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CONDITIONS FOR THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF PROGRESSIVE LEFT IN BULGARIA

Abstract. The political left in Bulgaria experienced a deep crisis over the last eight years having lost mostly eighty percent of its electorate. The main left-wing party operated an ideological shift to a kind of left nationalism and conservative socialism, trying to recover its support. On the other side there are numerous NGOs, initiatives, media platforms and even think-tanks, small in size, scattered everywhere, which identify themselves as center-left, socially sensitive, feminist, anti-racist even anti-capitalist. Their ideologies seem to be close to the progressive European left. But often they work separately and quite are reserved towards the political left. The article explores the conditions, the opportunities, and the obstacles for a possible reconstruction of an influential and progressive left political actor in Bulgaria.

Keywords: Bulgaria, politics, progressive left, conservative socialism

Introduction

The differences between left-wing parties in the post-communist world are now quite explored by different types of research. The main focus is

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understanding the development of the former ruling communist parties and their transformation in the new political environment. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which has been established on the bases of the former Communist Party, is one of the visible and studied cases of these changes. After two decades of efforts in building a new socialist pro-European and culturally liberal party, the newly elected leadership of the BSP has chosen to make a turn towards nationalism and social conservatism, ever since 2016.

During the last decade in Bulgaria, many autonomous initiatives and NGOs with more or less of a leftist ideology and identity have emerged. Most of them are not willing to form political parties, but they have succeeded in coming together as a substantial part of active society. This reticence to become political parties is due to several reasons, among them the very bad public image of political parties as an expression of political representation.

The article explores these leftist initiatives and discusses the opportunities to form on this ground a new political actor to the left of the center, able to assemble electoral support, and to pose a major challenge to the long-lasting political monopoly of the BSP in the leftist circles of the Bulgarian society.

What is Left?

In 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Steven Lukes published in the Times Literary Supplement an article with exactly this question: what is left?² The ambiguity of the title says a lot about the main questioning among the leftist circles in Europe and in the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first side of this questioning is about the nature of the left in these new conditions of post-communism. The second side is just the legs of the political left, the need to know how to reconstruct this political space with the remnants of parties and organizations, which were historically an important part of the leftist heritage.

² Steven Lukes, "What is Left?," *Times Literary Supplement* 4643 (March 1992).

The categories *left* and *right* do not only mean the same in different eras, but also in different countries. Just as there is no single left- or right-wing ideology, left and right are positions in ideological debates, in a particular place and time. But broadly speaking, the differences between these two positions are over the relationship between past, present, and future. The right position is that of the established order, the status quo; the left position is that of revolutionary change towards the future. The right most often insists on the priority of the past over the present, the left, conversely, on the priority of the future over the present.

Let us start with the main divisions in modern society, around which left and right positions were established. One classic – perhaps the oldest – axis is the one that opposes the individual and the collective. It leads to two different understandings of what we assume to be *human nature*. According to one understanding, man is born an egoist who pursues his own interest and is in constant competition with others. Only upbringing and faith can divert one somewhat from this egoism. According to the other understanding, a human is by nature a sociable being who always wants to be among others like oneself and prefers solidarity and cooperation. The first is the right, the second is the left position.

The second – no less classic – axis is on the issue of what is permitted and prohibited in society; in modern societies the border between the two is always the subject of sharp political struggles. The left position is on the side of fewer prohibitions, while the right is on the side of more order. We can also say that the left position is more liberal, while the right is more conservative. But there is no society in which everything is permitted, or everything is forbidden. The border between the two is a matter of power balance and the prevailing social mores.

The third axis is the economic one, in terms of property, the state and the market, the distribution of wealth. The division is in terms of the conflict between private and public interest. The left usually sides with the public interest, the public sphere, the protection of society. The right usually sides with the private interest, the private sphere, the protection of the private individual. The left is the position of public regulations of the free market; the right is the position of freedom of the market and the lack of public interference in it. Here too, the border between the two is a matter of the balance of power in society.

So, following these criteria based on the history of the leftist parties and movements, the left as one of the main sides of the social and political debate in modern societies could be defined as having some common features despite the significant and even deep differences between the left political actors. The left position is often the choice of cooperation and solidarity among human beings, the belief that the better society is with very limited prohibitions and more liberty, the support for policies that protect society and the public sphere against the pressure of private interests. These quite general features will allow us to identify different parties and movements as being a part of the left, totally or partially, because in this definition, the left is more or less an ideal type.

Left and right have their significance as poles of the political debate only in politically pluralistic societies, in parliamentary democracies or in autocracies with some political pluralism. Totalitarian regimes do not allow pluralism, and their main ideology often serves to identify them as being on the left or on the right side of the political spectrum. But this is based on the general comparison between national political systems in the world, and not to the nature of this regime. Nazism and Stalinism could not be essentially compared based on their ideology, but on the basis of their political and social practices. They could be considered to belong to the far right or the far left only because of their genealogy.

This is the reason for some misunderstandings of the political situation in the former communist countries in Europe, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Being at the beginning a radical revolutionary regime, Soviet communism became, with Stalin, quite conservative in cultural terms, oppressive in politics, and nationalist in ideology when in fact it had replaced the internationalism with Soviet patriotism and imperialism. The ruling communist party in this regime has been transformed from one revolutionary, even libertarian (in the cultural sense) party into a hierarchical power structure of domination and support of the established social and political order. Therefore, a real example of the “party of order.”³

³ In the French history this was a political group formed by monarchists and conservatives in the Parliament during the French Second Republic (1848-1851) with its main slogan: “Order, Property, Religion.”

At the beginning of the democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, the resistance to the established hierarchical order of Soviet communism was inherently revolutionary and therefore objectively leftist. Whereas the effort to preserve the established order was, however partially, a right-wing position. But the first position was represented by the anti-communist movement (often a large set of organizations which spanned ideologically from the far-right to the far-left). And the second position was held by the successors of the former Communist parties of the Soviet regime. But, for historical and ideological reasons, in most of the analyses the anti-communists were considered to be to the right and the post-communists to the left.

With time and under the pressure of the necessary self-identification with the parties in the European Union, in countries like Bulgaria these two main actors of the post-communism have changed. The former anti-communist coalition split into different parties, mostly to the right side of the political spectrum, albeit some adopted center-left positions. The former Communist parties tried to adopt a social-democratic profile, and with this they moved from their initial conservative-rightist position to the center-left of the political spectrum. And this was not without severe internal conflicts.

The Bulgarian Political Left

The left in Bulgaria has a long history and a specific character in a post-communist situation. Today's left is undoubtedly burdened by the history of Soviet communism, whose *leftism* is increasingly being questioned, especially when it comes to its post-revolutionary period (Stalin and his successors). The non-communist leftist tradition (mainly social-democratic and anarchist) practically disappeared during the Communist regime, also because it has been suppressed by the authorities.

Genealogy

The political left in Bulgaria is now organized into several different political parties, originating not only from the former Bulgarian Communist Party, but also from the former anti-communist United Democratic Forces (CDF).

The BSP was one of the main left actors of the democratization transition in Bulgaria since 1989. During the first decade of the post-communist transition this “heir party” was a kind of association of different currents, going from the neo-communist nationalists to the liberal pro-Europe socialists. The BSP won the 1994 general elections, but its government failed to manage the financial crisis of 1996, which incited a deep political crisis, and the government was forced to resign. The party experienced an internal crisis, and many influential pro-European socialists left the organization and founded the *Euroleft* party. The new leader, Georgi Parvanov, relying on the support of the influential internal fraction of the *Alliance for Social Democracy* (OSD), carried out in three years an important evolution of the BSP towards social democracy. After his election at the presidency of the Republic in 2001, his successor Sergey Stanishev continued the programmatic transformation of the party and in 2003 the BSP joined the Socialist International and in 2006 the Party of European Socialists (PES).⁴ In 2012 Stanishev was elected as President of the PES.

In the 1990s, the Bulgarian Socialist Party was the party with the most numerous factions: social democratic, social liberal, neo-communist, pro-European and nationalist. Gradually, in its program documents, the party adopted the profile of European social democracy as it joined social democratic supra-national organizations. But the BSP inherited a lot of the political culture of the ruling communist party, established during Soviet communism and having kept the essential elements of the Stalinist period: authoritarian ethics based on discipline, and conservative values in moral issues and a kind of left nationalism. Also, the BSP, since 1990 has always taken part in several coalitions with small left and patriotic parties, so it remained in the universe of some “soft nationalism.”

⁴ Marta Touykova-Guillemet, *La conversion identitaire du Parti socialiste bulgare* [The Identity Conversion of the Bulgarian Socialist Party], PhD diss., Institut d'études politiques, Paris, 2005.

The internal diversity and tensions on political and moral issues were the reason for many splits since 1990. First, in 1991, small communist parties were founded by former members of BSP. Another split occurred in 1997 when the *Euroleft* party was established as a new political actor merging former BSP members and members of the traditional BSDP, a social democratic party. Since 2000, several separations have weakened the party: in 2011 the *Movement 21* (D21) appeared, led by one prominent socialist woman; in 2014 the former socialist leader and former president of the republic Georgi Parvanov founded the *ABV* party; and in 2019 *Stand Up.BG* was established by another prominent socialist woman.

But the political left in Bulgaria had also a genealogy outside of BSP. The *Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party* (BSDP), historical political actor before 1947, reconstituted in 1991 as part of the large anti-communist coalition of the *Union of Democratic Forces* (CDC), experienced after having left the coalition several splits and today exists under the label *Bulgarian social democrats*. Another split from CDC gave the birth to the *Bulgarian Progressive Line* (BPL), former *Bulgarian Party of Liberals*. All these political parties formed a coalition labelled "*The Left!*" in 2023-2024 parliamentary elections, but with very tiny results and thus remained outside of the Parliament. For the last elections of October 2024 most of them joined the coalition of BSP after the change of the leadership of the party.

Today, only BSP and BSDP are members of the Socialist International and the Party of the European Socialists (PES).

Electoral Weight

Since 2005, when the BSP won the parliamentary elections with 1,13 million ballots and 31% of the votes, and led the governmental coalition, the electoral support for the socialists constantly decreased, in spite of the fact that the former BSP leader Georgi Parvanov won two consecutive Presidential elections in 2001 and 2006, and the BSP candidate Rumen Radev won also two Presidential elections in 2016 and 2021.

This enormous loss is due to many different factors, among them the traditional demography of the socialist electorate with mostly elderly people, the nationalist and conservative ideological shift of the

party leadership elected in 2016, the crisis of confidence in political parties as representatives of the society, and the decreasing backing for the long-lasting support of the socialists to global corporate capitalism. Also, one possible reason is that since 2020, the year of mass protests against the political hegemony of the GERB party and its corruption practices, there were seven early elections in Bulgaria, most of them unable to form a regular governmental majority. This undermined the general level of confidence in parties and elections, and the turnout dropped drastically from approximately 50% to less than 40%.

The other left-wing parties have had limited electoral support during the last two decades. *ABV* succeeded in winning parliamentary mandates in 2014 elections (4,1%) and took part in a center-right controlled government. After that it lost electoral support arriving to 0,5% of the votes in 2021, then decided to take part only in coalitions with other left parties. The *D21* party and *Stand Up.BG* succeeded once, in the Parliamentary elections of July 2021, to win seats in coalition with small centrist parties (4,7% of the votes), but after that they also lost electoral support and decided to take part in a coalition with other left parties. The coalition *The Left!* received only 2,2% of the votes in 2023 elections and 0,5% in June 2024, thereafter deciding to enter a coalition with the BSP for the elections of October 2024.

The decreasing electoral support goes together with the step-down membership in the left parties and especially the BSP. The former Communist Party in 1986 had more than 932,000 members, but only one third of them were likely to remain in the BSP in 1990. The number of members decreased gradually, mainly because of their demographic structure – their average age has always been very high. There are new members, but they cannot swing the death of former members. However, the BSP was in 2009 the largest party in membership – its members in 2009 were almost 40% of the total members of all political parties in Bulgaria.⁵ In 2020, the official count of the members shows that there are about 80,000 socialists, and the party is now on equal footing with the hegemonic GERB party in membership levels.

⁵ Antony Todorov, *Grazhdani, izbori, partii. Balgaria 1879-2009* [Citizens, Elections, Parties. Bulgaria 1879-2009] (Iztok-Zapad, Sofia: 2010): 500.

There is very little data and studies about the demographic profile of the socialist members. The data in the official documents of the party gives the image of an organization formed by pensioners, aged people, but also a community of educated people, often with a university diploma. This is the result of the legacy of the BSP as a former Communist party, which inherited the strong presence among the groups of civil servants and intellectuals.⁶ BSP seems to have limited presence among the labor class, even though it maintains regular relations with the two main trade unions (*KNSB* and *Podkrepa*).

The Ideological Turn of BSP

The last fifteen years were for the BSP a period of decline and some glory at the same time. The party lost the legislative elections of 2009 and the presidential election of 2011 and remained the second political force in the country after the hegemonic center-right GERB party until 2021. The socialist candidate won the Presidential elections in 2016 and 2021, but the party came third by the number of votes gained in April 2021, on the fourth position in November 2021, and on the fifth position on the following four elections. The main political cleavage in Bulgarian politics changed from a classic left-right opposition to the nowadays liberal-conservative opposition, or centrist – far-right opposition. The political left lost its previous important position in Bulgarian politics.

The BSP still has a very problematic public support since most of its members and voters are aged people, mostly pensioners. The party remains on a lesser scale than during the 1990s, dramatically split between those people who considered themselves to be the losers of the post-communist transition, and the very wealthy people who accumulated their property during these last thirty years. The great influence of this

⁶ Nikolai Genov, "Ups and downs of social democracy in Bulgaria," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Office Bulgaria, 2010., <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/07838.pdf>; 7; Dora Kaneva, "Trudniyat pat na transformatzia na BSP" [The Difficult Way of Transformation of the BSP] in *Izsledvaniya po istoria na sotzializma v Balgaria. 3. Prehodat* [Research on the History of Socialism in Bulgaria. The Transition], eds. Lilyana Kaneva, Maxim Mizov and Evgeny Kandilarov (Sofia: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Tzentar za politologicheski i istoricheski izsledvania, 2011), 217-247, 230.

second stratum on the party produced disappointment for the first group. BSP has also difficulties enlarging its audience to small entrepreneurs and the urban young professionals. They mainly consider themselves politically to the right, although they suffer the pressure of big businesses and monopolies. The party lost a lot of its previous influence among the marginalized strata, especially among Roma people.

In respect of the programmatic views, the BSP confronted many challenges. Trying to become a center-left social-democratic party, it adopted many elements of the global market-oriented consensus. But with the development in Bulgaria of many citizens' mobilization movements like *Occupy Wall Street* and *Indignados*, but also the new ecological movements, the BSP started to look outdated.

The BSP in its new program (2008) is in favor of the formation of a social state according to European models, considering the Bulgarian specifics.

"This is a social state of the active, proactive, enterprising and educated – a positive social state that can create conditions for reducing poverty and inequality, for supporting the most affected social strata, for a fairer and more solidary society. [...] The active welfare state should overcome social polarization, eradicate misery and isolation, ensure equal opportunities for all citizens, especially children and young people, equality between women and men, and reject all kinds of discrimination."⁷

There are little differences between social democratic parties on the socio-economic issues in Bulgaria. The BSP is trying to align the positions of the SPD and the PS in France, more sensitive to public intervention in the functioning of the market. At the same time, the government of Sergey Stanishev, who was later elected as president of PES, introduced in 2007 the flat tax of 10%, which is considered being a measure of the ultra-liberal right. Today the BSP proposes a return of the progressive taxation.⁸

⁷ Programa na BSP [BSP Programme] Savremeneni pokazatel. Informatzionen biuletin na BSP. No.21, December 2008: 15-16.

⁸ Duma Daily, "The BSP wants the flat tax to be repealed," *duma.bg* (website), accessed April 15, 2025, <https://duma.bg/bsp-iska-otmyana-na-ploskiya-danak-n296440>.

The BSP realized substantial transformation in relation to issues of cultural liberalism – initially being culturally conservative as an heir to the former Communist party. In 2011 the Socialist candidate for mayor of Sofia sided with the gay parade participants from Sofia (Sofia Pride) to display its opposition to the attacks of the extreme right parties against the LGBT community. However, this remained isolated, as for the most part of the BSP electorate is made up of elderly people with prevalent conservative cultural values.⁹

Today all social democratic parties include environmental issues in their programs. But the political relationships between the BSP and the ecological movements remain difficult – the environmentalists' mistrust towards socialists is still quite significant. Yet young socialists allied with environmentalists and other social movements in 2011-2012 to protest the bill authorizing Genetically Modified Organisms and partially against the shale gas fracking in Bulgaria.¹⁰

The social democratic parties in Bulgaria strongly supported the accession to the EU and the development of European integration. The BSP was in favor of a Europe of economic growth, employment and priority access of women to the labor market as well as a Europe without poverty.¹¹ The party makes it a priority to increase the role of the European Parliament as an expression of the political will of the citizens of Europe. On the major themes of international politics, the BSP tries to align the positions of the PES.

The significant ideological change in the BSP began in connection with the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on Combating Violence against Women. To the great surprise of many socialists, the new chairwoman Korneliya Ninova categorically opposed in 2018 the ratification, contrary to the long-standing campaign of the BSP women's organization in favor

⁹ Pride Sofia, "Georgi Kadiev podkrepi iniciativata na Sofia Pride" [Georgi Georgiev supported the initiative of Sofia Pride], pridesofia.org (website), accessed April 15, 2025, <http://www.pridesofia.org/2011/05/georgi-kadiev-podkrepa-sp/>.

¹⁰ The shale gas fracking technology is considered in the Bulgarian debate to be one possible mean to reduce the energy dependence on Russia, but on the other hand it is considered to be very risky for the environment.

¹¹ Platform European socialists, [Europe.bg](http://europe.bg), April 16, 2007, webpage removed before April 15, 2025, <http://www.europe.bg/htmls/page.php?category=338&id=7983>.

of the rapid ratification of the convention. The organization sent in 2018 a letter to the leadership, which states: “The BSP’s position is surprising, considering the long-standing battles that the BSP has waged in defense of women’s rights, including many joint initiatives with the PES and PES Women.”¹²

Increasingly, the BSP began to speak the language of far-right nationalism. In the studio of *Hello, Bulgaria* in 2017 the leader of the BSP stated: “We are closest in platform to the *Patriotic Front*.”¹³ The BSP under the leadership of Korneliya Ninova is turning towards “conservative socialism,” a highly controversial concept. Velislava Dareva, a prominent socialist activist and journalist, explicitly rejects it: “The idea of conservative socialism and left-wing conservatism that she has promoted is a big mistake. What is conservative socialism? Wooden iron.”¹⁴

According to the 2021 *8Values test* study most left-wing parties are more conservative or centrist on the authoritarian-progressive axis (BSP, ABV). Most of the parliamentary parties are to the right of the center, even conservative, few of them on the left of the center (*Stand Up.BG*).¹⁵

The Non-Governmental Left

There is a non-governmental left spectrum made up of diverse left-wing civil organizations, initiatives and projects, working on the ground, and very often treating the parties with too much reserve or even hostility. These organizations have a different genealogy, including different relations with the parties of the political left. Among these left oriented actors there

¹² 24 Chasa Daily, “PES Women to Ninova: BSP e edinstvenata socpartiya protiv Istanbulskata konvencija” [BSP is the sole socialist party against the Istanbul convention], January 31, 2018, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.24chasa.bg/mnenia/article/6692376>.

¹³ Novini.bg, “Korneliya Ninova: Nai-blizki po platforma sme s Patriotichniya front” [Kornelia Ninova: We are closest in platform to the Patriotic Front], March 3, 2018, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://novini.bg/bylgariya/evropredsedatelstvo-2018/413716>.

¹⁴ Maritsa Daily, “V. Dareva: Konservativen sotsializam e «darveno zhelyazo»” [V. Dareva: Conservative socialism is “wooden iron”] June 12, 2019, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.marica.bg/samo-v-marica/intervyuta/v-dreva-konservativen-socializm-e-dr-veno-jelqzo>.

¹⁵ Stanislav Dodov, Ivaylo Dinev, “Politicheski kompas na izborite – kak se pozitsionirat partiite” (Political compass of the elections – how the parties position themselves), Dnevnik daily, March 29, 2021.

are more or less structured NGOs like *Solidary Bulgaria*, *New Left Prospects* and *LevFem*, but also media platforms like *dVERSIA* and *Barricada*, as well as thinktanks such as the *Institute for Social Integration*. These organizations and networks are very critical to BSP for its conservatism, Stalinist remnants and mostly for its unexpected turn to national populism. Most of their members were in the recent past members of the BSP, and even though few of them continue to remain party members, the majority have left it.

Solidary Bulgaria is a discussion network of citizens who share the values of freedom, solidarity and justice. Its leader Vanya Grigorova ran for the mayor's election for Sofia in October 2023 and failed to win in the second round, coming in very closely as the second. For the Parliamentary elections in June 2024, she initiated a left coalition of three parties (*Stand up, Bulgaria!* Movement, along with the *Bulgarian Left* party, and *United Social Democracy*). *Solidary Bulgaria* became the common label of this coalition unifying one radical left party (*Bulgarian Left*) and two social-democracy oriented parties (*United Social Democracy* and *Stand up, Bulgaria!*). However, the coalition won 1,5% of the votes and in fact disappeared. In the October 2024 elections, these parties (without *Bulgarian Left*) took part in a coalition with BSP.

New Left Prospects is an editorial project of the *Collective for Social Interventions* (KOI) which aims at achieving broader social change along principles of solidarity and social justice. KOI conducts socially engaged research, organizes policy campaigns, and functions as a publishing house. This is a non-governmental organization founded in 2013 when its members were still part of the *New Left Perspectives* initiative and *Social Centre Haspel* in Sofia. KOI is a partner organization of *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* and *Clean Clothes Campaign*. Among its members there are many young university teachers and academic researchers in philosophy, sociology, anthropology and political science.

LevFem is a left-wing feminist organization founded in 2018. It addresses issues related to the socio-economic inequalities produced in a capitalist economy, which are directly linked to the increase in gender inequalities. The organization links the feminist movement to the LGBTIQ+ cause and anti-racism, building on the principles of intersectionality. This is also supported by the other left initiatives and organizations like *New Left Prospects*, *Bulgarian Left* and some politicians from the BSP.

Among the left-leaning non-governmental initiatives, two have influence in media circles. The *dVERSIA* is a platform for independent left-wing journalism. Every year it publishes electronic and print editions with social, political and cultural analysis, photography and unpopular viewpoints. The other platform, *Barricade*, defends human rights in all dimensions, not least the right to decent pay, free choice of work, fair and favorable working conditions, and social protection. These platforms cooperate with most of the left NGOs and left-oriented intellectuals.

The *Institute for Social Integration* was founded in 2002 by leading experts – sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, jurists, diplomats, economists, journalists. Among its main projects there are educational academies for social policy, for municipal policy, and for civil observers. The institute is partner of the *Solidar Foundation*,¹⁶ progressive left organization with international network of partners, which four key priorities are climate and environmental emergency, democracy, human rights and peace, digital revolution, and gender equality and intersectionality.¹⁷

The *Public Interventions Collective* (KOI) engages in critique and strives for broader social change, conducts engaged research, publishes, and organizes political education initiatives. Most of the participants are young academics.

Among the *left-of-the-center* organizations, which could be generally considered as left liberals, are the quite active in the defense of human rights NGO *Marginalia* and the small intellectual NGO BOLD (*Bulgarian Society for Liberal Democracy*). The mission of *Marginalia* is to inform society about the problems of minority groups in Bulgaria. The association was founded in 2014 and with its opening it started its website, where news and materials concerning minorities and discriminated communities in Bulgaria are published. As part of its activity to educate, *Marginalia* organizes youth educational and creative projects. BOLD has two main goals: to increase public support for democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms; and to help consolidate the liberal-democratic community in Bulgaria. It calls for a society with democratic governance and pluralistic political system in which the fundamental rights and freedoms of the

¹⁶ Solidar Foundation, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://www.solidar.org/>.

¹⁷ *Institute for Social Integration*, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://www.isi-bg.org/?cid=28>.

people are protected and in which laws, policies, and practices are directed towards environmental and socio-economic justice. Both these NGOs work in cooperation with the *Bulgarian Helsinki Committee*, the traditional organization fighting for the respect and the protection of human rights in the Bulgarian society.

All these left-wing NGOs, initiatives, platforms, projects are reluctant to support the BSP and most of the left political parties. The attempt of *Solidary Bulgaria* to participate in a party coalition failed, and this once again produced disappointment with the organized political life in all of these circles within the civil society. Therefore, they continue to develop civic activities and remain dispersed, unwilling to produce a common political project.

Main Divisions Within the Left

The non-governmental left is very critical of the BSP, like many younger socialist, and very critical of the party's leadership under Korneliya Ninova. One member of BSP, Nishan Jingozyan, working in London, summarizes these critics in *Barricade* by raising this question:

“What were the reasons for a 130-year-old left-wing party, a member of the political family of left-wing parties in Europe, to take a sharp turn to the right and step into the waters of right-wing populism?”¹⁸

Most of the left-wing NGOs are convinced that the BSP awakes a smoldering nostalgia for the times of Todor Zhivkov, the former communist dictator, confronts and denies the main policies of the left parties in Europe, uses anti-immigrant rhetoric and instils intolerance towards sexual minorities, promotes Eurosceptic policies, and finally demonstrates direct support for right-wing political parties (such as Viktor Orbán's party, FIDESZ).

¹⁸ Nishan Jingozyan, “Genezis na pro(pod)myanata v BSP” [Genesis of the change / replacement in the BSP]. September 23, 2020, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://baricada.org/2020/09/23/bsp-dqsna-partiq/>.

The left is divided on many issues: the attitude towards Soviet communism, the choice between cultural liberalism and cultural conservatism, the attitude towards today's Russia, the attitude towards NATO, but also towards the West in general, the positions towards the Eurozone and the level of political integration in the EU, towards federalism or the union of nation states.

Soviet Communism and Russia

The attitude towards Soviet Communism influences the diversity of the Bulgarian left. The general expectations for the post-communist transition were that with the successes of the transformation, the rejection of Communism should increase in society. In Bulgaria this was not exactly the case, as in some other post-communist countries. Several studies have shown that the new generations are not as hostile to Communism as the elder ones. Maria Ferretti, a well-known historian of communism, explains that "the problem of the memory of communism arises differently in different European countries, because the experiences lived are very different," warning to "be careful to avoid any simplification very fashionable at present, consisting of immediately identifying the memory of communism and the memory of the crimes of communism." Also, she notes that twenty-five years later, in the cradle of Soviet communism – Russia – "the nostalgia for the Soviet era, often tinged with irony, is palpable."¹⁹

In Bulgaria, a study from November 2014 shows a similar situation. This study, carried out by the sociological agency *Alpha Research*, compares the opinion on the communist period in 1992 and 2014. The overall positive assessment of communism in 1992 was shared by 34% of respondents and by 43% in 2014, but negative opinions were 30% at the beginning of the post-communist transition and only 14% now. Most

¹⁹ Maria Ferretti, „La nostalgie du communisme dans la Russie post-soviétique” [The Nostalgia of Communism in Post-Soviet Russia] [http://dspace.unitus.it/bitstream/2067/871/1/La%20nostalgie%20du%20communisme%20dans%20la%20Russie%20post-communiste%20\(2\).pdf](http://dspace.unitus.it/bitstream/2067/871/1/La%20nostalgie%20du%20communisme%20dans%20la%20Russie%20post-communiste%20(2).pdf), accessed 14 June 2025. Workshop organized by the European Network on Contemporary History (EURHISTXX), Paris, December 17, 2007, <http://www.eurhistxx.net>.

Bulgarians (55%) have a positive opinion of the last communist leader Todor Zhivkov, against only 25% who have a negative opinion.²⁰

This nostalgia has several dimensions; it cannot be assimilated to the desire to restore Soviet Communism as it was. These dimensions of post-communist nostalgia are directly related to the current situation, viewed with a very critical eye by nostalgic people. We can say that nostalgia is a response to unfulfilled expectations, which many people experience as disappointment. This could explain the fact that nostalgia for communism is shared today by young people who had no personal experience with the old regime.

Studies showed that the transition produces a division within post-communist societies into two opposing categories – winners and losers of these transformations. Nostalgia is, logically, the attitude of those who consider themselves to be among the losers. And among them we also find some younger people, without any personal memory of the communist regime, but sensitive to the ideas of social equality and critical to the present global corporative capitalism.

There is an assimilation of the soviet communism in the Bulgarian society, and it is also present in Russia. It hardly takes long to argue that today's Russia is very far from any understanding of a society of social equality and social justice. For example, the level of income inequality and property inequality in the Russian Federation is among the highest in the world. According to the World Inequality Database (for the period 2000-2020, the top 10% of society in Russia received an average of 47-48% of income (before taxes), while the bottom 50% received 16-17%.²¹

The equating of the history of the USSR (1922-1991) with the history of the present-day Russian Federation is one of the factors that probably explains the *special attitude* of many leftists towards Russia. Most of the left (political as well as non-governmental) opposes the dismantlement of the Monument of the Soviet army in Sofia (built in 1953), that divides also

²⁰ Dnevnik daily, "Alpha Research: Spomenite za sotsializma izblednyavat, dominira nostalgichno-idealiziraniyat mu obraz" [Alpha Research: Memories of socialism are fading, its nostalgic-idealized image dominates] November 9, 2014, accessed April 15, 2025, https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2014/11/09/2415677_alfa_risurch_spomenite_z_a_socializma_izbledniavat/.

²¹ World Inequality Database, <https://wid.world/country/russian-federation/>.

today the public opinion in Bulgaria. This allows the Russian elite today to appropriate Soviet history, including that from the World War II, as its exclusive property. However, the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on the occasion of May 9: "Today we celebrate the Day of Victory over Nazism. And we will not give anyone a single piece of our history. We are proud of our ancestors, who, as part of the coalition against Hitler, defeated Nazism."²²

On the other hand, some people, including young people, are critical towards global capitalism. They equate it with the world hegemony of the United States of America and see a possible competitor and opponent of this hegemony in Russia, and also to some extent in the People's Republic of China. These are among the main reasons for the mixture of post-communist nostalgia with the Russophilia in Bulgarian society.

With the war in Ukraine the division between pro-Russian and pro-Western attitudes became larger and exacerbated, also among the left oriented people. However, at the very beginning of the war in 2022, the BSP declared that "Any aid to Ukraine will receive our full support, but weapons – not."²³ Until now the socialists have accepted humanitarian and financial aid for Ukraine, but not military aid. Being part in 2025 of the Government of Rosen Zhelyazkov (GERB party), the BSP continues to maintain the same position in the public discourse, but silently accepts the military aid offered by Bulgaria. The political left outside of BSP is also against sending arms to Ukraine. The non-governmental left is divided too on this topic. The Leader of *Solidary Bulgaria* expressed pro-Russian feelings, but many other left NGOs were more reluctant to oppose the necessity for also military aid for Ukraine.

²² BNT, "Zelenski na 9 may: «Nyama da dadem na nikogo nito chastichka ot svoyata istoriya»" [Zelensky on May 9: We will not give anyone a single piece of our history] May 9, 2022, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://bntnews.bg/news/zelenski-na-9-mai-nyama-da-dadem-na-nikogo-nito-chastichka-ot-svoyata-istoriya-1194097news.html>.

²³ Milena Kirova, "Sabitiyata na 2022: Kak voynata v Ukrainyana ocherta razdelitelni linii mezhdu politicheskite sili u nas" [The events of 2022: How the war in Ukraine drew dividing lines between political forces in our country] BNT News (online), December 30, 2022, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://bntnews.bg/news/sabitiyata-na-2022-kak-voinata-v-ukraina-ocherta-razdelitelni-linii-mezhdu-politicheskite-sili-u-nas-1218432news.html>.

Social Conservatism versus Cultural Liberalism

One of the main topics of differences among left circles in Bulgaria today is the conflict between the cultural liberalism and the social conservatism. The BSP has moved towards social conservatism since 2018, when the leader Korneliya Ninova decided to withdraw the support of the Socialists for the Istanbul Convention.²⁴ This was contrary of the position held by the previous leader of the party Sergey Stanishev, at that time president of PES. Some other left parties like ABV also rejected the ratification of the Convention,²⁵ also because the Bulgarian Constitutional Court in 2018 proclaimed the Convention as contrary of the Constitution.

The other left parties took an ambiguous position on the topic, even though their leaders previously supported the ratification of the Convention. The argument now was that the left has other priorities than the rights of the sexual minorities and should concentrate on the protection of labor rights, the cooperation with trade unions, and promoting socio-economic equality. In an interview in 2023, Tatiana Doncheva, former prominent member of the BSP and now leader of the left *D21 movement*, explained:

“The topic of minority rights, including the Istanbul Convention, the LGBT community, the attitude towards migrants – this is not our target. Our target will be the authentic people of employed labor. We will be turned to family values. Which suits the Bulgarian! Otherwise, we are tolerant people. We respect the rights of every person with a different sexual orientation. But we do not believe

²⁴ Ivan Gergov, “Ninova dovolna: Za treti pat spasyavame Bulgariya ot Istanbulskata konventsia” [Ninova pleased: For the third time we are saving Bulgaria from the Istanbul Convention] *News.bg* (online), August 7, 2023, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://news.bg/politics/ninova-dovolna-za-treti-pat-spasyavame-bulgariya-ot-istanbulskata-konventsia.html>.

²⁵ ABV, “Rumen Petkov: Privetstvam reshenieto na Konstitutsionniya sad, s koeto Istanbulskata konventsia se obyavyava za protivokonstitutsionna” [Rumen Petkov: I welcome the decision of the Constitutional Court declaring the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional] August 27, 2018, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://abv-alternativa.bg/>.

that this should be a primary public topic, raised artificially, and that these people should have an advantage over others.”²⁶

The leader of *Solidary Bulgaria* Vania Grigorova also preferred to not discuss the topic, considering it outdated. In an interview in 2024, answering on her opinion about the Istanbul Convention, she has said: “It’s time to stop discussing closed topics, because we will look like those caveman anti-communists who continue to fight against «communism» that does not exist in our country. There are far more important issues.”²⁷

The majority of the left in Bulgaria does not seem to be reluctant towards minority rights, but rather more so towards the radical neoliberal cultural ideology. The reasoning behind this is that it has produced a kind of political correctness and radical wokeism that in many cases goes far away from the initial goal of this movement claiming the necessity to avoid forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.²⁸ This has been discussed in connection with the decision of the Constitutional Court in 2018 to stop the ratification of the Istanbul Convention with the argument that the text misuses the terms of *sex* and *gender* (with the obvious difficulty for the Bulgarian translation, where *sex* is *пол* (pol), but *gender* is translated as something along the lines of *social sex*).²⁹

Many socialists and leftist political activists decided to not accept this new position of the BSP and continued to support the rights of the LGBTQI+ community, opposing the homophobia of the far right.³⁰ Georgi

²⁶ Cross.bg, “Tatyana Doncheva: Lyavoto tryabva da se obedini po estestven i razumen nachin” [Tatyana Doncheva: The left must unite in a natural and reasonable way] March 4, 2023, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.cross.bg/hora-nyama-beshe-1714547.html>.

²⁷ BTA, “Vanya Grigorova: Istanbulskata konventsia e prioritet na evropeiskoto semeistvo na BSP, kade shte sednat evrodeputatite i?” [Vanya Grigorova: The Istanbul Convention is a priority of the BSP’s European family, where will its MEPs sit?] June 9, 2024, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.bta.bg/bg/vote-epns2024/670783-vanya-grigorova-istanbulskata-konventsia-e-prioritet-na-evropeyskoto-semeystvo>.

²⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politicallycorrect>.

²⁹ Constitutional Court of the Republic of Bulgaria, Case No. 3/ 2018, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/case-541>.

³⁰ Glasove, “Maya Manolova podkrepi Istanbulskata konventsia” [Maya Manolova supported the Istanbul Convention], accessed September 10, 2020, <https://glasove.com/pytevoditel-v-klasikata/i-ombudsmanyt-maya-manolova-podkrepi-istanbulskata-konvenciya>.

Kadiev, former socialist and founder in 2016 of the small left party *Normalna darzhava* (Normal State) was the first left-wing politician to join the Sofia pride in 2011.³¹

In 2022, a forum "For a Fairer Society" at the New Bulgarian University with the participation of young activists of political and non-governmental organizations from the broad field of the *left of the center* discussed the differences between the expectations and the ideas of the participants, but also the commonly shared ideas and representations.³² This forum, initiated by academics and civil society activists with the support of the *Friedrich Ebert Foundation* in Sofia, intended to establish or re-establish dialogue between quite young representatives and activists of different organizations operating in parties, NGOs and media platforms, having worked quite separately and even oppositely in their fields, in which they have a lot to share and to do together.³³

During the discussion many topics were debated: is BSP still left-wing, is it possible to reach a common leftist ideology, what kind of differences separate the leftist organizations and initiatives, what hinders the possible cooperation within the left? One participant from BSP (Krum Zarkov) claimed that "for many reasons, not just ideological, the BSP is no longer big, and it is high time it truly becomes left-wing".

The meaning of the left is not consensual among these young leftists. They share some common field of values, but they see them in different priority orders. Stoyo Tetevenski, an LGBTQI+ activist, associate to *LevFem*, maintained:

"Because what I heard several times was that it is almost taken for granted that the values around which we unite are some kinds of socioeconomic equality, but we step on our toes on the women's

³¹ LGBTI organization Deystvie, 23 June 2011, https://www.facebook.com/lgbtdeystvie/photos/a.10150212910675028.317648.245822645027/10150212910950028/?locale=bg_BG, accessed June 14, 2025.

³² NBU, Seminar-diskusiya "Za po-spravedlivo obshtestvo (Seminar-discussion "For a more just society"), 2022, accessed June 14, 2025, https://projects.nbu.bg/projects_inn_er.asp?pid=1505.

³³ All quotations from this forum are taken of the video recording that is part of the author's archive (A.T.)

issue, we step on our toes on the LGBTQI+ issue, we step on our toes on migration, etc. It's as if these issues are not part of socioeconomic inequality. It's as if the fact that one of the largest groups of poor people in Bulgaria are elderly women, retired women, we don't understand this issue, that this is a result of feminized labor and the corresponding low wages that lead to low pensions."

On the other side, some participants tried to explain the necessity to make a difference between the widespread ideas and prejudices in the Bulgarian society on gender issues, quite conservative in general, and the practice of dealing with a lot of questions that are part of the same field. Jana Tsoneva, sociologist and participant in the *Public Interventions Collective*, gives one interesting example of her field work:

"In one of our studies, my colleagues had met and worked with a group of trade unionists in some provincial sewing shops who had the exact opposite of our values. They were sexist, homophobic, racist... But at the same time these people managed to win many useful benefits for the workers in these factories. For example, one, specifically the sexist one, was dealing with things like maternity and child benefits because a lot of the workers in that factory were women. Simply by virtue of this man working with women and having to keep the trade union, he was doing such women's work. He was practically a feminist, although his ideology was the exact opposite."

Explaining the existing differences between all these organizations and initiatives, the sociologist Mila Mineva put the most essential questions on diversity in the Bulgarian left:

"You talk about the left as if it is clear what its values are. And now I will start asking you about specific things. Do you agree on the Istanbul Convention? Do you agree on migration? Do you agree on the European Union? Do you agree whether the left in Bulgaria will be a protectionist left of small losing communities, or will it be a European left that believes that the European Union is

an answer to some problems, not a framework of oppression. I do not know where the Bulgarian left sits. Maybe there are several leftists.”

Capitalism and Society

Capitalism is an essential topic of discussion among the Bulgarian left: what to do with it? One of the main criticisms formulated by the young participants at the 2022 forum was about the principle of capitalist *realism*, the idea that there is no possible alternative to capitalism, considering the unfortunate fate of Soviet communism.³⁴ The fact that most left-leaning individuals accept now this view does not allow the real debate about possible socio-economic alternatives.

Strahil Deliyski, political scientist teaching at Sofia University, explained during the discussion:

“The only way out of the trap of capitalist realism is to confront it in its very logic. To go beyond its framework, beyond its language. That means being utopianly attacked. Saying that this is not the only best possible world. Another world is possible, and it can be much better, much nicer.”

But is it possible to do this? He quoted Eric Olin Wright’s *real utopian sociology*.³⁵ In this book, the author relates to the example of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, where the formation of the city budget is a function of a democratic deliberative process at the lowest level, the economic cooperatives, the open source and copyleft (not copyright) movements, etc.

Some left-leaning intellectuals expressed doubts about the need to continue combatting capitalism instead of thinking about many possibilities to improve it but in a more social sense. Zhivko Minkov, young scholar at the New Bulgarian University, developed this idea:

³⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

³⁵ Erik Olin Wright, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso Books, 2019).

“Perhaps the first question we need to consider is whether our main goal or ideological core should really be to deny or fight capitalism. Can we create a comprehensive project for a different world? There are certainly many other things that can be done to make capitalism more humane and to move perhaps as a common goal, an ideal goal, a utopia and towards a social order that gives us the opportunity for equality and for solidarity and for justice.”

The question is to what extent the socialization of capitalism is possible and acceptable without calling into question the main features of this socio-economic system. To what extent is the tension between the democratic principle of genuine and fundamental equality among citizens as human beings is compatible with the logic of the competition and the inequality between humans, always produced by the capitalist economy? And is it possible to maintain the well-being of our societies without the freedom of the private economic initiative?

The attitude to capitalism, and specifically to its present form of corporate neoliberal global capitalism, seems to be an important topic when discussing the political identity of the left. Should the left remain in principle anticapitalistic or be more moderate? But among the more radical leftists in Bulgaria, the acceptance of capitalism without alternative is one of the main reasons for the decreasing support for the left-wing parties and for socialist perspectives. Aside from this, they assume that remaining as not a radical critic of capitalism will eliminate the main difference between genuine leftists and capitalist supporters among right- and center-leaning parties. Another question concerns the difference between this critique and the anti-capitalist critique coming from the far right.

One substantial critique to the present positions of leftist actors in the political debate is that their language remains difficult to understand by the large public, the *ordinary people*. This is why the critique against contemporary capitalism, or the possible socialist alternatives remains without any positive effect in terms of societal and electoral support for the political left, as well as for the acceptance of the non-governmental left. Nikola Venkov, researcher in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, stated that in the contemporary Bulgarian society there is a mixture of leftist and rightist values and especially of what he calls “everyday

ideologies of socialism" inherited from the communist past not as ideology, but as an everyday set of egalitarian values. He claims that

"nationalism and conservatism are so successful because they stand very well on a foundation of everyday values that we often do not pay attention to."

He suggests that the proposal on the left should address those values that align with progressives and not ignore the others, because in his opinion, they will only lose their importance if we do not bother to edify the audience against them.

Galin Durev, political scientist and policy consultant, working in the United Kingdom, proposes to shift the language used in some complicated leftist discourse:

"What we present as a modernized version of the values of the left, which may be largely relevant in Europe, can in no way touch the heart or, if you will, even appeal to the mind of an ordinary Bulgarian voter."

For him,

"it's better to be moderate and, in addition to that, to use terms that are close to the people, and to speak in a language that is closer to their own, rather than, when we present our ideas, our interlocutor having to look at the dictionary from time to time to understand words like discourse or oppression, identity or minorities and the like."

Conclusion

How to answer the main question posed at the beginning of this article: Is it possible to construct or reconstruct a progressive political left in Bulgaria today? This question raises another one, namely what the meaning of *progressive left* is. In the present debates, dominated quite

significantly by radical conservative ideas opposed to the left and liberal ideologies, even the word “progressive” is often used in an obviously negative way – as synonym for the so-called “gender ideology” and radical wokeism. This usage seems to be an attempt to disqualify the liberal left and to produce a kind of ideological and political revenge on the achievements of the 1968 generation.

According to the results of the European Values Survey (2017-2021), in Bulgaria, about 22-27% of respondents define themselves as “left of center” (30-39% define themselves as “right of center”). However, in many cases, people who consider themselves as “center” or “right” because they are repelled by the historical weight of “left” Soviet communism, in essence share leftist values. Many “rightists” and liberals in Bulgaria think in leftist categories, but do not see themselves as being politically represented, which is why they often prefer to operate in the non-governmental sector (because they are also suspicious of right-wing parties). There is quite a large sector in the Bulgarian society which is sensitive to leftist values of equality and solidarity but is mostly reluctant to support the existing left political parties.

The question is whether a united political left, strengthened by dialogue with the non-governmental sector, will be able to produce a left that is simultaneously: socially sensitive and solidary, anti-corporatist, culturally liberal, anti-nationalist, mostly secular and definitely anti-racist? While some of these features could be accepted “moderately,” they should all go together. There is some common ground of shared values among the political left, non-governmental and intellectual circles in Bulgaria today, but on the other side there are also many substantial differences that prevent easy unification.

Annexes

Table 1

Electoral support on parliamentary elections for BSP (2017-2024)¹

Year	2017	April 2021	July 2021	November 2021	2022	2023	June 2024	October 2024
Votes	955,490	480,124	365,695	267,816	232,958	225,914	151,557	184,403
%	27%	14%	13%	10%	9%	8%	7%	7%

Source: Central electoral commission.

¹ In all of these elections, the BSP was the main party in a coalition with other parties, mostly leftist or patriotic.