



Specifics and Tendencies in Contemporary Bulgarian Political Culture

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Abstract: This article analyses character and specifics of Bulgarian Political Culture. The analysis is based on the Bulgarian Political Traditions during the three main periods in Bulgarian political life - modern political life (1878-1944); totalitarianism (1945-1989) and post-totalitarianism (1989-today).

Index Terms: Political Culture, Bulgarian Political Culture, Political Tradition, Political Process

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I. INTRODUCTION

A considerable problem in contemporary Bulgarian theoretical and actual political practice concerns the character and features of the national political culture, the specifics and interrelation between existing social subcultures.

The importance of these problems is defined by the place, role and influence of political culture on the political process.

In our view, political culture is the result of overall individual and group activity in the acceptance, evaluation, alteration and regulation of the principles governing political relations in society. It is a compound of obvious and subdued notions, formed in history, about different aspects of political life, which reflect: a) political knowledge, values and ideals, b) political norms of behaviour and tradition and c) examples of the political behaviour of personalities and groups, motivated by the rational and emotional materialization of political interests. In this sense, political culture is a summarization of overall political socialization.

Such an understanding of political culture helps explain its place and role in the social system via the following theses:

First, political culture is the binding joint between macro- and micro- politics, because it is the union between the ACTUAL ACTIVITY of the subjects in regulating existing political relations and the RESULTS of this activity, materialized in values, norms, traditions and institutions of political culture. These values, norms and traditions are material experience in political activity, while institutions are historically motivated by the need to produce, preserve and distribute political culture.

Second, in its core, political culture is a non-institutional phenomenon although it is manifested and affirmed by certain institutions.

Third, political culture is tied to the historical development of the social being and is, at the same time, a reflection of contemporary times on its own.

Fourth, there is an obvious mutual determination between political culture and the political system of society.

The above-quoted form the ground without which NO ANALYSIS of ANY national political culture is possible.

From this angle, the basic characteristic features of contemporary Bulgarian political culture may be derived after analyzing two groups of problems:

the historic foundations of the national political culture, and the national political culture in contemporary society.

II. BULGARIAN POLITICAL TRADITIONS POLITICAL CULTURE

The understanding that political culture results from the function of historical, social and cultural factors which affect mass conscience in time and space and form its dynamically expressed attitude to political life gives us the right to confirm that it is in this system of values and norms of political behaviour where one should search for the core of Bulgarian national political culture. The analysis of contemporary political culture is, therefore, impossible without the analysis of its historical roots, i.e. without the analysis of political tradition.

In analyzing Bulgarian political tradition several claims prove beyond doubt:

First, that the formation of authentic political tradition in Bulgaria begins with the restoration of the Bulgarian state in 1878 after five centuries of economic, political and social suppression by the Ottoman Empire, where the basis of the process dates back to the Bulgarian Renaissance from the second half of the 18th century up to the middle of the 19th century.

Second, that due to the contradictions and dynamics of modern and contemporary Bulgarian social and political history, the constitution and development of political tradition is slow, painful, inconsistent and lives in the dichotomy of authoritarianism—democracy, liberalism—conservatism.

Third, that the formation of Bulgarian political tradition is not only the result of the specifics and uniqueness of its history, but also the result of influences coming from the so-called “Great Powers”, the West European countries and Russia.

In other words, we believe that the character and specifics of Bulgarian political tradition may be GENERALLY analyzed within the following framework of PROBLEMS:

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- the attitude of the state as an institution towards the forms of state organization, the law and its role in the process;
- the role of the Eastern Orthodox Church and its institutions;
- parliamentary democracy and constitutionalism;
- the organization of local government bodies;
- the relation between national policy and the policies of different political parties;
- attitudes towards “authority” (its personification); the so-called “paternal” complex of the Bulgarians;
- attitudes towards social and political privileges;
- national egalitarianism;
- the relation between “mine” and “not mine” or “WE” and “the others”;
- the attitude towards Russia (the former USSR), the countries of Western Europe and neighbouring Balkan states;
- the Bulgarian inferiority complex (?!), and others.
- During different periods in Bulgarian history, the parameters manifest a system of subordination and hierarchy. The differences arise out of the overall social, economic, political and international context.
- Modern and contemporary Bulgarian history may be divided—according to the existing type of political system—into three basic periods:
 - modern political life (1878-1944);
 - totalitarianism (1945-1989) and
 - 3) post-totalitarianism (1989-today).

Each of the above periods has its own political character and respective political culture. At the same time, however, these are periods within an overall Bulgarian political process and as such have something in common, namely certain political traditions, values and ideals.

Without analyzing the history of Bulgarian political life since 1878 in depth, we will outline those events in the political process which have had a role in defining political traditions and without which it would be impossible to understand contemporary political culture.

The foundations of modern Bulgarian political life lie in the period of renaissance, because:

It is the period of national consolidation, chiefly as a result of the appearance of a national market and a gradual bourgeois prosperity and the self-awareness—economic, political and social—of society; the gradual formation of the social structure; the formation and manifestation of the subjects of renaissance processes through concrete social action—they are later transformed into the founders of modern political life; the appearance and constitutionalization of a Bulgarian renaissance intelligentsia, which is the feeding ground for the future Bulgarian administrative elite; the affirmation of the important role of the Eastern Orthodox religion and the institutions of the national Church in the social, political and cultural life of society.

It is during the renaissance period that as a result of the bourgeois processes and the national-liberation movement, tendencies of a national-psychological character become visible; they outline Bulgarian national psychology and are

the basis for Bulgarian contemporary psychology. From the 14th century through the 19th century, the Bulgarian community is isolated in its patriarchy. It is the renaissance period which brings the tendency to destroy this primitive patriarchy, as well as the negative and positive effects on Bulgarian national self-awareness that this leads to. On the one hand, Bulgarians look for support to their national self-esteem in the glory of their past; on the other, they realize that they are centuries behind other nations and this forms their Bulgarian inferiority complex in relation to other advanced nations. In different forms, this complex is still in existence. The Bulgarian community lives in a condition of political (Ottoman) and religious (Muslim) alien suppression. Thus, the Orthodox Church becomes the support for Bulgarian ethnicity and a symbol of survival among alien oppressors. “Ours” and “foreign”—in the sense of Bulgarian social life during the centuries of foreign rule—boil down to the opposition between two clearly defined entities:—“we”, the oppressed Christians and “they”, the Muslim oppressors, the aliens. The characterization of “foreign” is used to label the state, the legislation—power in general. This notion of the above quoted indicators of political tradition vary; their power of expression differs just like their deeply embedded psychological attitude of the Bulgarians towards the notion of “ours” and “foreign” degraded the Bulgarian attitude to “the state and law” in general for a long period of time.

Local democratic governance is formed during the renaissance period and is realized on several planes—handicraft organizations, school and church bodies, municipal self-governance. In itself, the Bulgarian Renaissance (often called “revival”) is a deeply democratic process, outlining the formation of politically oriented democratic traditions. The new Bulgarian state accepts the principles of political democracy, largely determined by the character and specifics of Bulgarian renaissance processes.

As a result of the war between Russia and Turkey in 1877-78, the Bulgarian state was restored in 1878. This, as well as the interference of the Great Powers and the decisions of the Berlin Congress of 1878, determined, to a considerable extent, the future development of Bulgarian statehood.

It is a fact of history that the restoration of the Bulgarian state and its overall national and state development is only a Balkan reflection of political and economic competition between the Great Powers; internal strife between them in relation to the Balkans (Bulgaria respectively). This restricts Bulgarian chances to follow an independent (truly national) policy and leads to the formation of an “inferiority complex” for not being able to authentically express their own political will. This is where we find the roots of the Bulgarian nationalism and national nihilism which can be found in Bulgarian political traditions.

In spite of this and irrespective of the historical international context in which the restoration of the Bulgarian state was effected, it marked the start of the process of political modernization of society. Concrete expressions of this process are: the acceptance of the First Bulgarian Constitution (the so-called “Turnovo



Constitution”) of 1879 and the gradual formation of the contemporary political system.

It should be stressed here that renaissance tradition and the “Turnovo Constitution” created the conditions for the development of political democracy in the Bulgarian state as well as the gradual transformation of the political culture of “patriarchal subordination” of the Bulgarians into a civil political culture (after G. Almond and S. Verba’s terminology).

However, due to internal (national) and external (international) factors, the Bulgarian political process is far from being democratically straight forward. Among such factors, one may view:

- the lack of parliamentary political and administrative experience of the Bulgarian political elite, wholly due to the five-century-old interruption in administrative traditions;
- the appearance of Bulgarian political parties takes place in an environment of a social structure not completely formed; thus, they are unstable, not homogeneous and do not represent lasting political formations;
- the appearance of the Bulgarian industrial bourgeoisie comes without the existence of a national aristocracy which usually preserves existing political and cultural traditions. This lack of historical heritage deprives the bourgeoisie of the aristocratism, self-esteem and style typical of the bourgeoisie in other European countries, where it comes as an heir to European aristocracy, which in itself explains the lack of scruples and the rough provincialism demonstrated in political life;
- the lack of sufficient capital attracts Bulgarian entrepreneurs, industrialists and bankers to state power and political office as a way to profit from the state budget and state loans. Thus, economic weakness leads to the exploitation of political power for personal prosperity, in itself creating fertile ground for the appearance of political corruption, another sad tradition of Bulgarian political life. The feeling of a “possessed stateship” among Bulgarians is provoked and the state and state institutions once again become a synonym for something “alien”;
- the principle of the division of power is often violated and corrupted and although a founding principle of the Turnovo Constitution, this leads to intolerant competition and struggles for domination between Parliament, Government and King (a foreigner);
- powerful political pressure and even direct intervention in the internal political life of the country on the side of the Great Powers is permanent. In itself, this fact not only rekindles the existing Bulgarian inferiority complex but leads to lasting “affiliations” and “phobias” in respect to one or another big country;
- the country witnesses a gradual increase in the participation of the military in the political battles of the young Bulgarian state—an unknown precedent.

Political life in Bulgaria during the period between 1878-1944 is characterized by the endless opposition between

democratic and authoritarian traditions—between political stability and instability. It seems as if transition is the permanent state in which Bulgarian society finds itself. Some examples; the democratic constitution and principles of political development as well as popular consensus among the nation in respect to the national issue (the culmination being the Union of the Bulgarian Kingdom with Eastern Rumeli on 6 September 1885) on the one hand and three national catastrophes and the loss of more than 1/3 of the historical and territorial heritage of Bulgaria, political coups and counter-coups, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes on the other.

In this way, the period of modern political life in Bulgaria brings forth the process of formation, manifestation and affirmation not only of democratic political traditions but also of non-democratic political behaviour which, in their unity, comprise the basis of the NATIONAL POLITICAL CULTURE. It may be declared that traditions in the Bulgarian political culture are connected mainly with:

- local democracy;
- attitudes towards the state, its institutions and the law (an overwhelming nihilism in relation to and alienation from the state, institutions and the legislation);
- attitudes towards parliamentarianism (the existence of electoral and parliamentary traditions which are systematically undergoing deformation);
- attitudes towards privileges derived from power (lasting egalitarian traditions and modes of behaviour connected to family ties, patrimony and populism);
- attitudes to freedom of opinion, criticism and self-criticism (on the one hand tolerance in respect of ideas, opinions, values etc., but on the other lack of ability in fair discussion, suspicion in political communications and the transformation of political ideas into personal attitudes);
- the relation between “mine” and “not mine” (another duality—on the one hand national and religious tolerance, an “openness” towards the world, and suspicion and reservation on the other; between subordination to the value of others and pride and national dignity);
- the attitude towards authority (the paternalistic reflex of the Bulgarians comes from their egalitarian tradition; this reflex, plus the complex of small and historically backward nations, leads to a sacral attitude to authority—a personality, a party, another state—and “demands” its personification).

The political traditions in question offer grounds for the claim that Bulgarian political culture of modern times may be characterized as a patriarchal and subordinate type of culture, with the domination of some participational elements.

The year 1944 marks another transitional period for Bulgarian society and state. It is a transition leading to a fundamental change in its political system, principles, fundamentals and subjects. The period between 1945 and

1989 in Bulgarian social development can be described in the terminology of communist totalitarianism.

Bulgarian totalitarianism secures its legality not only through political acts and economic legislation; it successfully achieves legitimacy through:

- 1) the power of ideology,
- 2) the power of the so-called “agents of socialization” and
- 3) the specifics of Bulgarian political traditions and the resulting peculiarities of the national political culture.

The aim of all this was the creation (formation) of the “new communist” individual.

Through total political and ideological intervention in the life of the individual, the social group and society as a whole, Bulgarian totalitarianism achieves its legitimacy by creating a “new” political culture. It is another question whether this culture creates only a “visible” stability and whether it is so universal. Irrespective of the above, we should here point out an important element which is valid only when one considers the following factors; the total isolation of Bulgarian society—economic, political, social, cultural and from the point of view of information exchange—from the ideologically “different”, from the “foreign” or the “enemy”; the interruption in existing political traditions, and the fact that the system is being legitimized in the minds and behaviour of the widest circles of society, but in practice, there is no alternative.

As a result, Bulgarian totalitarianism creates a national political culture which may be characterized as the “culture of subordinates”. To the extent to which a totalitarian regime is created, based on thinking aimed at the unification of individual and social values, the paternalistic and orientation and mentality that characterize Bulgarian political culture become hypertrophic.

Social, economic and political processes in the country after 1989 give us grounds to declare that Bulgarian social development is entering its post-totalitarian period.

One of the consequences of the change in the socio-economic and political system in Bulgaria will doubtless be the change in the character of the national political culture. Contemporary Bulgarian political culture may be traced with the help of two, conditionally grouped, packets of indicators—direct and indirect. When speaking of “direct” indicators we mean; attitudes to politics demonstrated by the knowledge of, information about and interest in politics; the objects and subjects of the political process; the self-estimation of members of society and their political self-evaluation as well as the existing political values and political activity demonstrated. Then there is the attitude towards the character of the political system, the political rights and obligations of citizens; towards the state and institutions of central and local governmental bodies; existing legislation; criticism and demands in relation to the duties of the state, its social and national policy, etc.

Indirect indicators; attitude towards religion and religious institutions; other nations and peoples; the new economic, political and social realities Bulgarians face today.

Considering sociological research on the above-quoted problems (there are a number of works on the subject, but we cannot quote them here), one may conclude that the characteristic features of Bulgarian political culture are expressed in:

- the fact that contemporary Bulgarian political culture is in the process of DEVELOPMENT, a process in the course of which several objectives are met—the overcoming of all patriarchal and other “subordinate” characteristics; the rehabilitation of democratic values and traditions and the formation of new, civil-oriented values;
- the duality of contemporary Bulgarian political culture and its internal contradictions, expressed in the simultaneous existence of interest in politics and indifference to actual participation; of being “informed” about politics and the lack of actual political knowledge; rational self-estimation and evaluation and emotional input; of political polarization and the acceptance of the necessity for national consensus; of moderate patriarchal conservatism and “openness” to all social innovations; of a personally individual pride and the sense of national political inferiority and so on. This dualism in Bulgarian political culture is objectively defined by the contradictory historical development of society and by natural contradictions in the transitional period.

One could also describe contemporary Bulgarian political culture as being of a mixed type—of the subordinate-activist type, which has not completely done away with patriarchal elements and still possesses resistant characteristics typical of “subjects”, but where one can visibly trace an imbalance in activist orientations and mentality.

III. CONCLUSION

Our understanding of political culture and its place and role in the political process gives us grounds to declare that there is an obviously interrelated and very important determining relation between political culture and the processes of democratization in post-totalitarian society. In general terms, this is realized on the following planes:

First, the processes of social change during the transfer from totalitarianism to democracy have a direct (and indirect) reflection on the characteristic features of political culture;

Second, the character and state of the actual political culture of society define the specifics, peculiarities and rates in the realization of the democratic process, i.e. that political culture is a condition in the process of democratization;

Third, that in demonstrating real materialization on the level of social thought of all aims and values of democratization, the actual political culture of society becomes a criteria for social democratization.

This determination between political culture and the process of democratization of post-totalitarian society



objectively leads to conclusions about possible forecasts for the development of both political culture and social processes.

The analysis of political culture in a post-totalitarian society is possible within the framework of three elements—totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism and liberal democracy—because the post-totalitarian society margins between totalitarianism and liberal democracy have features of both.

Totalitarian society is built on an ideological and political foundation, based on the principles of monism, centrism and the monopolism of the “party-state”. In as far as political, economic and social interests are not articulated in legal forms and do not become legitimate in social conflicts, totalitarian society is formally “without conflicts” and is “unified”. At the same time, however, due to the existence of enormous social tension, it cannot be called a society of legal and legitimate social consensus.

Liberal democracy, on the other hand, is a society founded on consensus. Moreover, liberal democracy is characterized by pluralistic consensus which does not exclude differences in opinion and situations of conflict, but is rather a specific way of resolving them.

At its core, post-totalitarian society is based on conflict. From this fact “conflicting” is the word used to describe the political culture of such a society too and this explains why its basic characteristic features are termed “different”, “contradictory”, “polarized” and “opposing”.

Such general considerations have led us to claim that the core of the problems in post-totalitarian society is the lack of consensus resulting from the contradiction between the necessity for high-level agreement (characteristic of critical and transitional periods in social history) and the low level (or total lack) of actual agreement on issues in society.

The need for consensus in Bulgarian post-totalitarian society is fundamental and has many aspects. Its depth is defined by the change in social system and its acuteness—by the critical condition of the economy—by the tensions and conflicts in the Balkans.

In other words, during the transfer from totalitarianism to liberal democracy the most crucial problem was that of achieving a strategic social consensus or the transformation of the conflict into a consensus.

Considering the specifics in the historical development of Bulgarian society and the actual characteristics of the contemporary political process, the only “working” formula which will produce results in achieving this social consensus may be discovered when viewing actual national interests—economic, political, socio-cultural as well as all-national values, ideas and ideals which have long proved their historical durability.

Officially, all political powers in Bulgaria acknowledge the need for such a consensus in the name of the national

interest, but their understanding of “national interest” in itself varies widely. This is evidence that political culture in Bulgarian society is still very “conflicting” and that it is still burdened by aims, values, norms and ideals arising out of narrow party and group interests, rather than those of the nation as a whole.

One of the basic tasks before contemporary Bulgarian society therefore, can be formulated thus; to look for mechanisms to transform the conflicting political culture of post-totalitarian society into a political culture of consensus, typical of liberal democracies.

- At present, Bulgarian political culture shows some such tendencies, generally boiling down to;
- a well expressed social interest in politics, the political system, political objectives and the activities of the subjects in the political process. Together with this, the last year has been witness to a decline in active social interest in the abovequoted phenomena;
- a high level of social participation in the political process, characterized by rational and emotional political behavior;
- a high level of social engagement in the norms, values and principles of the political system, but also political and party polarization in evaluating the features of this political system;
- a gradual formation and differentiation inside the national political culture itself of competing subcultures (mainly based on political and party principles rather than on ethnic or religious differences).

At the same time, however, the development of contemporary Bulgarian political culture does not show sufficient accumulation of tendencies which would permit us to speak of a well-formed and resistant model (type) of political culture (which is typical of liberal-democracies).

Such formation of a stable model of a national political culture is connected to the further development of the Bulgarian political process.

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