (Edvin Sugarev) Varzonovtsev, D., Автобиография на българския преход [*An Autobiography of the Bulgarian Transition*], Sofia, 2005.

Alexander Marinov analysed elites also in the context of the transition from totalitarianism to democracy (Маринов 2004). According to him, the key factor that renders a democratization process successful is the presence of elites alternative to the old ones and capable of generating power that unites civil interests, thereby becoming a counterbalance to the non-democratic loci of power. The lack of such alternative elites enjoying solid public support and grass roots as well as the enforced appointment of soft, compromising leaders aggravate the transition process.

The main topics of researching and analysing Bulgarian political elites for which there is a research consensus pertain to their transformation and development in the early transition years, non-public arrangements during the democratization process (Коларова, 1997), the heavy dependence of the process on certain structures and the absence of alternative elites (Маринов, 2007), the lack of public traditions and support, and the broken or awkward communication between the elite and the public (Манлихерова, 2007).

The only empirical survey of the Bulgarian social elite is *The Elite and Changes in Bulgaria*, conducted by Vitoshka Research in March 1997³. Although not restricted to representatives of the political elite, the survey drew a clear picture of the elite's attitudes towards public governance, the direction and expectations of the evolution of Bulgaria. The personality traits of the surveyed group presented an emphatically meritocratic profile: 'representatives of the Bulgarian elite are self-confident and certain that they are competent enough to achieve the goals they strive for; they have the sense they live and work for the sake of something important; they love intellectual challenges and solving complex problems; they enjoy undertaking risks that could bring profit; they have the mentality of entrepreneurs rather than employees; they prefer to work for themselves and accept all ensuing liability; for roughly three fourths of them, personal happiness is primarily related to professional success; the majority of the interviewed representatives of Bulgarian elite act as individualists. They believe that the responsibility for personal prosperity lies with the individual rather than the state.' In terms of demographic characteristics, 90% of the elite representatives are university graduates, and about 15% hold more than one degree; 84% can speak or understand Russian, about 50% , English, and about 30%, German or French; nearly 80% are men. In other words,

³ It consisted of 421 personal interviews with representatives of Stefan Sofiyanski's government, the state administration, public and private businesses, the army, the media, intellectuals and religious leaders.

the group's characteristics surpass the average ones for Bulgaria, which confirms its meritocratic profile.

As a whole, the survey reveals the lack of a common vision for the evolution of Bulgaria; a large part of the respondents' answers contradict one another, e.g. by offering a combination of egalitarian attitudes and expectations of a liberal market economy. A major part of the interviewees believe that common Bulgarians do not receive a fair share of the nation's wealth, and accept state control as necessary, i.e. express markedly leftist views. However, their views on economy are surprisingly rightist, with 60 to 70% in favour. The lack of a shared vision about the future is also evident in the almost equal percentages supporting or opposing Bulgaria's accession to NATO; there is a similar ratio in the evaluations of the collapse of the USSR. 40% of the representatives of the Bulgarian elite claim that people are not yet mature enough for the democratic changes, therefore political liberties should be introduced gradually. 60% believe that in that particular moment Bulgaria needed a strong leader to bring order in the country: a rather odd view for people defined as representatives of the elite. On the one hand, it demonstrates the expectation of the 'strong hand' typical of the transitional years; on the other, it is an implicit confession that the elite cannot cope with the governance of Bulgaria through its available resources and abilities.

Empirical data from the series of surveys conducted under the 'Quality of Democracy in Bulgaria' project as well as analysing data from other studies show a relatively stable attitude towards the political elite. A particularly striking feature is the explicit distancing from the political elite: the question 'Do you have a relative, friend, personal acquaintance whom you consider to be part of the political elite, of famous politicians?' yielded only 16% positive responses, of which 13% said, 'yes, but they're not a close friend.' A demographic cross-section of positive respondents reveals them to have higher or secondary education and to work most often as government officials in large cities.

The major expectations of the elite continue to be meritocratic: criteria for a successful political career include 'proper education and professional experience' (23%), 'wits, knowledge and intelligence' (23.6%). This is reinforced by responses to the question 'Do you think it's possible for a common worker, salesperson, driver or another person with an ordinary profession to become a successful politician in Bulgaria?'; 65% of them are negative. Positive responses here come primarily from retired or low-income people, which can be easily explained with attitudes developed in another socio-political environment. Other

desirable qualities in a politician include ‘a good person who takes care of the others’ (16.5%) and ‘a resolute person, capable of imposing his or her opinion’ (11.8%). The expectations ‘a common person, who understands common people’ and ‘someone who has business experience or even wealth’ gathered 9.8% and 9.6% respectively. Respondents could select up to 3 answers. The perception that a strong hand is the best governance option (displaced by the ‘good king’ in that moment) was solidly supported by about 10% of the respondents. Other dominant notions held that the most suitable politicians are economists (62%) and lawyers (51%).

The elite change

Politics is an open system. Any adult citizen can engage in it, form a view about it, or take part in various political activities. On the other hand, politics is a projection of the processes happening in society itself: political, economic, ethnic, social, etc. Due to its specific role as a regulator of social processes, politics often becomes a battlefield of conflicts, of struggle between the interests of various social, professional, business, ethnic, etc. groups. And since it is an open system, these groups contend and strive to push and protect their interests in all possible ways, including non-public means, lobbying, pressure, etc. Conflict is a fundamental feature of politics, hence of elites; in this sense, the recruitment of political elites directly influences the stability and qualities of conflict (Putnam 1976). The presence of explicit rules for recruiting an elite provides a mode for reducing the conflict potential of politics, of filtering those whose views do not reflect social consensus and the inter-elite consensus regarding governance. This makes elites considerably more viable and resilient to changes in society and politics. In most political systems, the selection of party and government elites puts an emphasis on administrative experience and personal qualities, such as popularity and the ability to communicate, persuade and organize large groups of people.

However, the profile of representatives of the Bulgarian political elite and a great number of events from Bulgaria’s most recent history have indicated a lack of clear recruitment principles. This has created a major potential for instability of state governance and the administration, and the manners of entering/presence in/departure from the Bulgarian political elite have frequently resembled a process of bartering and haggling rather than selection. Bulgarian political practice has witnessed a number of techniques for elite recruitment: career

growth through party or state structures; taking a candidate slot on a slate, including by paying for it; favouritism or family, work or other personal ties; transfer from a key position in another field—business, science, defence, etc.—to politics. However, occupying an elite position becomes legitimate only after passing the procedure of elections, whose general accessibility and public character make them the main mechanism for the formal recruitment of political elites. Elections publicly legitimize the right of a group of people to rule another one, usually much larger, and in this sense, the process of (de)legitimization of political elites through elections and the unconditional acceptance of the results by their opponents are among the crucial features of democracy. Each electoral cycle, regardless of its type, brings about changes in the composition of the elite: the entrance of new actors and the exit of old ones. It is through the procedure of elections that people evaluate the actions of their elite, through their subjective perceptions; this evaluation may not always coincide with the self-assessment and expectations of the elite.

Elections are the procedure that empowers particular citizens and turns them into an elite, but electoral results seldom match voters' expectations of the qualities of the elected candidates (Dahl 1958, 1961)⁴. The parliamentary democracy system presupposes that people are chosen (i.e. become an elite) through democratic means (i.e. elections), after satisfying certain prerequisites. And since these prerequisites are formal⁵ rather than related to candidates' personalities, any meritocratic expectations that the elected candidates will be highly educated, highly moral, highly qualified, etc. people, corresponding to the image of an elite, can be nothing but illusions. It is these subjective notions of an elite and the discrepancy

4 '... In order to know whether there exists a ruling elite or not, we must have a political system in which there are occasional divergences in the preferences of the individuals populating it.'

⁵ Election Code, Art. 4. (1) The right to be elected National Representative shall vest in any Bulgarian citizens who have attained the age of 21 years by polling day, do not hold another citizenship, are not interdicted and do not serve a custodial sentence.

(2) Eligibility for President and Vice President of the Republic shall be limited to natural-born Bulgarian citizens who have attained the age of 40 years, who does not hold another citizenship, is not interdicted, does not serve a custodial sentence, and has resided in Bulgaria during the last five years.

(3) The right to be elected Member of the European Parliament for the Republic of Bulgaria shall vest in any Bulgarian citizen who has attained the age of 21 years by polling day, does not hold the citizenship of any State which is not a Member State of the European Union, is not interdicted, does not serve a custodial sentence, has a permanent address in the Republic of Bulgaria, and has resided in the Republic of Bulgaria or in another Member State of the European Union at least during the last six months.

between them and the objective political reality that underlie statements such as ‘this elite is no elite’ or ‘there is no elite.’

The model of operation of the Bulgarian political system provides for two ways to accomplish this empowerment or legitimization: through a direct or indirect election. Thus, in terms of formal legitimization, the Bulgarian political elite comprises two types of representatives: elected by a direct vote (President, Vice-President, Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament) or elected indirectly, by a vote in Parliament (Government).

Due to the importance of the election mechanism, elites have strived to secure their influence and control over both the election procedure and voters’ decision-making process. The Bulgarian electoral system provides parties with opportunities for an almost complete control over these key elements, with the consequence that the mechanism of elections as a means to impact the composition of the elite is often subverted. In the pure proportional system, part of the eligible seats are de facto reserved for certain party candidates, regardless of their personal qualities. Nomination procedures function ineffectively and often succumb to orchestrated and pre-organized campaigns benefiting the candidate who is a favourite for taking up the position, whether people like him or not; this yields the paradox that a candidate is not elected by citizens or party members but той е избран да бъде избран (Mosley 1982). On the national level, such attempts are coupled with changes in electoral law, the type of ballots, the areas of constituencies, even in the electoral system itself. An elite obtains legitimacy and power by laws⁶, which are practically always amended immediately before elections. That is, an elite gets ‘elected’ by rules defined by none other than itself. Thus, there is only a nominal legitimization by the electorate, and the act of voting places the electorate in a position of de facto relinquishing the option to influence the authorities, because of the specifics of the electoral system. Ordered party slates cannot be controlled or rearranged by voters, including members and supporters of the respective party. Thus, it turns out that ‘elections don’t change anything,’⁷ or at least they do not change the composition of the elite to a degree that would create an impression of renewal or change, if nothing else. In practice, the electorate becomes a mere carrier of the ballot to the ballot-box; anything before and after that act is outside of its control.

⁶ Election Code

⁷ ‘Elections don’t change anything—if they did, they’d be banned.’ A graffiti on Vasil Levski Boulevard in the centre of Sofia.

A relatively indisputable element in the biography of the Bulgarian democratic political elite is the moment of its birth and the manner of its initial legitimization. In general, the new elite combined two major groups: the former so-called *party (communist) nomenklatura* and the *dissident circles* (Пачкова 1996). The setting up of the Round Table, the transitional structure between the two regimes, on 3 January 1990 was the *début* of the new political elite. Of course, its composition was questionable and we must bear in mind that its legitimacy, i.e. recognition by the electorate, had not yet happened, therefore it would not be entirely correct to call the participants in the round table an elite. It would seem more appropriate to call them a proto-elite: groups from which the future democratic Bulgarian political elite would be born.

One of the participating sides in the round table, namely the opposition, *de facto* represented no-one. A group of citizens sitting at the table opposite the current authorities by mutual agreement do not in any way become legitimized as politicians or an elite. Some of them were indeed dissidents, i.e. people with an attitude towards the authorities; others had been politicians before 1947, while still others were fledgling politicians, leaders of newly emerged parties, etc.⁸ At the same time, across the table sat representatives of the outgoing, though still ruling authorities. Their right to be there was legitimized only by their status (and power) of an official state government. It was this mutual legitimization of the right of the groups to join the round table that provided the initial recognition of those who would subsequently become the ‘new’ Bulgarian political elite and would be ultimately legitimized as such in the Grand National Assembly elections. Thus, Bulgarian transition began with an apparent consensus, an agreement between the two major proto-elites of democracy: the old communist one and the new anti-communist one. This semblance would crumble later on, due to the political disagreements between the two groups as well as the incompatibility of their strategies with the people who were not represented at the Round Table—afterwards tagged as ‘the electorate.’ The fragility of that type of legitimacy was revealed in the subsequent fate of the parliamentary elite from the early period. We may illustrate it with the table below: out of 412 MPs in the Grand National Assembly, only 87 were re-elected in its successor, the 36th National Assembly. In that respect, BSP and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) have been most stable: their parliamentary groups have often (1995, 2005, 2009) remained

⁸ ‘Our structures were joined by every Tom, Dick and Harry: people possessed by some sort of revanchism to get even with the communists, to ride the wave. With a few exceptions—people whose relatives had been persecuted—the local intelligentsia did not join UDF.’ Varzonovtsev, D., *Автобиография на българския преход [An Autobiography of the Bulgarian Transition]*, Sofia, 2005.

relatively unchanged in composition. The table clearly reveals two instances of major changes in the composition of the parliamentary elite, related to the election victory of the catch-all party National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMSP) and the wave supporting Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB, from the Bulgarian acronym).

Continuity (re-election in two consecutive National Assemblies)			
National Assembly (NA)	Total number of MPs ⁹	Re-elected	%
7 th Grand NA 10 July 1990 – 2 Oct 1991	412	-	-
36 th NA 4 Nov 1991 – 17 Oct 1994	273	87	31,9%
37 th NA 12 Jan 1995 – 13 Feb 1997	269	105	39,0%
38 th NA 7 May 1997 – 19 Apr 2001	254	81	31,9%
39 th NA 5 Jul 2001 – 17 June 2005	288	70	24,3%
40 th NA 11 July 2005 – 25 June 2009	298	121	40,6%
41 st NA 14 July 2009 – 15 March 2013	280	67	23,9%

Table 1. Data based on (Стойчев 2010), updated as of 15 March 2013

A specific case of political elite recruitment occurred before the 2001 parliamentary elections, when the largely functioning mechanism for mutual legitimization of the elite was undermined by the inclusion of new actors in the political elite, picked by a charismatic leader on a subjective principle of the ‘selectorate’ type. This change was set in motion by the appearance of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who, for purely biographic reasons, came with royal attributes, very similar to the meritocratic distinction that the electorate makes between itself and the political elite. The appearance of a charismatic leader coupled with the notion of

⁹ Includes MPs who have held a partial mandate for a particular reason: becoming elected to another position, leaving the parliament, death, etc.

‘yuppies’ introduced by the Bulgarian Velikden (generally, highly educated Bulgarians who had been successful abroad) gradually marked the beginning of a new political elite, which replaced the old one: an act that was legitimized also by the results of the parliamentary elections. The only functioning mechanisms for entering the ranks of the elite at that time were loyalty to Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, personal recommendations, or direct favouritism. The leader’s charisma and the gathered momentum did not require a ‘materialization’ of the picture of the new elite. The new faces were comparatively unknown: neither appealing nor repelling, yet ‘recognized’ by the leader. Thus, the means and manners for recruiting a political elite were effectively replaced by a single man’s will—a phenomenon that would be manifestly repeated in the 2009 elections, when the man in charge was Boyko Borisov.

These major changes in the elite’s composition led to the emergence of stable ‘elite cores’ in the traditional parties, which are resilient to changes. The cores have usually formed around party leaders and individuals who hold senior positions in the party or represent various political or economic interests. They are highly resistant to changes in their composition and exert direct control over the political and party elite. The actions of the cores, who strive to impose their values and opinions on everyone else, have boosted subjective criteria (loyalty, influence, personal qualities) into becoming the most important factor in recruiting the elite, as witnessed in the composition of the BSP, MRF, NMSP and Attack parliamentary groups after the 2005 and 2009 elections.

In order to explain the interrelation between the quality of a political elite and the quality of democracy, we need to discover the theoretical specificity of its nature, the universal key for explaining the subject-object relation; this key is power. Here, by power we mean power over the state, the syncretic set of instruments, influence and institutions that ensure actual governance. It is the type of power construed by Bertrand Russell as a capability for ‘producing intended results’ (Иванов 2002), and the state is defined as “... a field of power resembling a playground, where owners of capital of various nature contend for gaining power over the state, i.e. power with respect to state capital, providing control over the various types of capital and their multiplication” (Bourdieu 1986), i.e. the state is on the one hand a physical framework of the space in which elites contend with one another, and on the other, a goal, prize for the winners, which would enable them to expand and solidify their power. Elites indubitably possess power, and what differentiates them internally is their

attitude towards power, interpreted as a complex of intended results, i.e. intentions for its use based on their expected effects. The primary reason for this is that power is both a goal and an instrument for implementing a particular policy.

Elites' monopoly of power always poses a problem in societies that turn to a new model of existence and evolution. The use of power in democratic states presupposes rules that govern it, but in a situation of transition, of a gradual emergence of such rules, there necessarily arises a pressure between those who have power and those who do not accept this fact for various reasons. The improper structuring of power—that is, the improper formulation of the relationships between individuals (or groups) and those who are in charge of decision-making—gave birth to the Bulgarian paradox: the continuing existence of an enormous (in terms of scope and intentions), yet internally corroded and weak state (Дайнов 1997). In the Bulgarian state, the strategic planning of results has been allocated to political parties, economic lobbies and non-public groups. The majority of media and non-governmental organizations have been 'conceived in sin,' i.e. founded in order to cater to certain interests.

Changing the model of governance, the model of relations between institutions and citizens, between state and civil society, between elite and non-elite has been one of the main challenges of the transition. In this sense, elites should legitimize their right to exercise power, i.e. win and keep the trust of the public. The public itself should discover the mechanisms to restrict this power, besides the existing institutional means. In other words, both the elite and the public should find the intersections of their attitudes towards power. The search for this balance of attitudes towards power between the elite and the public has been an issue for the entire transition, and thus the period under consideration. This is reinforced by the warning (Schopflin 1993) that "Democracy requires a package of values, both from the authorities and from the electorate, which include self-restriction, compromise, negotiation, mutuality, feedback mechanisms and so on. Post-communist countries cannot expect to develop these at once: they can only result from many years of practice."

The peculiar role of the elite in the processes of changing a political system has been a frequent problem in ex-socialist countries as well as other countries undergoing a transition to democracy (Dogan, Higley 1998). There is a consensus among researchers about the role of the elite in the choice of the new governance type, the democratization of mechanisms, the change of rules, the establishment of new institutions, and the stability of democracy. In the case of Bulgaria, the main actions of the political elite during the transition years have taken

two directions. One: deconstruction of the political system and the rules regulating the management of social and economic relations; two: reconstruction of the political reality, but with new rules and relations. Consequently, evaluations of the preferred form of governance are directly related to the vision of the elite about the necessary changes at the entrance of the system and the public expectations at its exit. The elite makes informed choices, usually based on clear expectations about the results of its actions. The non-elite, however, evaluates these results post factum, after the events, because this is when it is provided with an opportunity and information to do so.

At the beginning of the transition, the strategies of the elite for changing the system appeared to have the approval of the public; the necessity for change was evident, and so was the general direction it should take. The situation with the transformation of the economy was ostensibly the same, but here the elite had the strategic advantage of its position of power, of control over rules, which enabled it to transform its power into an economic one, control over resources, and thus realize its own private interests rather than the public ones. The political elite imposed such social relations that would provide it with control over everyone else (Петев 2004).

This strategy of the elite was particularly obvious during the 1990s, when political parties were transformed into ‘parties of power’: they were entirely funded, ‘fed’ their leaders and members by being in power. The allocation of government positions, job appointments, ‘giving away’ business were done, not to benefit governance but for the sake of selfish interests. In this case, the elite traded in influence, which only led to the emergence of temporary dependences that could be broken by a better offer or a threat from another party. The success of this strategy has been the establishment of NMSP and its transition into the scheme of the Triple Coalition as well as the deliberate re-orientation of MRF in this direction over the past decade.

In essence, changing the system is also legitimized by elections, given that elected representatives are granted a constitutionally guaranteed control over it, and parliamentary majorities are a crucial element for the implementation of elite strategies. In this sense, controlling the electoral process becomes an essential factor for securing a parliamentary majority. This alters the purpose of elections, transforming them into a mere substitution of the ruling elite for another that has the same characteristics but differs in its ideological discourse about its role in history and economics. The mass public comes to believe that

‘elections don’t change anything,’ and their results are reduced to two mathematical quantities interpreted as levels of success: the 4% threshold for entering Parliament, and the 50.42%¹⁰ threshold for forming a majority in the National Assembly. The extreme abnormality of the political situation, electoral process and rules has become especially obvious since 2003. The ascent of controlled votes, vote buying, as a major tool of election campaigns, including on the polling day itself, has become a point of covert consensus among the elite: the vice is countered by the very means that it employs. Elections have become a market phenomenon, money being a primary indicator of efficiency (while remaining a scarce commodity for certain social groups). In this context, it is now money competing with money, and since all election candidates use money, curbing controlled votes has proved difficult. Legislative changes focus on consequences, not on causes or prevention, and the ‘umbrellas’ put up by the elite (especially local party leaders) over any participants in the process, have effectively turned vote buying into a normal practice.

This change of the rules of political competition has necessitated a substitution of PR techniques and activities for political messages. Especially since the 2005 parliamentary elections, the emphasis has been, not on policies proposed, but mostly on negative campaigning that smears opponents. As a result, the fairness of electoral procedures and subsequently of election results themselves has been seriously questioned. The change of the electoral process rules was particularly evident in the 2013 elections, which marked a peak in resorting to ‘dirty’ methods, and their results were not recognized as genuine for a long time. The status change of the purpose of elections—turning them into a political weapon, rather than a procedure for the democratic replacement/affirmation of authorities—poses a threat to the entire political system and leads to a further encapsulation of the political elite. An election victory no longer indicates successful expert messages, policies proposed by a party and approved by the electorate, but merely establishing supremacy and shared dirty secrets, primarily measured through the funds invested in the elections, often against the law.¹¹

Having legitimized their power in such a manner, elites essentially abandon their role in the political structure of society: the genuine representation of voters and their interests. Being in power becomes an end in itself, a tool for realizing private interests, occasionally presented as public ones. Thus, violating politics’ unwritten rules turns into a recipe for success, even a

¹⁰ This is equivalent to 121 MPs: 50% of the seats plus 1.

¹¹ Изследването за парите в кампаниите Алфа РИСЪРЧ

prerequisite of success. The internalization of practices (Константинов 1980) primarily encountered in election campaigns from the early 20th century results merely in the unravelling of the political fabric. Through their conduct, elites gradually lose fundamental political and moral reference points, among which we may include the loss of restrictions defining formal rhetoric. Vulgarization of politics turns into an attraction, a model to be emulated, based on the ‘who will go farther’ principle. The erosion of fundamental ‘rites’ in politics and the electoral process, which essentially underlie their institutionalization and credibility—equal access, non-violence, non-coercion—directly impacts the quality of democracy, as a commonly accepted form of governance.

This ‘crisification’ of the political model and representation drives elites to use techniques for creating parallel realities, pseudo-structures, and degrades the socio-political debate to a search for solutions to mundane problems. It also necessitates orienting the public image of state governance towards populist actions, towards conflict-based messages and publicity. Parliamentary democracy has been reduced to procedures and institutions that, given their limited functions, may well operate in an authoritarian environment too, without threatening to redistribute power mechanisms or the means for economic and media control over society. In their endeavour to retain their power and feign a discussion with the public, elites resort to simulations of ‘civil society,’ civil organizations, protests and activities. Politicians’ behind-the-scenes participation in such activities ultimately results in decay of values and confusion of society, enabling all sorts of ideas and actors to infiltrate politics, including radical excesses, which accounts for the success of such parties as Attack and talking in the language of hate in general.

Another kind of ‘simulating’ politics on behalf of elites and related groups is the engineering of parties established or used to carry out ‘wetwork,’¹² whose existence and actions further aggravate attitudes towards politics and politicians. The first such acts date back to the early 1990s, when they aimed to accelerate the disintegration of the Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union and the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party and establish their counterfeit doubles. The political fate of splinter groups throughout the transition period has unequivocally demonstrated that their actions have been instigated by others—now BSP, now UDF; here we may also include the ostentatious establishment of the National Movement for Rights and

¹² Such as the Nova Zora party with its video ‘If you vote for Boyko Borisov, you get Ivan Kostov’ during the 2009 parliamentary elections campaign.

Freedoms in 1998 by Gyuner Tahir, an MP from UDF. Party mimicries lead to the gradual collapse of parties but also to the collapse of the idea of an alternative, and even of the meaning of words such as ‘order,’ ‘rule of law,’ ‘justice,’ ‘proud,’ ‘leader.’

There are analogous methods for controlling the potential emergence of counter-elites: groups that may take advantage of the exodus of electors from traditional parties. A demonstration of subverting the opportunity for a rational choice is the unique phenomenon ‘a party-nominated independent candidate,’ as well as the plethora of ‘civic’ quotas, ‘local parties,’ ‘local coalitions,’ ‘fake’ parties, etc. participating in various elections. Here we may also add one-man parties such as George Ganchev, Krastyo Petkov, Tsvetelin Kanchev, Toma Tomov, etc., who occasionally turn the electoral process into a burlesque circus. Their presence in political space is usually linked to personal or corporate interests, including local ones, to the selling of nominations for local elections, etc. Funding the participation of such political actors in elections had never been transparent, nor have their indirect ties to a particular party been demonstrable, yet the continuing ‘competition’ of such political metastases for the trust of the electorate can only be explained with political engineering by the ruling elites.

These acts of the elite demonstrate that the established political model relies primarily on conflict, with interim instances of consensus that are generally achieved through bartering, including at the price of contradictory compromises. The helplessness of the elite is evident in the struggle of some of its members to present themselves as anti-elite: from ‘I’m one of you’¹³ to the almost biblical ‘you’re simple and I’m simple, so we get each other’¹⁴. The perseverance to be an oxymoron, ‘ruling non-elite,’ is a natural continuation to the populist wave in the elite’s rhetoric, especially prominent since 2000. The same period witnessed the emergence of ‘hollow elites,’ life-boats for failed political parties and leaders, which, through non-public funding and agreements, have managed to enter Parliament: Bulgarian Nationalist Union, Order, Law and Justice, Attack. Once inside, they fail to handle the responsibilities of power, to convince anyone (including themselves) that they are an elite. Their maintenance of this status is brief and tragic; they are used as ‘postboxes,’ tools for buying majorities by other parties, and the trajectories of their careers logically lead back to their original state or to an overt ‘encashment’ of their influence. Such elites usually enter politics claiming that they

¹³ A common slogan in local elections (2003, 2007).

¹⁴ ‘Borisov: You’re simple and I’m simple, so we get each other,’ www.dnesplus.bg/News.aspx?n=562286 (Jan 2014)

want to change it, make it ‘closer to people,’ but as a rule, this change gets reduced to an attempt to reject traditional characteristics and make politics according to certain personal perceptions—with no ideology, no platform, no responsibilities, and with the fundamental values of ‘our leader, our party, our folks.’

Consequently, Bulgarian society has been afflicted with an obvious imbalance, a constant search for an imaginary meritocratic elite, ending in the discovery of a traditional, power-based one, which is not wanted, yet is the only possible alternative. The intense public expectation of a meritocratic elite dominates the relationship between elite and non-elite, and the sense that the elite does not govern according to society’s notions of ‘morality’ is a grave challenge to the entire political system. It generates perceptions that the elite has strayed from certain ethical norms, from its function as a role model, even though the category of ‘morality’ has no part in politics and cannot be defined in the same explicit manner in which it is used in everyday life, primarily since politics is a results-oriented process. The electorate cannot accept that morality in politics differs from its own notions; looking for an easy answer, electors conclude that ‘they’re all scoundrels,’ and arrive at the paradox of eternal return, of setting negative experience as the basis of their model of behavioural reaction towards the elite.

The new elite

Since its emergence at the beginning of the transition, the democratic Bulgarian political elite has held its position in political space because it has been in the right place at the right time. Consequently, it has dominated this niche only for a particular amount of time—until the change of its environment, its nutrient medium. This offers a possible explanatory model for the changes in the composition of the elite over the transition period as well as for its behaviour as an elite. The heavy dependence on environmental factors, on the political, economic and social situation, has made the elite a *temporal* one, an elite that is influenced by the transition processes and the activity of the participants in these processes. This elite cannot function efficiently outside the concrete historical and political situation, which largely accounts for the major changes in the composition of the elite during the transition period. This volatility of the elite has also been predetermined by its weak ties with society and its strong dependence on parties and external interests: economic and other lobbies. The urge to

maintain such an abnormal situation for as long as possible and thus make it normal has led to the emergence of a fixed model of bargaining among and inside elites. This recurring scheme is especially evident in the elites of stable parties such as BSP and MRF. There have been no abrupt changes in the composition of the elite, even during severe crises such as the one in 1997, or losing power, as in 2009. The gradual evolutionary succession of generations in these parties, including the passing down of positions from parents to children, provides their elites with stability. In such cases, elites are conservative, the processes of renewal and recruitment are predetermined and control the political environment, party structures and members. In this area of political space, changes in the existing political elite are nearly impossible if they are not deliberately launched, i.e. they can happen only 'from above.' Essentially, everything boils down to the prospect of teaching successors, be they family members or protégés, how to rule.

Changes in the political milieu caused by the introduction of the Internet and the means for parallel immediate communication among more than two people have had a strong impact on the political elite. First of all, they have brought along high publicity and transparency of elites' actions, decisions, often of personal relationships, private property, etc. It was control over these aspects that enabled elites to implement plans and strategies primarily in accordance with their interests and to their advantage. Publicity, although only ostensible in certain situations, has allowed the non-elite to monitor the actions of the elite and verify whether the positions of the two coincide or diverge. The virtual environment has ousted traditional media from their role as a conduit for ideas, including propaganda, through which the elite generally earned its political comfort. It is only in social networks that a harmless piece of news can explode into a sensation (becoming 'viral'), which would otherwise have amounted to several lines on the inside pages of a newspaper. This environment allows the specific cumulation of the potential of politically active Internet users. The combination of virtual and physical reality has boosted the implementation of group political interests, which has frequently put political elites in a subordinate position, i.e. they have begun to lose their status as *decision makers*.

At the same time, this environment of streamlined communication has given birth to a new phenomenon that may be called *ad hoc elites*. Essentially, these are 'unpersonified' elites (groupness is one of their major features), spontaneously formed and legitimized as representing the interests of particular dynamic social groups. This phenomenon has emerged

against the backdrop of a generational shift, where the active part of society is highly distinct from the ruling elite. Today's young people are well educated, upper middle income, i.e. they have grown up in the situation of transition but have managed to find their place in society, earn a particular status, and they have considerable potential for success, both in private and in public matters. This generation ties in its personal prospects for success with the existence of public regulations; compliance with those regulations is a precondition for success, while their absence (or defectiveness) becomes an obstacle to self-fulfilment, which must be overcome.

The new ad hoc political elites are the final product of a succession of events that have occurred dynamically and over a relatively brief period and basically represent a process of natural selection in a community that does not necessarily aspire to political careers but does realize the importance of controlling political processes. These events can be compared to a process of legitimization, due to the explicit distinction and acceptance of the role of leaders in stating the community objectives and negotiating their implementation. The emergence of a new ad hoc elite consists of several stages: a process of accumulating a critical mass of trust, which legitimizes, first, the significance of the issue, second, the elite itself, and third, the options for resolving the issue delegated to it. First stage: emergence of a systematic governance problem, which is noticed by separate, initially unorganized individuals, who focus on solving the problem. Second stage: the individuals, independently of one another, popularize the problem, propose group actions for resolving it and start attracting supporters, using their personal online contacts or other means of communication. Third stage: personal contacts lead to: 1. hyper dissemination (the snowball effect): via circles of friends, forum discussions, Facebook interest groups, etc.; 2. community: at the intersections of dissemination, opinions start gravitating towards a consensus, debates become concentrated within particular limits; and 3. trust in the importance of the problem and the need to resolve it. Fourth stage: distributed brainstorming. There starts an uncontrolled process of looking for possible solutions to the problem. The use of social networks has the advantage of speeding up this brainstorming and allowing an unlimited number of participants to join, without the necessity to meet in a place outside the virtual environment. Thus, it takes a short time to solve problems, discuss situations, generate ideas and messages: results that would be hard to happen in parallel and in a brief time-frame under the classical decision-making process. Fifth stage: moving on to action. Organizing events and petitions, selecting representatives among the most active participants that would be in charge of the organization, including offline

activities. Sixth stage: promoting and resolving the problem through putting pressure on institutions and public opinion leaders, often combined with an explicit refusal to politicize the actions and a dissolution. The rate of response, dissemination and debate in this process gives a strategic advantage to these groups over classical types of actions in politics, where existing procedures and the hierarchic nature of decision-making slow down reactions. It would be a stretch to claim that this 'elite' exhibits meritocratic features, yet the natural process of filling leading positions by people with outstanding personal abilities hints at a similar conclusion. This model can largely account for the 'revolutions' that happened in recent years in countries and communities without a serious democratic tradition. These ad hoc elites essentially look for ways to set right the actions and inactions of the classical political elites, which have been hard pressed to represent and fulfil the expectations of societies with increased demands on the authorities. The emerging educational, social and economic features of various public groups entail expectations of becoming equal in status with the elite. This effectively leads to the parallel existence of a closed elite, whose main characteristic is the possession of power, and other groups, who have no access to political instruments and governance, which reinforces the opinion that the elite does not represent or rule efficiently.

Conclusions

The tradition in recruiting elites that has emerged in the transition years and the manners in which they have wielded their power expectedly resulted in outbreaks of civil unrest in 2013. It is a tradition where the electoral process goes hand in hand with violations and manipulations: controlled votes, vote buying, amendments in electoral law to the advantage of those who are in power, abusing public resources during campaigns, etc. Breaches of democratic procedures, often tagged as 'peculiarities of the model' or 'transition problems,' have become a routine: fusing of economic and political power, adoption of explicitly lobby-driven laws, an unstable party system, non-public decision making, high levels of corruption.

These are phenomena whose systematic recurrence has gradually transformed them from abnormal into ordinary and expected events. All of this, combined with the ongoing economic crisis and the expanding gap between the rich and the poor, and the privileged status of particular people, groups and parties has further escalated tension and stirred unrest, not so

much because the elite is incapable of handling the various issues, but because it has been preoccupied with solving its own problems and the problems of its affiliated circles and groups.

In this context, democracy, as a form of state governance, has become associated with the inability or unwillingness of ruling elites to demonstrate a fair attitude towards the electorate and public agenda. This is the main challenge facing Bulgarian democracy: to mitigate the potential for a future confrontation between those citizens who are most active and comparatively stable, in terms of social status, and the state, as represented by the political elite; and thus to avoid the risk of social crises, which would promote alternative forms of governance.

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