

THE BULGARIAN SOCIALIST PARTY ON THE PATH TO DE-EUROPEANIZATION

PETIA GUEORGUIEVA*
(New Bulgarian University)

Abstract. The article's main purpose is to shed light on the Euroscepticism of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and its shifting identity towards European issues, liberal democracy, and in terms of party organization during the last decade. More than twenty years ago, the successor of the former Bulgarian Communist Party managed to achieve a difficult (and, it turns out, superficial) Europeanisation and Social-democratization. BSP supported the country's accession to the EU and the integration in NATO. Now, the party is identifiable as a pro-Russian actor, opposed to the Istanbul convention, spreading conservatism, and hysteria against the so called "gender ideology," fighting against economic neo-liberalism but also liberal ideas. The Russian war against Ukraine significantly impacted domestic politics and the structure of party competition, revitalizing the historic divide between pro-Russian and pro-Western camps. Isolated, the BSP lost its position as a major party of government and embraced anti-establishment and protest-party profile. The main research questions address the essence of the BSP's ethnonationalist and conservative turn, and its hybrid interpretations of "national interest" and "patriotism" in its discourses and documents. Special attention is paid to the BSP's positions towards the war in Ukraine. Our main approach is grounded on the path dependency theory and on the supply and demand sides of the fragmented party system.

Keywords: Bulgarian Socialist Party, path dependency, party change, Euroscepticism, Nationalism.

Introduction

This article studies the transformations of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and its identities in the light of the different crises faced at the European

* Petia Gueorguieva, PhD, is a Senior Assistant Professor at New Bulgarian University (petiagueorguieva@gmail.com).

and domestic level. Our focus is on the BSP's turn to ethnonationalism, illiberalism, its fierce opposition to respecting the rights of LGBTQ citizens, and its intolerance towards refugees and diversity. For a long time, the BSP has been known for its opposition to the European Union's sanctions against Russia. After the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine, the BSP has also been strongly opposed to any military aid to Ukraine.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party is identifiable as a pro-Russian actor, opposed to the Istanbul convention, spreading conservatism, and very vocal against the so called "gender ideology," fighting against economic neo-liberalism and globalization but also liberal ideas. As Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks wrote on the democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland,

"Illiberalism is allied to a nationalist discourse of parochialism, conservatism, and anti-elitism which is mobilized against the perceived threats of foreigners, multinationals, and the European Union."¹

In Bulgaria too, political parties and the BSP, in particular, take more polarized stances on the GAL-TAN dimension of political contestation.

From 1990 to 2021, the Bulgarian Socialist Party constituted either the major party of government, or the main parliamentary opposition force. Since 2021, the party has been abandoned by its loyal voters, and nowadays its coalition potential is rather low, having been isolated by the pro-European camp.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party is characterized by several paradoxes. On the one hand, the BSP has lost its place as a major party, but it remains one of the oldest and most resilient parties since the fall of the Communist regime. The BSP diverges from the core progressive values and principles promoted by the European social democracy, as an expression of its de-Europeanization. The fact remains that it is the only political actor of the center-left defending values such as the welfare state, social justice, social protection, and equality. Another paradox is that the BSP, while following the general trend of a personalized style of leadership, is still a party with functioning and regulated intraparty democratic procedures,

¹ Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "Grand Theories of European Integration in the Twenty-first Century," *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no. 8 (2009): 1113-1133, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2019.1569711, 1127.

but at the same time there is no place for a true intraparty democracy. Besides, it is the only party in Bulgaria which very early introduced and has maintained internal quotas for women's and young people's representation. Moreover, in 2017 the BSP decided to change the election method for the party's leader, to direct voting by party members, and in 2020 it organized the first direct election of its leader. Another paradox is the changing nature of the party - from an established government party to an anti-establishment challenger, which joins protest movements and very often resorts to mechanisms of direct democracy.

Our main goal is to shed light on the BSP's sovereigntist and nationalist turn, veiled as *patriotism* – throughout the analysis of party's decisions and resolutions, as well as its positions on geopolitical and foreign policy issues. With the Russian aggression against Ukraine, BSP's positions affected the actions of Bulgarian government and showed that party politics do not necessarily stop at the *water's edge*, and that the foreign policy is affected by parties' positions.

Our research questions concern the meaning of the proclaimed *patriotism* and the party's position since February 2022 on foreign policy issues.

The research methods include content analysis of party documents, official resolutions, decisions, votes in the National Assembly, and declarations. The analysis is based on the approach of path dependency and on studies related to effects of new challengers on established parties.² From the perspective of path dependency, we argue that nationalism has always been a component of the Bulgarian Socialist Party ideology, because of the transformation trajectory chosen by the former communists. There is a double language and radical shift of positions of party leaders who twenty years ago were the most pro-European within BSP.

The study is structured in five sections. The first one reviews studies of party Europeanization and focuses on Euroscepticism in Bulgaria. The second section presents briefly the BSP's electoral upheaval. The third part introduces the discussion on nationalism and the left. The fourth section analyses BSP's documents from 2008 to 2019 with regards

² Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, "Stubborn Structures: A Path-Dependence Explanation of Transitions in the Postcommunist Region," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 113-146.

to nationalism. In the fifth section the BSP's positions on the Russian war against Ukraine are presented.

Parties, Europeanization and Euroscepticism

The impact of the European integration on national political parties and party systems is a widely researched topic.³ For some scholars, the European Union has had a limited impact on national parties.⁴ Others analyze processes of de-Europeanization going along with processes of de-democratization in Eastern Central Europe.⁵

Paul Taggart defines four criteria to evaluate the significance of Euroscepticism in national party systems: (1) participation of Eurosceptic party in national government; (2) whether the leadership of any of the major parties of government was decided by conflict over European issue; (3) whether the EU related issue has strongly defined the fate of a national government; (4) whether the issue of European integration has determined the issue of a national election.⁶

³ Claudio M. Radaelli, "Europeanisation: Solution or Problem?," *European Integration online Papers (EIoP)* 8, no. 16, (2004), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=601163>; Robert Ladrech, "National political parties and European Governance: The Consequences of 'Missing in Action,'" *West European Politics* 30, no. 5 (2007): 945-960, DOI: 10.1080/01402380701617365; Christian Lequesne and Etienne Behar, "Européanisation et résistance à l'européanisation" [Europeanization and resistance to Europeanization] in *Études européennes* [European Studies] eds. Olivier Costa and Frédéric Merand (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 2017), 505-534; Sara B. Hobolt and James Tilley, "Fleeing the Centre: The Rise of Challenger Parties in the Aftermath of the Euro Crisis," *West European Politics* 39, no. 5 (2016): 971-991, DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2016.1181871; Hooghe and Marks, "Grand Theories of European Integration in the Twenty-first century".

⁴ Peter Mair, "The Limited Impact of Europe on National Party Systems," *West European Politics* 23, no. 4 (2000): 25-51.

⁵ Attila Ágh, "De-Europeanization and De-democratization Trends in ECE: From the Potemkin Democracy to the Elected Autocracy in Hungary," *Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 2 (2015): 4 - 23.

⁶ Paul Taggart, "Europeanization, Euroscepticism, and Politicization in Party Politics," in *The Member States of the European Union*, eds. Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 341-348.

According to the typology in Table 1, the Bulgarian case, especially since the political crisis which started in 2020-2021, falls between the type of constrained contestation on EU issues, and the type of open contestation, with significant parties' Euroscepticism, with the European issue having played a role in determining the party's leadership and the outcome of an election.

In Bulgaria, there is no strategy of containment of the far right or radical populists, such as the *cordon sanitaire* in Belgium, or the *front républicain* in France on behalf of democratic parties. Far right parties in Bulgaria have had great coalition or blackmail potential, and some of them have successfully found their way to national government by ensuring parliamentary majority of the ruling party and thus influencing the policy making process. The party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) normalized and institutionalized the radical right actors in parliament and government.⁷ In all three cabinets of Boyko Borissov (2009-2013, 2014-2017, and 2017-2021), radical right parties were either part of the parliamentary majority, or a coalition partner – especially the United Patriots (2017-2021).

However, the BSP has also collaborated with national populists either in its electoral coalitions, or in Parliament. During the short-lived minority government of BSP with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (2013-2014), the parliamentary majority was ensured by the far-right Attaka party. The local coalition of the BSP and the Left for the 2023 municipal elections in Sofia includes parties like Attaka, the coalition Neutral Bulgaria, and Russophiles for Revival of the Homeland.

In the summer of 2020, a mass citizens protest movement erupted in Sofia and in several cities against corruption, the government of Boyko Borissov and its party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), and against the prosecutor general Ivan Geshev. During this protest cycle, a new cleavage structured the party competition: new protest and

⁷ Petia Gueorguieva, "Les Patriotes unis aux rênes du pouvoir" [United Patriots holding the reins of power], *L'Action nationale* CVIII, no. 3 (March 2018): 104-118; Petia Gueorguieva, "La «normalisation» de la droite radicale populiste en Bulgarie après 2009" [The "banalization" of populist radical right in Bulgaria after 2009], in *L'Etat face à ses transformations* [The State in front of transformations], ed. Benjamin Biard (Louvain-La-Neuve: Academia-L'Harmattan, no. 22, 2018), 259-278.

anti-establishment parties *versus* GERB and all established parties which were stigmatized as corrupt and in acting in a cartel. The appearance of several new protest parties challenged the role of BSP as the main opposition to the dominant GERB. The socialists fell into the category of established parties. However, in 2020 the BSP attempted to present itself as a protest party, its MPs left the Parliament and joined the protesters.

The crisis of the party system, marked by fragmentation and polarization, led to five national elections in two years (from April 2021 to April 2023). The Parliament elected in November 2021 managed to form a majority and to support the short-lived government led by the prime minister Kiril Petkov (December 2021 – August 2022), a four-party heterogeneous coalition of anti-GERB parties, including the BSP. The government fell apart when the populist party *There is Such a People!* withdrew from the coalition, as it opposed Kiril Petkov, and – together with the BSP – the French-sponsored EU proposal on resolving the crisis between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, in order to unblock the European integration of the later.

The Russian war against Ukraine significantly impacted domestic politics and has revived the historical divide between pro-Russian and pro-Western parties. The fourth election round held in October 2022, together with the fifth election held in April 2023 revealed a new main cleavage, with the pro-European and pro-NATO parties on one side *versus* the pro-Russian, anti-NATO parties on the other side. The BSP and the far-right party *Vazrazhdane* (Revival) are the main parliamentary parties with pro-Russian positions. The Bulgarian Presidency represents another center of influence. During the unprecedented parliamentary crisis, the Presidency gained in terms of political power and influence. From May 2021 to June 2023, for seventeen months the country was ruled by four different caretaker cabinets, appointed by the President at his discretion and which often operated without any parliamentary supervision. President Roumen Radev, a former general from the Bulgarian Air Force, who repeatedly declared his rejection of any supply of weapons to Ukraine and attacked pro-NATO and pro-EU parties *We continue the change!* and *Democratic Bulgaria* for their full support to Ukraine. Ahead of an early election in April 2023, President Radev declared:

“Let the parties of the war win the elections, let them form a government, let them take responsibility for the decision Bulgarian army to hand over weapons to Ukraine! People who understand absolutely nothing about military affairs are doing everything possible to involve us in the processes of escalation, which they cannot control... I am categorically against sending armaments.”⁸

During his meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2023 in Sofia, Radev appealed for a cease-fire, and for a peaceful solution through the means of diplomacy.⁹ Later he affirmed that “Ukraine insists on continuing to fight the war, but the bill has been paid by entire Europe.”¹⁰

In 2023, the socialist party supported the initiative of the far-right party *Vazrazhdane* on the organization of a national referendum against the adoption of the Euro and for the preservation of the Bulgarian Lev until 2043. Furthermore, the BSP started its own initiative in April 2023 for a national referendum against the “gender ideology” with the question:

“Do you support the introduction of a ban on any education, upbringing and propaganda related to the change of gender and the concepts of a gender other than male and female among children and students in the Bulgarian educational system?”¹¹

Among the party’s arguments for holding a referendum are the rejection of any European pressure to ratify the Istanbul Convention; the non-acceptance of “more than 30 genders, preached by gender ideology” and

⁸ “Radev napadna PP i DB: Partiite na voynata purvo da spechelyat izborite,” [Radev attacked We continue the change! and Democratic Bulgaria: let the parties of war win the elections first], *Sega*, February 14, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/radev-napadna-pp-i-db-partiite-na-voynata-purvo-da-spechelyat-izborite>.

⁹ Krassen Nikolov, “In Sofia, Ukraine’s Zelenskyy clashes with “peaceful” narrative of Bulgaria’s Radev”, *Euractiv*, July 6, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/in-sofia-ukraines-zelenskyy-clashes-with-peaceful-narrative-of-bulgarias-radev/>

¹⁰ “Radev obvini Ukraina, che nastoyava da vodi voynata, koyato Russia zapochna” [Radev accused Ukraine for institing to fight the war that Russia started], *Svobodna Evropa*, July 14, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/radev-voyna-ukrayna-rozhen/32503610.html>.

¹¹ Notification for the establishment of an Initiative Committee for holding a National referendum, National Assembly, April 24, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://parliament.bg/pub/referendum/305aa937aceac0fcefd1a133eb56b6576d9407c5.pdf>.

the will to protect the family with “a mother and a father and their children – a son and a daughter.”¹² The initiative failed because the signatures collected were below the 400,000 threshold required by the law. It was not the first attempt of the BSP to call a referendum on the topic. In 2018, the party leader Kornelia Ninova provided with the most insistent opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and threatened to initiate a referendum. The Bulgarian Socialist Party is also the first party to use the mechanism of direct democracy since it was initially regulated by the Direct Citizen Participation in State and Local Government Act, passed in 2009.¹³ The first national referendum held in 2013 was initiated with the support of BSP in favor of the construction of a new nuclear energy plant in Belene with Russian participation. The low voting turnout invalidated the referendum.

From Major Party to the Margins

The Bulgarian Socialist Party appeared as a result of the intraparty referendum held by the Bulgarian Communist Party in April 1990, on changing of the name of the party. The BSP – a successor party –, has struggled since its beginnings to achieve a clear ideological identity, and to adopt a coherent European social-democratic profile. The BSP maintained organizational continuity and blurred ideological orientations. The party preserved a long-lasting cohabitation of different internal ideological factions (including Marxists, Russophiles, leftists, and centrists) until 2001. The party went through a phase of social-democratization, and in 2003 it was accepted in the Socialist International and later in the Party of European Socialists (PES). From 2011 to 2022 the former leader of the BSP and former PM Sergei Stanishev presided over the PES.

The BSP has been spreading attitudes of nostalgia idealizing the communist regime. The party has failed to attract new younger and dynamic “middle classes.”

¹² Notification for the establishment of an Initiative Committee for holding a National referendum, 3.

¹³ Direct Citizens Participation in State and Local Government Act, promulgated SG. no. 44/ June 12, 2009.

Along with its electoral decline, since 2014 the party also faced the competition of a range of radical populist actors from the right, which were successful with their nationalist, anti-establishment and anti-party appeals. Then, instead of reaffirming the values of progressive European socialism, the BSP started abandoning its European face and entered the race from a right-wing populist and nationalistic stance.

Since the 2014 early elections' severe defeat, the BSP choose a turn to the left in terms of social, fiscal, and economic policies. After 2016, this turn was coupled with stances against neo-liberal globalization, against some progressive achievements, with Euroscepticism and reinforced nationalism. Until 2021, the BSP remained one of the main pillars of the party system as the first or second parliamentary political party. This resilience of the BSP contrasts with the failures of the Polish and the Hungarian socialists, and of Czech social-democrats, who did not reach the threshold to enter their countries' parliaments in 2021.

The de-Europeanization of the Bulgarian Socialist Party received a new impetus with the election of a new chairwoman in 2016 - Kornelia Ninova. The party has since implemented changes in mechanisms of intraparty decision making, in its statutes, political positions, relations with intraparty opposition, and all this has led to the coalescence of national-populist and conservative identity in contrast with other party members of the Party of European Socialists. However, the nationalist and conservative turn did not stop the decline of the party or increased the electoral support of the BSP.

The BSP adoption of themes of the radical populist right has not prevented the rise of new national-populist radical right parties. On the contrary, the new course led to an unprecedented crisis for the BSP. The crisis had been unfolding for years but manifested itself during the long electoral year 2021 when three parliamentary elections were held, and the party was reduced from second to fourth political force in the Bulgarian parliament.¹⁴

¹⁴ Antony Todorov, "Elections of Change or Failure?," *Bulgarian Political Science Association*, no. 1-2 (2021): 5-27.

Left and Nationalism

The relationship between the left and nationalism has been a subject of several studies and analysis from different approaches, both from scholars and practitioners.

David Miller points out the various forms of nationalism, and the difficulty in providing a short definition of this concept, nevertheless it is characterized with three core elements. The first element is,

“the idea that the nations are real, that there is something that differentiates people who belong to one nation from those who belong to its neighbors”.¹⁵

The national identity and its essential features can be understood “in terms of common belief in membership or will to belong and for nationalists the features are language, religion, or race.”¹⁶ The second element is related to the ethical significance of nationality.¹⁷ Nationals have a duty to preserve valuable communities and it can involve a personal sacrifice. For one extreme, “the nation as the highest form of ethical life,” while for other extreme is the deny to any significance of the nationality.¹⁸ The third political element of nationalism is based on the idea that a nation should have its own political freedom and institutions. Nationalism differs from patriotism because it places the cultural traits at the core of the definition of national identity – the language, the religion, the national style of arts and music, etc.

Exploring the relationship between the left and nationalism, several studies pointed out that the left wing has allowed the right wing to take the monopoly on national and patriotic issues.¹⁹ The left should:

“confront nationalism seriously both intellectually and politically (...) Nationalist rhetoric has been and still is very powerful on the poor, the unemployed, frustrated

¹⁵ David Miller, “Nationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, eds. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 529.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 530.

¹⁸ Ibid., 531.

¹⁹ Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

intellectuals, and the declining middle classes. Socially humiliated and disconnected people find in the membership of the nation a new sense of pride, a new dignity."²⁰

That is why the Democratic Left should provide its own answer on issues related to national identity, in a clearly differentiated manner from the way in which these questions are answered by the nationalistic approach.

The main fault of socialism is to have left aside symbolic issues which greatly concern the working classes. The fears and reactions aroused by the evolution of national cultures under the effect of globalization and emigration have been slow to be considered, according to Fabrice d'Almeida.²¹

Massimo d'Almeida has reminded that,

"the fight against poverty, ignorance, social exclusion, precarity and humiliation at work must become again the absolute priority of the reformist Left."²²

Because the left has ceded the ground to the rightwing populism exactly amongst the most vulnerable social groups,

"in this popular world which did not feel protected, who paid the high price of globalization and who found an illusion of protection in the call for protectionism, for hatred against immigrants."²³

Studying the historic relationship between the socialist internationalism and the nationalism, John Schwarzmantel claims that,

"the socialist internationalism can be considered as historically the main challenge to nationalism, being its main rival in the field of political ideologies and in terms of movements inspired by those ideologies."²⁴

²⁰ Viroli, *For Love of Country*, 15.

²¹ Fabrice D'Almeida, "Socialisme et mondialisation" [Socialism and globalization] in *Le socialisme à l'épreuve du capitalisme* [Socialism to the Test of Capitalism] eds. Daniel Cohen and Alain Bergounioux (Paris, Fayard: Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2012), 357.

²² Massimo D'Allema, "L'avenir du socialisme européen" [The Future of European Socialism] in *Le socialisme à l'épreuve du capitalisme*, eds. Daniel Cohen and Alain Bergounioux (Paris, Fayard: Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2012), 375.

²³ D'Allema, "L'avenir du socialisme européen."

Nationalism won over internationalism after the end of the Cold War, but new forms of internationalism developed, such as the “alternative globalization movement,” and a “cosmopolitanism from below.”²⁵

In a brilliant study, Daniele Conversi has analyzed the links of nationalism with the left and the right, particularly in the age of globalization and climate crisis:

“Insofar as nationalism can be defined as a political practice founded on «boundaries building,» the Right becomes the absolute master, the Left a mere apprentice.”²⁶

The dilemma of the left toward nationalism is if there can be a consistent form of leftist nationalism, if the left

“renounce[s] nationalism in the name of cosmopolitical principles (...) that would mean offering the Right the monopoly of the most potent cotemporary ideology of mass mobilization.”²⁷

Furthermore, in the age of Anthropocene and the climate crisis, the left could

“redefine nationalism, depriving it of its anti-plural intolerance and transform it into an inclusive ideology... by accepting that nations are plural entities rather than the monolithic leviathans envisaged by the far Right.”²⁸

It seems that for some Central and Eastern European left parties, there is no such dilemma, because oftentimes the left is associated with nationalism. Dominique Reynié affirms that in the wave of anti-liberalism and populism, only the left-wing populists (nationalist and xenophobe) in Central and Eastern Europe have the odds to succeed over the radical populist right.²⁹

²⁴ John Schwartmantel, “Nationalism and Socialist Internationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 635.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 651.

²⁶ Daniele Conversi, “The Left and Nationalism: From the French Revolution to the Anthropocene,” in *Research Handbook on Nationalism*, eds. Liah Greenfeld and Zeying Wu (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 40-41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁹ Dominique Reynié, *Les Nouveaux Populismes* [The New Populisms] (Paris: Pluriel, 2013), 301.

Path Dependence, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and Nationalism

Bulgarian nationalism is rooted in the pre-state period, and its centrality is on language and religion.³⁰ During the Communist regime, after the death of Stalin, the Bulgarian Communist Party imposed national communism. The policy to rename the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, launched in 1984, can be assessed as the cumulation (and the biggest miscalculation) of a long-term nationalist line of the Zhivkov regime.³¹ For Maria Todorova,

“nationalism and communism are a line of development until the very end of the 20th century and form what I will call an (almost) continuous nationalist continuum.”³²

Martin Mevius deconstructs the two main myths on the relationship between communism and nationalism – the first, that

“the nationalism and the communism are wholly antagonistic and mutually exclusive; and the second that in communist Eastern Europe, nationalism was oppressed before 1989, to emerge triumphant after the Berlin Wall came down. Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe constructed «socialists patriotism,» a form of loyalty to their own state of workers and peasants.”³³

Valery Bunce argued that the national idea in Eastern Europe has had a strong influence for ending communist regimes and for shaping post-communist political and economic developments.³⁴ “Nationalism has either slowed or facilitated transitions to democracy and capitalism in Central and

³⁰ Maria Todorova, “The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism,” in *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter F. Sugar (Washington: The American University Press, 1995), 55-102.

³¹ Todorova, “The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism,” 97.

³² Maria Todorova, “Etnos, Natzionalizan I komunisticheskoto nasledstvo v Iztochna Evropa” [Ethnicity, Nationalism and Communist Legacy in Eastern Europe], *Liberalen Pregled*, February 25, 2013, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.librev.com/index.php/discussion/bulgaria/1962-2013-03-29-10-47-42>.

³³ Martin Mevius, “Reapprising Communism and Nationalism,” *Nationalities Papers* 37, no. 4 (July 2009): 377-400, translated in Bulgarian [“Komunizum i natzionalizum”], *Liberalen Pregled*, July 24, 2013, accessed April 5, 2022, <https://www.librev.com/index.php/prospects/science/2122-2013-07-24-20-21-08>.

³⁴ Valerie Bunce, “The National Idea: Imperial Legacies and Post-Communist Pathways in Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 19, no. 3 (2005): 407.

Eastern European countries."³⁵ Bunce has defined the nation as "political community united by a common culture," and nationalism as a "political project motivated by popular sovereignty, freedom and equality of rights."³⁶

Herbert Kitschelt defined the Bulgarian communist regime as a "patrimonial communism" – a system organized on

"hierarchical chains of personal dependence between leaders in the apparatus and their entourage, buttressed by extensive patronage and clientelist networks. Opposition is severely repressed or coopted [...]."³⁷

The outcome of this type of patrimonial communism is a left-oriented (successor) party carrying economic populism, nationalism, authoritarianism, lenient decommunization, and a certain hostility to democratization.³⁸ John Ishiyama has underlined the place of nationalism in countries like Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia, where the red-brown vote was far more sizeable than in Central Europe.³⁹ According to him, extreme right voters supported the successor parties at the beginning because they were well organized and because of the nostalgia to the communist regime. He did forecast that,

"if bona fide leftist socialist party were to emerge that vehemently opposed Europeanization, immigration and capitalism, it is likely that this might mobilize the red-brown impulse again" [because] "the support for statism, socialism and nationalism is likely to remain an important part of the political scene in post-communist politics."⁴⁰

The Bulgarian Socialist Party and Nationalism

The analysis of the Bulgarian Socialist Party's expression of nationalism since Bulgaria's accession to the EU is based on three fundamental

³⁵ Bunce, *The National Idea*, 408.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 409.

³⁷ Herbert Kitschelt, "Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions," *Party Politics* 1, no. 4 (1995): 453.

³⁸ Kitschelt, "Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies," 465-467.

³⁹ John Ishiyama, "Historical Legacies and the size of the red-brown vote in post-communist politics," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42 (2009): 499.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 501.

documents adopted by the party in different periods, under different leaders: the party's program "For Bulgaria – Free Citizens; Fair State; Solidary society" from 2008; the Political Declaration "Time for Justice!" which marked the attempt for a left turn in 2015; and the document "Vision for Bulgaria" from 2019.⁴¹ We will try to explore the connections between the left, international cooperation, and nationalism.

The way in which the BSP labels its electoral coalitions is illustrative of the inclusion of the EU or the national state. The *social-democratization* of the party in 2001 matched its coalition format, called New Left, which assembled the historic Social-Democratic party and other social-democratic formations. Usually, the coalitions are named "Coalition for Bulgaria," "Left Bulgaria," "BSP for Bulgaria." Only in 2007, for the first (partial) elections of Bulgarian MEPs to the European Parliament, the coalition's name referred to the European level – PES (Platform European Socialists – BSP, and Party "Movement for Social Humanism"). Antony Todorov underlines that the change of the names of the BSP's electoral coalitions bears specific messages putting the accent on "European," on the nation state "Bulgaria," or on the "Left."⁴² In 2021, the BSP's "Coalition For Bulgaria" has nationalist and patriotic accent, and it includes one of the three marginal Communist parties; the nationalist formation *Nova Zora* (*New Dawn*); the political club *Ecoglasnost* (center-left) and the political club *Trakia* (a nationalist and patriotic organization). Until 2017, the BSP's coalitions included nine small communist and social-democratic organizations that have been since excluded.

⁴¹ Programa na BSP "Za Bulgaria - Svobodni grazhdani; Spravedлива darjava; Solidarno občestvo" [For Bulgaria - Free Citizens; Fair State; Solidary Society], adopted by the decision of the Forty-seventh congress of BSP, November 22-23, 2008, accessed April 2, 2022, https://bsp.bg/documents/osnovni_dokumenti.html; Politicheska deklaracija na BSP "Vreme za spravedlivost!" [Political declaration of BSP "Time for Justice!"], adopted by the decision of the Forty-eighth congress of BSP, April 5, 2015, BSP.bg, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://bsp.bg/files/attachments/2015/07/31/deklaracija-sled-kongres.pdf>; "BSP. Vizija za Bulgaria 2019" [BSP. Vision for Bulgaria 2019], adopted by the decision of the Forty-ninth congress of BSP, January 26, 2019, accessed April 5, 2022, https://bsp.bg/files/vizia_za_bulgaria.pdf.

⁴² Todorov, "Elections of Change or Failure?," 7.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party's European Moment

The Prime Minister and leader of the BSP Sergey Stanishev declared at the conference of the party organization of district Vazrazhdane in Sofia, on November 8, 2008, that the European integration of the country:

“[...] was a historical task for the BSP and we should be proud that our party has been in power when this goal was achieved and which was the fundamental horizon for the years of the Bulgarian transition(..) The membership in the EU, that we achieved, is a historical success not only for Bulgaria but also for the Bulgarian Socialist Party.”⁴³

The New Program of the BSP “For Bulgaria. Free Citizens. Just State. Solidary Society,” was adopted at the Forty-Seventh Congress (November 22-23, 2008). The program stated that:

“The BSP has more than 100 years of history and it is the successor of the Bulgarian Social-democratic Party created in 1891 [...]. The most invaluable in the long party's history is the defense of the interests of the large popular masses, of the principles of the social justice and of solidarity, equality, republicanism, patriotism, and internationalism.”⁴⁴

The document defines BSP as a patriotic, mass party, a left social party of democratic socialism and calls for a new kind of internationalism. Patriotism is defined as:

“our priority is to stand up for the sovereignty and for territorial integrity of the Bulgarian state; to fight for the conservation and the popularization of the Bulgarian cultural and historical legacy, and for the affirmation of the Bulgarian identity and its development. The chauvinism and all forms of national haughtiness and xenophobia are strange to the BSP.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Sergey Stanishev, “Ima kakvo da dadem na Bulgaria” [We have something to give to Bulgaria], speech at the conference of BSP district's organization in Sofia, November 8, 2008, *Savremeneni pokazatel*, Sofia: Informative publication of the Supreme Council of the BSP, no. 19, November 10, 2008, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://bsp.bg/files/savremeneni-pokazatel/bsp-noemvri.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Programa na BSP “Za Bulgaria - Svobodni grazhdani; Spravedлива darjava; Solidarno obchtestvo” [For Bulgaria – Free Citizens; Just State; Solidary Society], 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

As a mass party,

“the BSP gathers the socialists from all social strata regardless of their educational and property status, gender, ethnicity, and faith. The BSP is a part of the European and the World Left [...] The global challenges require a global solidarity, and a new kind of internationalism.”⁴⁶

The BSP is a member of the Socialist International and of the PES – “an irrevocable prerequisite to the success of our fight for social justice and prosperity.”⁴⁷

Looking to the Left

The party’s left turn is visible in its electoral platform ahead of the European elections in 2014 “For a Social Europe! For a Social Bulgaria!”⁴⁸ The document is pro-European and stands for a progressive and social European Union. Mihail Mikov has been elected as a chairman of the BSP at the Forty-Eighth party Congress in July 2014, after the resignation of Sergey Stanishev which came as a result of the party’s defeat at the elections to the EU Parliament. Under the leadership of Mikov, the party declared a Left turn.

The Political Declaration “Time for Justice!” adopted by the Forty-Eighth Congress on April 5, 2015, put the accent against the neo-liberal globalization, and on concerns about the nation and the national identity:

“We need to defend our national interests from neo-liberal financial, economic, and political dictates. We cannot be resigned to the wild capitalism, and to the deleterious neoliberal course of the government, when in Europe the dissatisfaction and the resistance against them are rising. We are against the division in Europe. We are for an EU which actively overcomes economic and social inequalities. Together with the parties of the European socialist family we are fighting for an EU which ensures sustainable employment and justice.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Programa na BSP “Za Bulgaria – Svobodni grazhdani; Spravedлива darjava; Solidarno obchtestvo,” 5-6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁸ BSP. Electoral Platform “For a Social Europe,” BSP.bg, European Elections 2014, adopted by the decision of the Forty-eighth congress of BSP, February 8, 2014, accessed January 22, 2024, https://bsp.bg/documents/resheniq_kongresi.html.

⁴⁹ BSP political declaration “Time for Justice,” 3.

The formal signs of Euroscepticism appear in this document:

“Our socialist values are obliging us to defend the national priorities of Bulgaria and to stand up for the interests of Bulgarian citizens and their rights.”⁵⁰

The BSP denounces some perceived injustices stemming from the EU:

“We insist for equal conditions for the Bulgarian producers [...] We are against the economic dumping inside the EU at the expense for Bulgarian producers. [...] We stand for a just redistribution of the EU funds without divisions on center and periphery in the EU, for their effective investment in favor of more citizens.”⁵¹

The BSP opposes the signature of the Treaty of Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The document calls also for

“The spiritual revival which requires the mobilization of the intellectual potential of the nation. Only educated and spiritually enlightened citizens can preserve the Bulgarian cultural identity, the patriotism, and the love for homeland. They will restore the national self-confidence and the dignity of Bulgarian people not only on its history and the past but also of the present.”⁵²

All this is necessary to consolidate the statehood, and “to conserve the Bulgarian nation in the name of the progress of Bulgaria!”⁵³

...And to National Populism and Euroscepticism

The Forty-Ninth Congress of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, held in May 2016, elected a new party leader – Mrs. Kornelia Ninova. The new chairwoman successfully managed to marginalize or to oust opponents, social-democrats, or the pro-Europeans from high-ranking positions in the party. New elites took over the organization with a new line – conservative, nationalist, Eurosceptic. The BSP since 2016 has neither been leftist, nor European or progressive. In 2017, a new direction of action has been outlined by

⁵⁰ BSP political declaration “Time for Justice,” 3.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ BSP political declaration “Time for Justice.”

Ninova – against the government of the party GERB, against its corruption and its “authoritarian style.”⁵⁴ She tried to reposition the BSP as a protest anti-establishment populist party. She launched the concept of the “parallel state” of the corrupt elites against the people; she positioned the political organization against the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).⁵⁵ The BSP opposes “the People” to the government of the GERB and CETA; “the People” to the government of GERB, and then to the integration of refugees. The party has also been against the EU sanctions on Russia, imposed after the annexation of Crimea.

The migrant crisis in 2015 fueled xenophobic tendencies in the Bulgarian society, and the BSP was not keen on accepting refugees. The BSP formulated a vision for a “social state” only for nationals. Ninova has been against policies of integration of refugees and has criticized the Decision of the Council of ministers for the integration of refugees, under the argument that it would not be fair for the Bulgarian state to ensure for refugees’ health insurance, free accommodation, and rights that are not ensured for its own citizens. Dominique Reynié defines the concept of “patrimonial populism,” characterized by positions against taxes, political conservatism, cultural liberalism, individualism, identity secularism, and targeting immigrants as the main scapegoat for negative effects on the nationals.⁵⁶ In his analysis, Emmanuel Dalle Mulle defines the concept of “welfare chauvinism,” which is

“a conditional conception of solidarity primarily based on the deservingness criterion of identity. It is more vulgarly expressed by the expression «our own people first.”⁵⁷

In the case of poor countries, like Bulgaria, the ethnic approach to social transfers and conception of solidarity can be seen as a form of a “poor’s

⁵⁴ Speech of the president of the BSP, Kornelia Ninova, at the Forty-ninth Congress of the party, March 6, 2017, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZFepdm-tFM>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Reynié, *Les Nouveaux Populismes*, 298-299.

⁵⁷ Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, “The Nationalism of the Rich,” in *Research Handbook on Nationalism*, eds. Liah Greenfeld and Zeying Wu (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 234.

nationalism” towards other vulnerable people, who are perceived as a threat for the ethnic nationals, the *other*, ethnically different from the major ethnic or national group.

Also, the BSP started to criticize the failure of the democratic transition and to boost nostalgia for the Communist regime. The Political declaration made on the Forty-ninth congress of the party, “Contemporaries of the future. 125 years BSP,” affirms that:

“During these decades (of the communist regime), despite the dogmatic decisions and acts of violence in the first years, the country reached a comprehensive economic and spiritual development, industrialization, and modernization of production. It succeeded in state building, in the social sphere, health, education, science, culture, and sports. It ensured the parity between men and women. Bulgaria reached its place among the first thirty nations in the world in its economic and human development. That is why even after the dramatic fall of the state socialism in Eastern Europe the BSP has survived.”⁵⁸

On the contrary,

“the transition failed because it did not guide Bulgaria to a higher level of social economic and spiritual development or to a better life for a majority of people.”⁵⁹

The BSP proclaims itself a party of the Bulgarian statehood, which defends the republican and the constitutional government, the Bulgarian history and culture, and which preserves “the Slavonic and orthodox roots of the Bulgarian nation.”⁶⁰

The Forty-Ninth congress of the BSP approved in October 2017 a declaration “On the Bulgarian politics and the Left alternative for Bulgaria,” and a political vision statement titled “More Social Europe – in the interest of the people.” The BSP’s electoral platform started to promote protectionism, and patriotism regarding the country’s economic production. The same year, it proposed a bill aimed to

⁵⁸ Political declaration of BSP, “Contemporaries of the future. 125 years BSP,” BSP.bg, adopted by the decision of the Forty-ninth congress of BSP, May 8, 2016, accessed January 23, 2024, https://bsp.bg/documents/resheniq_kongresi.html: 2-3.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3-4.

“guarantee the interest of Bulgarian farmers on the Bulgarian market, the introduction of new requirements for the usage of the label «Bulgarian» for products, the reduction of deadlines of the payments for perishable products.”⁶¹

The bill of the socialists proposed to sanction the supermarkets that would not respect the requirement to hand over up to ten per cent of their annual turnover for assistance to the local agricultural production. The bill would have violated the European freedom of movement of goods and competition, and it was rejected.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party's ambivalent positions toward the EU can be defined as a soft Euroscepticism. The party is Eurosceptic on some European issues, and is pro-European on other issues, but fundamentally the BSP does not question the integration of the country in the EU or the European values.

The next document analyzed, “Vision for Bulgaria 2019,” is a comprehensive program for the development of Bulgaria, elaborated by experts, debated by the grassroots party members, and approved by the party national leadership. We will point out only the relevant parts related to nationalism.

In what regards the severe demographic crisis in Bulgaria, the document states that,

“The ethnic trends in the natality cannot and should not be underestimated. Knowing the condition of life of some ethnic communities, the policy for the improvement of the child wellbeing should not ignore the need for a comprehensive and sustainable integration of Roma in the Bulgarian society.”⁶²

On emigration issues, the document states that it is in the “defense of the national interests to determine the educated Bulgarians of active age to return back to the country, and to attract ethnic Bulgarians abroad.”⁶³

The BSP opposes the Pact on migration and the acceptance of refugees:

⁶¹ Bill for amendment and complement of the Foods Act N 754-01-7, submitted on May 18, 2017, by Kornelia Ninova and MPs, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://parliament.bg/en/plenaryst/ns/55/ID/5964>.

⁶² BSP “Vision for Bulgaria,” 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10.

“The Bulgarian Socialists affirm categorically that the migration [issue] needs an encompassing European solution. This is only possible based on the international law on refugees and asylum seekers, which distinguishes refugees from economic migrants. The adoption of the Global Pact on migration poses significant contradictions and problems. We do not want Bulgaria and Europe to live in fear of migrant invasion.”⁶⁴

The document appeals for a clear defense of national interests at the international level and exemplifies the BSP’s categoric opposition against the Istanbul Convention and the Pact on migration of the UN, and mentions that the support for these international agreements was withdrawn under social and political pressure.”⁶⁵

In November 2018, party leader Ninova required explanations from the party in government, GERB, asking when and how the Global Pact on migration had been approved by Bulgaria, and protesting that it was against “the national interests.”⁶⁶

In a Position of the National Council of the BSP on the Resolution of the European Parliament on October 8, 2020, concerning the principles of the Rule of law and the fundamental rights in Bulgaria (adopted on October 11, 2020), the party rejected some positions of the European Parliament regarding Bulgaria and declared as inadmissible the

“calls of the European Parliament for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, because of the decision of the [Bulgarian] Constitutional Court that the Istanbul Convention contradicts the Constitution and could not be ratified by the National Assembly and based on the official position of the BSP in the National Assembly in 2018 on not supporting the convention.”⁶⁷

The cultural nationalism and the expression of patriotism of BSP switched to national populist positions. On the issues of welfare state and social

⁶⁴ BSP “Vision for Bulgaria,” 35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁶ National Assembly of Republic of Bulgaria. Kormelia Ninova’s speech on the Global Pact on migration, Transcripts of the 195th Plenary session of the NA, November 9, 2018, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/plenaryst/ns/55/ID/6509>.

⁶⁷ Position of the National Council of the BSP on the resolution of the European Parliament from October 8, 2020, concerning the principles of the Rule of law and the fundamental rights in Bulgaria, issued October 11, 2020, BSP.bg, accessed April 4, 2022, https://bsp.bg/documents/resheniq_nacionalen_syvet.html.

policies, the BSP gives priority to the poor ethnic nationals. To some degree, the BSP is very close to the national radical right: it is against refugees, and it opposes the Istanbul convention. An important historical element of the BSP's patriotism is its pro-Russian stance.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party and the War Against Ukraine

The Bulgarian Socialist Party opposes sanctions against Russia. The slogan of the socialist mobilization can be defined as follows: "With the EU, but never against Russia." The Bulgarian socialists have always been pro-Russian, and several of the party's officials have promoted Russian interest, particularly the energy quasi-monopoly in Bulgaria. The "Movement of Russophiles" was a part of the party. The BSP was strongly opposed to NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. The former Bulgarian President Gueorgui Parvanov (2002-2012), and former leader of BSP, has supported the country's integration in NATO despite the strong opposition inside the party. Later, Parvanov very actively promoted the Russian energy mega-projects in the Balkan region which failed. In fact, it was Boiko Borissov and GERB who accomplished the Russian "Turkish Stream."

Table 4 reflects the geopolitical preferences of the supporters of parliamentary parties. It is evident that the BSP supporters are the most favorable to an alliance with Russia, while those of *Vazrazhdane* are less supportive to an alliance with NATO and EU. The most pro-EU and NATO are the supporters of Democratic Bulgaria and "We Continue the Change!" The less pro-Russian are the supporters of Democratic Bulgaria, GERB, "There is Such a People!" and "We Continue the Change!".

The BSP's document "Vision for Bulgaria 2019" declares that:

"Our membership in NATO remains at the center of our defense policy. Our country will continue to be an active and predictable member of the Alliance... Bulgaria will continue to work for the development of the European common defense policy."⁶⁸

However, two phases can be distinguished regarding positions of BSP related to the country's foreign policy in relation with the Russian war

⁶⁸ BSP "Vision for Bulgaria 2019," 32.

against Ukraine. The first phase covers the period when the BSP returned to power, as a part of the coalition government of Kiril Petkov (December 2021 – August 2022). During this period, the socialists managed to block any decisive action for military aid to Ukraine. However, the BSP had acceded to governmental power for the first time since 2014 and being part of the government was a factor moderating its stances.

The second phase started with the end of Petkov's government and the return of the BSP in opposition. The party was in isolation and without a real potential to block decisions on foreign policy issues. The socialists continued to lose electoral support in the two early elections in October 2022 and April 2023, and they hardened their positions against all pro-NATO and anti-Russian parties and decisions. The BSP designated these parties "the coalition of the war."⁶⁹ The BSP's positions can be summed up as follows: (1) The BSP is opposed to sanctions against Russia; (2) The BSP is opposed to any supply of military aid insinuating that it would directly involve Bulgaria in the war. This is presented also as a "principled position" because the BSP is a party for peace and against war; (3) The BSP's vision for Bulgaria is as a mediator to end the war; (4) The BSP is not openly opposed to NATO, but in fact it has been opposing all actions of fulfilment of Bulgarian duties as a NATO member.

On February 22, 2022, the BSP Parliamentary group issued a declaration calling for direct negotiations on the conflict in Ukraine under the leadership of the UN.⁷⁰ For the socialists, the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics by the Russian Federation is a violation of international law. During the BSP's participation in the coalition government of Kiril Petkov (December 2021 – August 2022), the party supported some Ukraine aid actions but formally rejected others. The BSP voted for the Declaration of the National Assembly on February 23, 2022, condemning Russia. In May 2022, the party made it clear that it would not support any supply of armaments to Ukraine. Later, the BSP opposed all decisions for military aid to Ukraine.

⁶⁹ Borislav Goutsanov, "We continue the Change!, Democratic Bulgaria and GERB are the coalition of the war," BSP.bg, March 8, 2023, accessed August 20, 2023, https://bsp.bg/news/view/24023borislav_goutsanov__pp_db_i_gerb_sa_koalitsiya_na_voynata.html.

⁷⁰ "BSP appeals to direct negotiations on the conflict in Ukraine under the lead of UN," BSP.bg, February 22, 2022, accessed August 11, 2023, https://bsp.bg/news/view/21783-bsp_prizovava_za_preki_pregovori_za_konflikta_v_ukrayna_pod_egidata_na_oon.html.

This position is based on the supposed effects of the war on the Bulgarian economy.

“BSP condemns the military actions in Ukraine. We also condemn the violation of the principles of international law...but the parliamentary group of «BSP for Bulgaria» did not support the introduction of sanctions against Russia.”⁷¹

Among the arguments against the sanctions is that these sanctions would harm small countries like Bulgaria which would pay the price, not the big economies.

“The purpose of the sanctions was to weaken the Russian economy (...) The only and the biggest loser from these sanctions is the European Union, including Bulgaria.”⁷²

As a coalition partner of “We Continue the Change!” on March 1, 2022, the BSP supported the decision of the PM Kiril Petkov who required the resignation of the minister of Defense Stefan Yanev as he refused to use the term “war” and referred to Russian invasion as a “special operation.”⁷³

Another argument against any military aid has been that this will directly involve Bulgaria in the war. Kornelia Ninova stated that:

“Categorically and firmly, the coalition’ partner «BSP for Bulgaria» with all the means at our disposal – legal, parliamentary, executive power, will not allow Bulgaria to be involved in the war through the supply of weapons, ammunition and dual-use goods and technologies.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Alexander Simov, “BSP: We condemn the military actions, but we don’t support sanctions against Russia,” BSP.bg, February 24, 2022, accessed January 23, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/21800aleksandyr_simov_bsp_osyjdame_voennite_deystviya_no_ne_podkrepyame_sanktsii_sreshtu_rusiya.html.

⁷² “BSP: The EU including Bulgaria are the only loser from the sanctions against Russia,” BSP.bg, May 5, 2023, accessed January 23, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/24466-bsp_edinstveniyat_i_golyam_gubeshht_ot_sanktsiite_sreshtu_rusiya_e_es_v_tova_chislo_i_bylgariya.html.

⁷³ “Prime minister Petkov demands resignation of Bulgaria’s defence minister,” BNR.bg, February 28, 2022, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101608233/prime-minister-petkov-demands-resignation-of-bulgaria-s-defence-minister>.

⁷⁴ Kornelia Ninova, “BSP won’t allow Bulgaria to be involved in the war,” BSP.bg, April 1, 2022, accessed January 23, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/21966-korneliya_ninova_bsp_nyama_da_pozvoli_na_bylgariya_da_byde_namesena_vyv_voynata_chrez_dost_avka_na_oryjiya.html.

This was defined as a “red line” for the party’s participation in the government of Petkov. Kristian Vigenin declared that,

“[the] BSP has principles and would not compromise them. There are red lines beyond which we will not cross - any aid to Ukraine will receive our full support, but weapons will not.”⁷⁵

The refusal to support Ukraine with armaments is presented also as a principled party’s position. According to Ninova,

“the issue of arms exports to Ukraine has been posed as a civilizational choice. For us – «BSP for Bulgaria,» the peace is the highest civilizational value. We are a party for peace. Our view is that this conflict must be ended, negotiated, hostilities stopped, and a peaceful solution sought.”⁷⁶

At the same time, however, the BSP is not opposed to NATO:

“The BSP has always treated Bulgaria’s membership in the European Union and NATO with respect. It was our president who signed our NATO accession treaty. We should be a consistent and loyal member of the Pact but let’s not be overly aggressive about armaments when it is not required by the documents we signed.”⁷⁷

However, on March 11, 2022, the BSP’s ministers in Petkov’s cabinet did not vote to allow eight Dutch fighter jets to protect the Bulgarian airspace in the framework of the NATO Air Policing mission.

The ambivalence of the socialists as a partner in Petkov’s government was also visible in May 2022 when they voted for the proposal of “We Continue the Change!” on the “Decision to Take Action in Relation to the War in Ukraine” (State Gazette, 35, May 10, 2022).⁷⁸ The Decision

⁷⁵ Kristian Vigenin, “BSP niama da napravi kompromisi s principite si” [BSP will not compromise with its principles], BSP.bg, March 1, 2022, accessed August 14, 2023, https://bsp.bg/news/view/21821kristian_vigenin__bsp_nyama_da_napravi_kompromis_s_printsipite_si.html.

⁷⁶ Kornelia Ninova, “BSP e partiya na mira” [BSP is a party of peace], BSP.bg, November 3, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/23415-korneliya_ninova__bsp_e_partiya_na_mira.html.

⁷⁷ Borislav Goutsanov, “BSP’s Position is ‘no’ to the war and ‘no’ to the participation in the war,” BSP.bg, May 4, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/22182-borislav_goutsanov__pozitsiyata_na_bsp_e_ne_na_voynata_i_ne_na_uchastieto_v_neya.html

⁷⁸ “Decision to Take Action in Relation to the War in Ukraine,” adopted by the National Assembly, May 5, 2022, 2.

gave a mandate to the Council of Ministers to implement a package of measures related to the war in Ukraine and its consequences by providing humanitarian, financial and *military-technical* assistance to Ukraine. Also, while Ninova declared that Bulgaria was not exporting weapons, ammunition or dual-use goods and technologies to Ukraine, some media started revealing that Bulgaria is exporting weapons to Ukraine, indirectly through third countries Poland and Romania since the beginning of the war.⁷⁹

On June 27, 2022, PM Kiril Petkov decided to expel seventy Russian diplomats and Russian Embassy staff members.⁸⁰ The BSP strongly opposed the decision.

In face of electoral downturn from one election to another, the BSP leadership has been further hardening stances against military aid. After the early election in October 2022, the “BSP for Bulgaria” announced four priorities including “guaranteeing the peace to Bulgarian people and the preservation of his dignity.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Kornelia Ninova, “BSP nyama da pozvoli Bulgaria da byde namesenavuv vojnata chrez dostavka na orujiya” [BSP won’t allow Bulgaria to be involved in the war because of the supply of armaments], BSP.bg, April 1, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/21966korneliya_ninova__bsp_nyama_da_pozvoli_na_bylgariya_da_byde_namesena_vyv_voynata_chrez_dostavka_na_oryjiya.html; Nikolay Marchenko, “Sofia secretly selling old weapons meant for Ukraine via Romania and Poland,” Bivol, July 19, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://bivol.bg/en/sofia-secretly-selling-old-weapons-meant-for-ukraine-via-romania-and-poland.html>; Philip Volkmann-Schluck, Welt “Bulgaria to the rescue: How the EU’s poorest country secretly saved Ukraine,” Politico, January 18, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-volodymyr-zelensky-kiril-petkov-poorest-country-eu-ukraine/>; John Henley “Bulgaria secretly supplied Ukraine fuel and ammunition in early months of war,” The Guardian, January 18, 2023, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/18/bulgaria-secretly-supplied-ukraine-fuel-ammunition-first-months-war-russia>.

⁸⁰ Tsvetlina Tsoleva, “Bulgaria expels 70 Russian diplomatic staff over espionage concerns,” Reuters, June 28, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgaria-expels-70-russian-diplomatic-staff-over-espionage-concerns-2022-06-28/>.

⁸¹ “Ninova: Imame chetiri prioriteta: blagosystoyanie, razvitie na ikonomikata, borba s koruptsiyata i mir” [Ninova: We have four priorities: welfare, development of economics, faith against corruption and peace’], BSP.bg, October 19, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/23329-ninova__imame_chetiri_prioriteta__blagosystoyanie__razvitie_na_ikonomikata_borba_s_koruptsiyata_i_mir.html.

“We believe that the peace is the highest human good. We have condemned Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. We have helped the Ukrainian refugees...but the provision of weapons from Bulgaria to Ukraine means involving the country in the war.”⁸²

The party rejected several parliamentary decisions: for the supply of military help to Ukraine passed in November 2022; the Declaration in support of Ukraine’s accession to NATO; the visit of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Sofia on July 6, 2023; the parliamentary “Decision for additional provision of military-technical support to Ukraine,” adopted on July 21, 2023, declaring that Bulgaria

“will provide Ukraine with armored transport equipment with its available armament, as well as spare parts for its service, with no longer needed for the needs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.”⁸³

The BSP warned on November 3, 2022, that:

“a coalition of the war which sooner or later will bring a heavy political cost to all... We from the BSP say: “NO to war, YES to peace!”⁸⁴

The so-called “coalition of the war” included all parties supporting military aid to Ukraine: GERB, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms DPS, Democratic Bulgaria, “We Continue the Change!,” and “Bulgarian Ascent.”⁸⁵ The MPs from “BSP for Bulgaria” raised placards reading “No to guns! Peace!” in the plenary hall, on November 3, 2022, when the Parliament

⁸² “Ninova: Iame chetiri prioriteta: blagosystoyanie, razvitie na ikonomikata, borba s koruptsiyata i mir.”

⁸³ Decision for additional provision of military-technical support to Ukraine,” adopted by the decision of the Forty-ninth National Assembly on July 21, 2023 (SG 63/2023), Parliament.bg, accessed August 28, 2023, <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=197060>.

⁸⁴ Kristian Vigenin, “BSP: Delivery of military aid to Ukraine is irresponsible and the people will pay the price,” BSP.bg, November 3, 2022, accessed January 22, 2024, https://bsp.bg/news/view/23413-kristian_vigenin_bsp_predostavyaneto_na_voenna_pomosht_na_ukrayna_e_bezotgovornost_tsenata_na_koyato_shte_plashtat_horata.html.

⁸⁵ Kornelia Ninova, “The supply of weapons to Ukraine is a risk for the involvement of Bulgaria in the war,” BSP.bg, December 9, 2022, accessed August 28, 2023, https://bsp.bg/news/view/23587-korneliya_ninova_predostavyaneto_na_oryjie_e_risk_za_vyvlichane_na_bylgariya_kato_strana_vyv_voynata.html.

approved weapons export to Ukraine. The decision was supported by 175 deputies from all parliamentary groups excluding the MPs from Vazrazhdane and BSP who voted against it.

The BSP Electoral platform for 2023, "PEACE. Prosperity, Solidarity, Progress" highlights that the party "puts at the first place our national interests," and that it is standing for "a world without wars."⁸⁶ In foreign policy, the goal is "the defense of Bulgarian national interests and the guarantee of favorable external conditions for the development of the country."⁸⁷ This includes:

"the assertion of possibilities for international political dialogue and diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine;" "the opposition to politics of sanctions and countersanctions from which suffer citizens;" the "categoric opposition to actions which could involve Bulgaria into the military conflict."⁸⁸

Also, the BSP is against "the tendencies of militarization of the Black Sea."⁸⁹ The party is for the normalization of diplomatic relations and maintenance of constructive dialogue with the Russian Federation.

The BSP opposes the decision of the new coalition government "We Continue the Change!" – *Democratic Bulgaria* with GERB –, formed on June 6, 2023, led by PM Nikolay Denkov for joining the EU initiative to provide a million ammunition shells to Ukraine, funded through the European Peace Initiative.

The BSP, along with *Vazrazhdane*, and President Roumen Radev, form the camp opposed to anti-Russian forces and actions. The three share and diffuse similar stances and messages to Bulgarian citizens even though they differ in degree and communication styles.

Since 2014, the BSP has shifted to leftist positions coupled with nationalism and populism in a conservative direction. The BSP's relations with nationalism are pragmatic and fluctuant: the party became pro-European in the name of the "national interest," then developed international

⁸⁶ BSP Electoral Platform 2023 "PEACE. Prosperity, Solidarity, Progress," BSP.bg, accessed August 28, 2023, https://bsp.bg/predizborna_platforma.html.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

cooperation in order to work for the “national interest.” Later, its Euroscepticism is explained again by defending the same “national interest.” The BSP is opposed to neo-liberal globalization, and it has rejected the TTIP and CETA, but stands for the deepening of the European integration in several fields including common defense. The conception of the national interest for the BSP includes good relations with Russia, China, India, and other countries. Further consolidation of Euroscepticism and the illiberal stances of the BSP, in case of new electoral upswing, could impact the country’s place among its partners in the EU and NATO, distancing it from the West and approaching it to the East. Another scenario leads to the marginalization or the disappearance of the party. Finally, the continued decline of BSP did not open a window of opportunity for the appearance of a new modern and progressive left political actor in Bulgaria. As during the two first decades since the fall of the communist regime, the resilience of the BSP continues to be a hurdle to the appearance of any new strong left party. Therefore, the party system suffers from an asymmetry abandoning progressive leftwing voters, not allowing them real representation.

Table 1

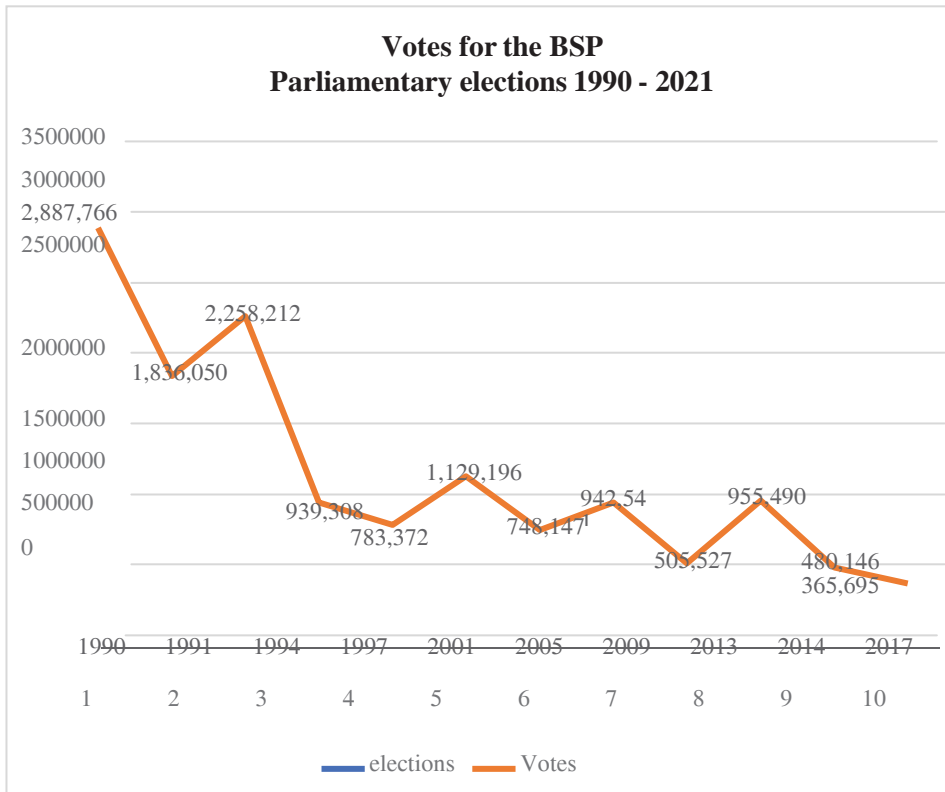
Party Euroscepticism: issues, criteria of assessment and types of party competition

Issues of Euroscepticism	Euroscepticism's significance – assessment criteria	Types of party system competition, related to the European issue
Economic crisis	Eurosceptic party's participation in government	Limited contestation: absence of significant parties expressing Euroscepticism. No competition on European issues. No significant effect on party's leadership or elections' outcome
Immigration crisis	Conflict over a European issue significantly determines the leadership of a major party	Constrained contestation: Euroscepticism is confined to the periphery of the party system. It is not an issue of contestation between major parties. No impact on major parties' leadership or elections' outcome
Democracy and Sovereignty	European issue determines the fate of a national government	Open contestation: significant Euroscepticism expressed by parties. European issues are contested between and within major parties and have at times impacted either their leadership or an election's outcome.
Values Traditional, religious vs liberal/globalist/metropolitan	European Issue significantly determines the outcome of a national election	Embedded contestation: Euroscepticism is embedded in party competition; high degree of politicization of European issue.

Source: author's own elaboration, based on Paul Taggart, "Europeanization, Euroscepticism, and Politicization in Party Politics" in *The Member States of The European Union*, eds. Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 331-353, 341-348.

Table 2

Trends of the electoral support for the BSP at parliamentary elections from 1990 to 2021



Source: author's own elaboration, based on Central Election Commission, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.cik.bg/>.

Table 3

Alpha Research-OSI Sofia: Dominant parties' attitudes in favour of alliance with NATO and EU, June 2022, Q: "If there is a new division in Europe, similar to the Cold War, where should Bulgaria position itself?"

Party	For an alliance with NATO and EU	For an alliance with Russia	Other	Cannot decide
Overall, for Bulgaria	39%	23%	7%	2%
Supporters of Democratic Bulgaria	96%	0%	0%	4%
Supporters of We Continue the Change	68%	14%	6%	12%
Supporters of There is Such a People!	65%	13%	0%	22%
Supporters of GERB	58%	12%	6%	24%
Supporters of Bulgarian Ascent	25%	38%	7%	30%
Supporters of DPS	23%	21%	8%	48%
Supporters of BSP	21%	56%	3%	20%
Supporters of Vazrazhdane (Revival)	17%	49%	17%	17%

Source: "Dva puti poveche bulgari predpochitat sauz s NATO i ES pred sauz s Russia" [Twice as many Bulgarians prefer an alliance with NATO and EU than an alliance with Russia] Open Society Institute Sofia, June 29, 2022, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://osis.bg/?p=4151>.

Table 4

Parties' votes on issues related to Ukraine, February 2022 – July 2023

Parties: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB); Union of Democratic Forces (UDF); We Continue the Change! (CC), Democratic Bulgaria (DB), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), There is Such a People! (TSP); Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP); Bulgarian Ascent (BA)

Date	Decision	For	Against	Abstained
24/02/2022	"47th NA Declaration in connection with the aggressive military actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine" The declaration was voted point by point on the insistence of BSP			
	For the entire Declaration with its preamble	214 MPs voted for: GERB, CC, DB, DPS, TSP and BSP	Vazrazhdane	
	1. categorically condemns the flagrant violation of international law by the Russian Federation and the encroachment on territorial integrity through military intervention against Ukraine	213 MPs from GERB, BSP, DPS, DB, CC, TSP		Vazrazhdane
	2. Supports its partners and allies in the EU and NATO in discussing a package of measures, including sanctions, to de-escalate the conflict.	192 MPs from GERB, DPS, DB, CC, TSP	Vazrazhdane + 1 MP of BSP voted against	19 MPs from BSP + 2 MPs from GERB
	3. Supports the Bulgarian government to take the necessary measures, corresponding to the seriousness against the challenges to the international security architecture.	227 MPs including Vazrazhdane and BSP		

	4. Supports the Bulgarian government to consider and offer assistance to Ukraine, corresponding to the capabilities of the Bulgarian state.	228 MPs including Vazrazhdane and BSP		
	5. Supports the Bulgarian government in insisting that the protection of the life and health of civilians from the region be an absolute priority	228 MPs including Vazrazhdane and BSP		
	6. Supports the Bulgarian government to assist in obtaining immediate assistance for Bulgarian citizens living in Ukraine and Bulgarians with Ukrainian citizenship, including if evacuation is necessary.	226 MPs, including Vazrazhdane and BSP		
	7. Expects the Bulgarian government to propose and present a plan for dealing with the consequences of the military actions.	212 MPs		13 MPs from Vazrazhdane abstained
	8. Urges the Russian Federation to immediately cease hostilities and return to full compliance with international law.	210 MPs from GERB, BSP, DPS, DB, CC, TSP		13 MPs from Vazrazhdane abstained
	Vote on the title of the Declaration	191 MPs from GERB, BSP, DPS, DB, CC, TSP	Vazrazhdane 13 MPs	1 MP from CC abstained
4/05/2022	47th NA “Decision to take action in relation to the war in Ukraine” Official Journal 35, 10/05/2022 The Decision gave a mandate to the Council of Ministers to provide military-technical assistance to Ukraine	200 MPs from GERB, BSP, DPS, DB, CC, TSP	16 MPs voted against: 13 from Vazrazhdane ; 1 from BSP; 1 from CC; 1 from TSP	1 MP from TSP

3/11/2022	48 th NA “Decision for providing military and military-technical support to Ukraine and strengthening Bulgaria's defense capabilities” Official Journal 89, 8/11/2022	175 MPs from GERB, CC, DPS, DB, BA	49 MPs: 27 from Vazrazhdane and 22 from BSP	1 from CC
4/11/2022	48 th NA “Project for investment expenditure “Acquisition of a new type of combat aircraft - second stage”	162 MPs from GERB, CC, DPS, DB and BA	49 MPs: 27 from Vazrazhdane; 21 from BSP; 1 from CC	11 MPs: 10 from CC; 1 from BSP
9/12/2022	48 th NA “Decision of National Assembly for providing military and military-technical support to Ukraine” Official Journal 99, 12/12/2022	148 MPs from GERB, CC, DB, DPS, BA and 1 from BSP (Yavor Bozhankov, who was expelled from the BSP group after this vote)	46 MPs: 26 from Vazrazhdane and 20 from BSP	1 from CC
1/02/2023	48 th NA Declares as a Genocide the Holodomor in Ukraine 1932-1933	134 MPs from GERB; CC; DB; DPS; BA and 1 independent MP	Vazrazhdane (25 MPs) and 1 from BA	BSP' MPs left the Parliament as a demonstration against the text
6/07/2023	49 th NA “Declaration in support of Ukraine's membership in NATO” Official Journal 59, 11/07/2023	157 MPs from GERB, CC-DB; DPS and TSP	57 MPs: 37 from Vazrazhdane; 20 from BSP	
6/07/2023	49 th NA “Decision to assign the Minister of Energy to carry out negotiations with the Minister of Energy of Ukraine or his representative for the purpose of selling equipment intended for the Belene NPP Project” Official Journal 59, 11/07/2023	155 MPs from GERB, CC-DB; DPS and TSP	57 MPs: 36 from Vazrazhdane; 21 from BSP	

<p>6/07/2023</p>	<p>49th NA “Decision to speed up the process of renewal of the departmental wartime stocks of the Ministry of Defense Official Journal 59, 11/07/2023</p>	<p>163 MPs from GERB, CC-DB; DPS and TSP</p>	<p>54 MPs: 37 from Vazrazhdane; 17 from BSP</p>	
<p>21/07/2023</p>	<p>49th NA “Decision for additional provision of military-technical support to Ukraine” Official Journal 63/202 Bulgaria “will provide Ukraine with armored transport equipment with its available armament, as well as spare parts for its service, with no longer needed for the needs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.”</p>	<p>148 MPs from GERB-UDF; CC-DB; DPS, TSP</p>	<p>52 MPs: 37 from Vazrazhdane; 15 from BSP</p>	

Source: author’s own elaboration, based on National Assembly data.