

EUROPEANIZATION OF THE BULGARIAN PARTY SYSTEM: DYNAMICS AND EFFECTS

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Abstract

The traditional explanations of the party system transformations usually rely on domestic factors. However, there is growing research on the impact of European integration over party politics. This impact is even greater in Central and Eastern European Countries and Bulgaria is no exception. The Bulgarian party system is fragile and fragmented. It has entered a new phase of transformation since the 2001 elections. This article examines the impact of the European integration over this transformation. The article argues that its impact is significant, since the parties are focused on the European cleavage, and the European party families play a key role in the formulation of their behavior and electoral strategies. Moreover, the paramount importance of membership in the European Union predetermined the other explanatory factors. European integration is the environment for the formation of the contemporary party system in Bulgaria. However, the effects of Europeanization appear not to be only positive. It turns out that along with consolidation of the party system, it provokes rise of populism which hinders professionalization of the Bulgarian political elite and thus, the political process suffers ineffectiveness.

Introduction

The¹ process of Europeanization is a major topic in the fields of contemporary Political Science and European Studies. Despite the growing number of volumes and articles on Europeanization, it remains poorly conceptualized.² What kind of process is Europeanization? The literature does not provide an explicit explanation of this question. Ladrech makes one of the earliest suggestions in the context of the institutionalist – intergovernmentalist debate. He argues that “Europeanization is an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making”³. While being close to the neo-functionalist and federalist theoretical implications, this definition in the terms of Ladrech recognizes “the continuing validity of national politics, yet of a transformed nature”⁴, thus offering a middle range approach of interpretation of the political and

¹ Paper presented at the 8th post-graduate conference on Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, 28-30 June 2007, Brno.

² Peter Mair, “The Europeanization Dimension”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11 (Apr. 2004): 338.

³ Robert Ladrech, “Europeanization of Domestic Politics and Institutions: the Case of France” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 32/1 (March 1994): 69.

⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

institutional change in the member-states.

Sticking to the institutionalist perspective, Olsen provides five different interpretations of the term⁵: 1) alteration of the external borders; 2) development of institutions and policy at the EU level; 3) "central penetration of national and sub-national systems of governance"; 4) export of European political models in other regions; 5) "political project" for the establishment of united Europe. The first interpretation concerns the extent to which Europe as a continent could develop in a single polity (Europeanization as EU enlargement). The second interpretation represents Europeanization as institutionalization and formalization of institutions and mechanisms at the EU level of governance. The third interpretation implies adaptation of national and sub-national levels of governance to the norms formulated at the European level. The fourth definition concerns foreign relations of Europe with other regions and its historical role in forming contemporary societies in these regions. These four interpretations could be treated as integral parts of the project for establishing a united Europe (fifth interpretation). These five interpretations could be integrated in a single model of Europeanization with three specific features 1) development of European polity and multiple levels of government model, 2) expanding the

introduction of the model through vertical (deepening) and horizontal (enlargement) integration and 3) expanding the influence of the polity outside its territorial constraints. The reason that Olsen provides for not integrating his five interpretations in a single model is that they do not necessarily positively correlate with one another.

Other authors like Cowles, Caporaso and Risse⁶ interpret Europeanization as institutional development and policy formulation at the EU level. Such institutionalization of an EU political system is, for Mair, one of the two aspects of a "single European dimension", where the other is the adoption of norms and rules formulated within this system at the national level⁷.

Other interpretations are based on the notion of European integration as enlargement and deeper integration. In the perspective of the latter, Europeanization "*encompasses the penetration of European rules, directives and norms into the otherwise differentiated domestic spheres*"⁸. Vaguely but in the same fashion Vink defines Europeanization "as domestic change caused by European integration"⁹. The perception of

⁵ Johan P. Olsen, "The Many Faces of Europeanization" *ARENA Working Papers WP 01/2*: 3-4.

⁶ Maria Green Cowles, James A. Caporaso, Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), chap. 1.

⁷ Mair, "The Europeanization Dimension" 340-43.

⁸ Ibid. 341.

⁹ Maarten P. Vink, *What is Europeanization? And Other Questions on a New Research Agenda*

Europeanization as a process of domestic adaptation forced by the EU norms penetration in the national sphere is shared also by Featherstone.¹⁰

Explanations of Europeanization as an effect of EU enlargement are especially relevant for explaining the end of the transitions in the CEE countries. In those terms Europeanization could be interpreted as modernization of the post-communist societies by adopting the Western European political model and introduction of the EU norms.¹¹ Furthermore, Europeanization is seen as a powerful tool for democratization in the post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe¹².

To sum up, the definitions and interpretations presented above imply several important aspects of Europeanization: 1) the development of institutions and policies at European level; 2) introducing change in the way

the national systems of the member-states function; 3) modernization of the candidate countries political and economic systems. The last two aspects could easily be integrated into one – both members and candidates experience domestic change due to European integration. Moreover, this change can be treated as modernization of both groups of countries. This process is more rapid and intensive in candidate countries since they have to catch up quickly with changes old members made decades ago, as well as to combine it with the transformation of their societies in the case of the post-communist states. Radaelli's definition of Europeanization includes the aforementioned aspects: "Europeanisation consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, "ways of doing things" and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies."¹³

Although this definition represents a one-way, vertical process, leaving out the possibility of horizontal or bottom-up influence, it is very useful for the purpose of this article.

(Paper for the Second YEN Research Meeting on Europeanization, Milan: University of Bocconi, 22-23 November, 2002) [database on-line]; available at: http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/standinggroups/yen/paper_archive/2nd_yen_rm_papers/vink2002.pdf; accessed on Jan/23/2007, 1.

¹⁰ Kevin Featherstone, "Introduction: In the Name of Europe" in K. Featherstone and C. M. Radaelli (eds) *The Politics of Europeanization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 7.

¹¹ Robert Harmsen and Thomas M. Wilson, "Introduction: Approaches to Europeanization" *Yearbook of European Studies*, 14 (2000): 16.

¹² Juhani Grossman, *EU Membership as a Tool for Democratization* (Freedom House, 2006) [database on-line]; available at: http://www.partners.civiced.org/paw/tools/people_download.php?group=event&id=199, accessed on Apr/23/2007.

¹³ Claudio M. Radaelli, "Europeanisation: Solution or problem?" *European Integration online Papers (EIoP)* 8/16 (Oct. 2004)

The effects of Europeanization over the national political systems¹⁴, in general, and national party systems¹⁵, in particular, are widely discussed in the literature. Mair finds “little evidence of any direct impact”¹⁶ of Europeanization on domestic party structures, while others argue that Europeanization is the major factor framing the political parties and party systems in the states experiencing European integration, especially in the Central and Eastern European countries.¹⁷ As Lewis points out “[t]hrough perhaps not directly apparent in relation to the precise format and mechanics of CE party systems, the influence of European institutions and political models in terms of such factors as integration with international and EU-based party groupings, the careful tailoring of electoral mechanisms to regional norms, and the development of parliamentary procedures according to international practice has been so strong that it is that it is indeed difficult to classify it as just indirect.”¹⁸ The great

impact of Europeanization for achieving political stability and development of the party systems in CEE is outlined also by Pridham¹⁹ and Dakowska.²⁰ This impact was fuelled by the domestic consensus²¹ in CEE countries over membership in the European Union (EU) as a major political goal.²² As the data of Candidate Countries Eurobarometer show²³, the public support for EU membership remained quite high until accession (around 60%). This support was even higher in Bulgaria and Romania – 10% above average. Despite the decrease in support after accession, the share of the opponents of the EU membership remained low.

The proposition that Europeanization is a major factor for the party system

¹⁴ Simon Hix and Klaus H. Goetz, “Introduction: European Integration and National Political Systems.” *West European Politics*, 23/4 (Oct. 2000): 1-30.

¹⁵ Cowles, Caporaso and Risse, *Transforming Europe*, chap. 1.

¹⁶ Peter Mair, “The Limited Impact of Europe on National Party Systems” *West European Politics* 23/4 (Oct. 2000): 28.

¹⁷ Zsolt Enyedi, “Europeanisation” of Central Eastern European Party Systems (Paper prepared for the POLIS Plenary Conference, 2005) [database on-line]; available at: <http://www.epsnet.org/2005/pps/Enyedi.pdf>, accessed on Feb/2/2007, 1.

¹⁸ Paul G. Lewis, “The Impact of the Enlargement of the European Union on Central European Party Systems” *SEI Working Paper 14*

(Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2003): 10.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Pridham, “EU enlargement and consolidating democracy in post-communist states – formality and reality” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40/3 (2002): 953-54.

²⁰ Dorota Dakowska, “Beyond conditionality: EU enlargement, European party federations and the transnational activity of German political foundations” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 3,2 (2002): 277.

²¹ Lewis, “The Impact of the Enlargement,” 9-10.

²² Jack Bielasiak, *Party Systems and EU Accession: Euroscepticism in East Europe* (Paper prepared for the Conference on Public Opinion about the EU in Post-Communist Eastern Europe, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, April 2-3, 2004 [database on-line]; available at: <http://www.indiana.edu/~iupolsci/euconf/Bielasiak.pdf> accessed on May/12/2008, 3).

²³ Eurobarometer Spring 2004 [database on-line]; available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cceb_en.htm accessed on May/12/2008, 186.

transformation in CEE countries tends to provide a plausible explanation of the processes that framed domestic politics in the region. However, it is underestimated in mainstream explanations of the party system transformation in Bulgaria. Karasimeonov defines “political engineering” as a main factor in the formation of the contemporary party system.²⁴ As an example of such engineering, he points out the constitutions, electoral laws, laws for the political parties, as well as the behavior of the new political elite. In this article I argue that the main factor for the transformation of the Bulgarian party system is rather Europeanization.

The first section of the article describes the party system transformation since 1989. The second section focuses on the European factors that influenced the political parties and the party system. The third section illustrates the effects of the EU impact on the party systems. In the final section I conclude.

The Dynamics of the Bulgarian Party System

The party system in Bulgaria between 1989 and 2001 was dominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) – the former Bulgarian Communist Party, and the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). The historical parties, revived after the fall of the old regime, had little

influence.²⁵ Most of them joined the SDS, which took the role of main opposition player. The main cleavage of the bipolar party system was the communism/anticommunism division between these two major actors. Anticommunism was the central impetus for mobilization of the opposition, while “nostalgia” towards the old regime was the driving force for supporters of the BSP.

The anticommunist SDS pushed for economic liberalization – developed market, full privatization except some limited sectors, limitation of the redistributive role of the state support or the private sector and tax concessions for foreign investors, etc. The party proclaimed strong commitment to the West and EU and NATO memberships as the only alternative in the foreign policy aspect. At the same time, it remained unfriendly towards Russia and appealed for economic and political delimitation. SDS insisted on revealing the archives of the former political police and conviction of people responsible for the communist terror, as well as compensation for the repressed by the old regime and full restitution of the confiscated property.

BSP, on the other hand, insisted on the preservation of the old regime’s legacy. This included greater state participation in the economy, limited privatization, state regulation of prices and salaries, state monopoly over whole sectors of the economy, free education and healthcare managed by the state. The

²⁴ Georgi Karasimeonov, *Партийната система в България* (The Party System in Bulgaria) (Sofia: Gorex Press, 2006), 225-26.

²⁵ Karasimeonov, *The Party System*, 228.

party was firmly against any conviction of former officials advocating that they have worked for their country and have fulfilled their duties. The party explicitly condemned a potential NATO membership and insisted on the preservation of good relations with Russia and enlargement of economic cooperation.

The communist/anticommunist division represented two entirely opposing political alternatives. Supporters of the SDS political platform were mostly young, educated people pushing for a change and better opportunities, as well as people repressed by the old regime and remaining representatives of the pre-communist elite and their heirs, writers, artists and poets. On the other side were all the people who benefited from the old regime. These were most of the people who, due to the planned communist industrialization, were brought from the countryside to the cities and provided with apartments, secure jobs and higher status in society, i.e., workers and peasants who were privileged in the old regime. These people had lived the greater part of their lives under the communist regime and its propaganda.

This cleavage was so strong and durable that it remained the only pillar of the so-called “first Bulgarian party system”.²⁶ The sustainability of the bipolar model was fuelled by the unwillingness of the BSP to reform itself. The government formed by BSP

in 1994 however, led to economic collapse and hyper inflation in 1996. The crisis provided grounds for radicalization and unification of the opposition. SDS and most of the opposition parties formed a coalition called United Democratic Forces (ODS). ODS initiated street protests in January 1997 which led to pro-term parliamentary elections in April 1997 won by ODS (Table 1).

However, there was and still is another division – the ethnic cleavage, exploited mainly by the Turkish minority party – Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which allowed it to mobilize the largest minority group in the country in its own support. By monopolizing the Turkish minority vote and by developing its party structure, DPS managed to approve its place in the party system as a third player, which in its turn gave for some incentives to claim that the Bulgarian party system consists of two and a half parties. This cleavage is a typical example of the Center-Periphery model introduced by Lipset and Rokkan.²⁷ The DPS electorate populates remote and mainly rural regions in the north-east and the south of the country. DPS’s main political struggle is for cultural and religious collective rights for the Turkish and Muslim community in Bulgaria (the Bulgarian Constitution prohibits collective religious and ethnic

²⁶ Ibid, 229.

²⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments”, in *The West European Party System*, ed. Peter Mair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). 91-138.

rights and guarantees them only at the individual level), which it negotiates with the center, suppressing the potential conflict. DPS managed to negotiate introduction of the right to study the mother tongue at schools, news emissions in Turkish on the national television, Muslim schools, etc. Sticking to the Center-Periphery model, the Turkish minority is territorially defined, it pushes for the extension of its rights and is open to coalitions with all other parties regardless their economic platform (except xenophobic parties). DPS also manage to institutionalize to a large extent the relationships between the Turkish minority and the Center.

It should be noted however, that these developments are to a high degree features of the leadership of the party. The party leader Ahmed Dogan is its founder and unchangeable leader since 1990. The deputy chairs Lyutfi Mestan, Yunal Lyutfi and Emel Etem are unchangeable as well. Although often criticized for lack of internal democratic mechanisms in decision-making, indecent relations with suspicious firms and electoral violations²⁸, DPS is a key factor for the construction of an ethnic model, which prevented ethnic struggles in the country.

Within the 1989 – 2001 period, two phases could be differentiated. The first

²⁸ DPS is widely criticized in the media for forcing people from the Turkish minority to vote for them, as well as organizing the Bulgarian emigrants of Turkish origin living in Turkey to vote in Bulgaria, which in the case of municipal elections always predetermines the election results in favor of DPS.

phase developed prior to 1997 and was marked with economic and political decline with the economic collapse in 1996 as its peak. Conventionally this phase was dominated by BSP. In 1991 SDS formed a government, but its support in parliament was so fragile that it is hard to define the years between 1991 and 1994 as dominated by the anticommunists. In 1994 the SDS government failed to receive vote of confidence and had to resign. BSP won the elections in 1994, but its government further intensified the crisis.

The second phase (1997-2001) was marked with economic stabilization and development. The ODS government headed by the SDS leader Ivan Kostov undertook rapid and deep structural reforms that delivered passable results. Enjoying stable majority in parliament, the government managed to pass pro-liberal legislation that facilitated the emergence of a market economy. The government launched an extensive privatization and restitution process. EU and NATO memberships were formulated as primary political goals of the country, and the ODS government started the negotiation processes. Despite the macroeconomic and foreign policy stability and development, the reforms that inevitably affected a large part of the population led to loss of popular support for the ODS.

The decline in the support for ODS and the still vivid memories of the economic collapse caused by the BSP government were expressed by the

complex popular distrust in politics. People were looking for an alternative with a majority claiming that the political parties failed to deliver good governance and better standard during the 11 years of transition. The alternative came unexpectedly in 2001 when the former king Simeon Sax-Coburg-Gotha, exiled by the communists in 1946, proclaimed his.

Table 1. Political Parties in Bulgaria, Share of the Legislative Vote 1990 – 2005

Party	1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and coalition (KB)	47.2%	33.14%	43.5 %	21.97%	17.15%	30.95%
United Democratic Forces (SDS) and coalition (ODS)	36.2%	34.36%	24.23%	52.02%	18.18%	7.68%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) in 1997 coalition (ONS)	6.0%	7.55%	5.44%	7.57%	7.45%	12.81%
Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BZNS)	8.0%	3.9%	in NS	in ODS	in ODS	in BNS
People's Union (NS)	***	***	6.51%	***	***	***
Bulgarian Business Bloc (BBB)	***	***	4.73%	4.91%	***	***
Bulgarian Euro-Left Coalition (BEL)	***	***	***	5.48%	***	***
National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) coalition	***	***	***	***	42.74%	19.88%
Attack Coalition	***	***	***	***	***	8.14%
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria	***	***	***	***	***	6.44%
Bulgaria People's Union (BNS)	***	***	***	***	***	5.19%

Source: *Elections Results Archive*, Center on Democratic Performance, Binghamton University
<http://www.binghamton.edu/cdp/era/index.html#>; accessed on 5/14/2007

intention to take part in the upcoming parliamentary elections with his own political formation. The 2001 parliamentary elections marked the end of the bipolar party system.²⁹ The newly formed National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV) obtained a majority of the vote (see Table 1) and 120 out of 240 seats in the parliament. The movement founded by the former king relied on his personal popularity as well as on a platform focused on economic issues rather than ideological identifications. The two parties dominating the first decade of the Bulgarian transition found themselves in opposition with the worst electoral results since 1989. Subsequently, SDS split into several smaller parties ran by leaders whose relations were filled by personal animosity. After the elections, NDSV had to form a coalition since it did not have absolute majority in parliament. The only possible partner appeared to be DPS, which determined the ideological identification of NDSV in the left/right dimension of the political specter. The movement proclaimed itself as a centre-right formation with a liberal platform. Doing so, it distinguished itself from BSP and SDS, representing the left and the right respectively. The centrist identification of NDSV provided ideological reasoning of its coalition with DPS, as well.

²⁹ Georgi Karasimeonov, *Новата партийна система в България - облик и перспективи (The New Party System in Bulgaria: Aspects and Perspectives)*, (Razum 2, 2002) [database online]; available at: <http://www.razum.org/number2.php.htm#4> accessed on Feb/2/2007.: 54.

All these developments lead to structural change in the Bulgarian situation. NDSV appeared as an ideologically undefined catch-all party of the protest against the compromised old parties and the centrist image was quite useful. This was a vacant niche so far. DPS as a party representing the Turkish people fit perfectly in this coalition. It appeared that communism/anticommunism division had depleted its potential to mobilize electoral support. The old parties had to develop new ideological identifications and electoral strategies.

Figure 1a represents the Bulgarian political specter prior to 2001. During most of the period, BSP was at the margin between left and extreme left. SDS was firmly in the right part of the scale. Despite the fact that BEL could be classified as a center-left party, and DPS and BBB as centrist, these parties had virtually no impact or significant electoral support. Practically there was a vacuum in the center and two poles of the system. The change of the situation in 2001 forced SDS to become more right in order to differentiate from NDSV, while BSP moved towards the center-left under constant pressure for reforms. Figure 1b schematizes this notion, as well as the general decrease in the support for the right and the left.

The fragmentation of the party system deepened with the 2005 elections. Seven parties managed to pass the 4% threshold (Figure 1c). Apart from BSP, NDSV, DPS and SDS, one new party and two coalitions entered the parliament. The new party of the former

Figure 1. Bulgarian Political Specter

1990-2001							
	BSP (KB)		BEL (97-01)	DPS, BBB (94-01)		SDS (ODS)	
Extreme left	Left		Center-left	Center	Center-right	Right	Extreme right

2001-2005						
	BSP (KB)		DPS	NDSV	SDS (ODS)	
Extreme left	Left	Center-left	Center	Center-right	Right	Extreme right

2005-							
	BSP (KB)		DPS	NDSV	BNS SDS	DSB Ataka	
Extreme left	Left	Center-left	Center	Center-right	Right		Extreme right

SDS leader and ex-prime minister Ivan Kostov – Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB) managed to draw a part of the SDS electorate and obtained 17 seats. The coalition BNS consisted of three small parties: the Union of the Free Democrats (SSD) – a splinter of SDS, the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BZNS) which was in coalition with SDS in the last two parliaments, and the Inner Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) which was also a part of ODS between 1997 and 2001. Coalition Ataka (Attack) was the surprise of the elections. With its populist and extremist rhetoric, it managed to gain more votes than any other right party.

These elections increased the “destabilization of the party system” and “created the most unstable political situation”³⁰ in the contemporary Bulgarian history. After an unsuccessful attempt of BSP and NDSV consecutively to form a government, the President in accordance to his constitutional powers authorized DPS to form a government. Faced with new elections, DPS, BSP and NDSV negotiated the formation of the “triple coalition”, formed a cabinet and solved the crisis.

³⁰ Maria Spirova, “Europarties and Party Development in EU Candidate States: PES and EPP in Bulgaria,” *Europe-Asia Studies* (under review): 10.

As illustrated in Table 1, until 1997 the Bulgarian party system was relatively stable and it has significantly transformed since the 2001 elections. The puzzle here is what caused this transformation. The widely argued explanation is focused on the exhaustion of the anticommunism cleavage.³¹ As already noted, this cleavage was the main element of the bipolar party system. It was to a large extent convergent with the pro/anti EU and NATO integration division.

The support of BSP for the European integration of Bulgaria during the first decade of the transition was questionable, because of its positions on some issues concerning the membership conditions. These were: economic liberalization, shutting down some of the Kozloduy nuclear reactors, as well as some of the party's foreign policy positions. Furthermore, its position against the Bulgarian membership in NATO until 2000, acted as an amplifier of the anti-integrationist image of the party. This allowed SDS to create for itself an image of a guarantor of the European future of the country. Yet, given the strong public support toward the EU membership of Bulgaria by 2001 (Figure 2), and the sharply decreasing electoral support for BSP in two consecutive votes (1997 and 2001), the party was forced to change its positions in

³¹ Karasimeonov, *The Party System*, 230.

order to recover its image. Nevertheless, the consensus over EU and NATO memberships between the major political parties did not deplete the pro/anti EU cleavage. It just took it out of the communism/anticommunism context of the first decade of transition.

The cleavage was later utilized by Ataka, which given the drop of the public approval for EU membership, delivered success for its populist and in a way chauvinistic platform. The party took advantage of the ethnic cleavage as well. As already mentioned, the Turkish minority party remained widely criticized for electoral manipulations, suspicious business contacts and corruptive behavior. Moreover, ethnic parties are constitutionally banned in Bulgaria and the fact that DPS is not prohibited gave Ataka space to accuse the political elite in national and constitutional treason.

All these developments shaped two dimensions of the Bulgarian party system. The first is the left-right dimension and the other is the euro-optimistic/euro-pessimistic dimension. These features of the Bulgarian party system fit the European model of party system defined by Hix.³² According to

Karasimeonov's classification³³ at present, the left is relatively united around BSP. NDSV and DPS occupy the center, while the right is quite fragmented. SDS, DSB, BZNS, VMRO, SSD and the newly founded Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) share the right part of the political specter. Between 2001 and 2005, the government was formed by the two centrist formations, while the present cabinet is supported by a left-centrist coalition. On the other hand, all these parties are pro-European and clearly distinguishable from Ataka, which due to its extremist and anti-integrationist positions, is, in the terms of Hix – "un-coalitionable".³⁴ Figure 3 presents the two dimensions of the party system. The arrangement of the parties within the system represented by Figure 3 reflects their positions on political and ideological issues. Two of the parties do not have explicitly defined economic platforms. These are the Turkish minority party DPS and the moderate nationalists from VMRO. BSP offers left solutions for the economic issues, while GERB, NDSV, SDS, SSD and BZNS are classified as liberal formations. DSB is rather

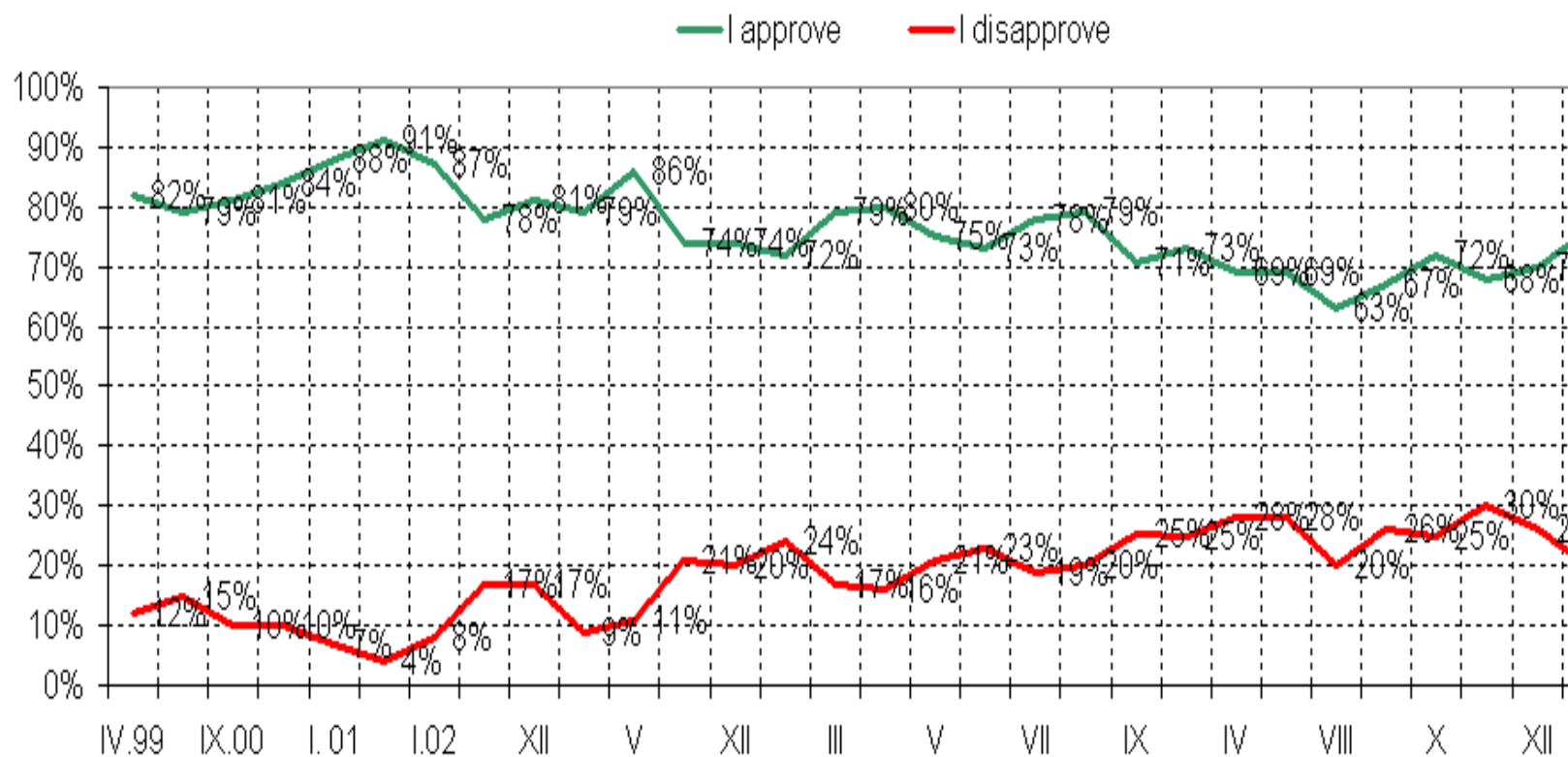
³² Simon Hix, *The Political System of the European Union*, 2nd edition (London: Palgrave, 2005), chap. 6.

³³ Karasimeonov, *The Party System*, 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

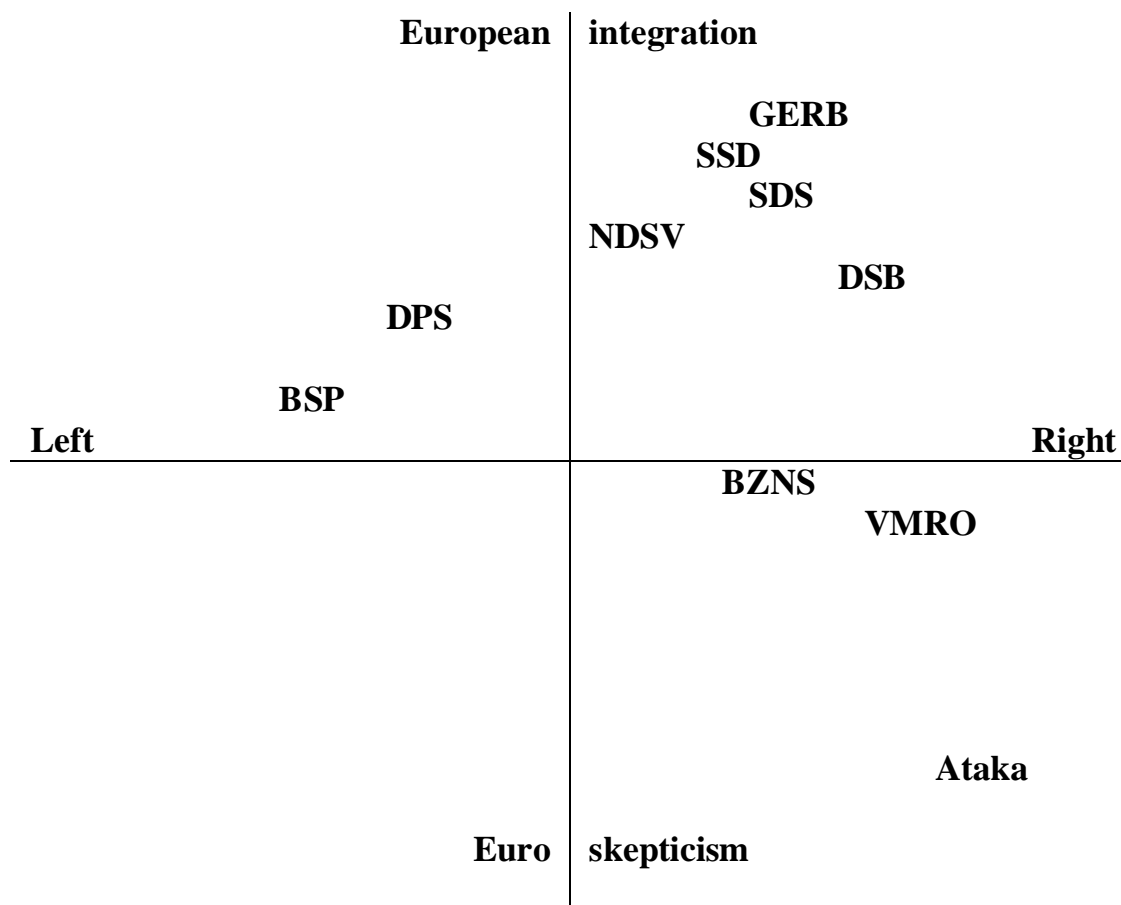
Figure 2

Public attitude to Bulgaria's accession to the EU



Source: Alpha Research: http://www.aresearch.org/european_union.html; accessed on May/15/2007

Figure 3. Two dimensions of the Bulgarian Party System



conservative. More intriguing is the case of Ataka. The party has left standings on economic issues, proclaiming even partial nationalization and expansion of state regulation, which contradicts with its rightist political positions.

The Influence of the European Party Families

The effect of European integration on the party system transformation in Bulgaria is even more salient when the influence of the European party families is taken into account. As Spirova argues, the Party of

European Socialists (PES) was involved in the formation of the Bulgarian social-democracy since the very beginning of the transition³⁵. Since the BSP was considered anti-integrationist and non-democratic, at first PES supported some smaller parties as well as encouraged the pro-European members of BSP to defect and join their social-democratic project. The greatest achievement of these efforts was the entry of the Bulgarian Euro-left (BEL) into parliament in 1997.

³⁵ Spirova, "Europarties," 11.

With the reformation of BSP and its pro EU positions, PES reformulated its policy toward it and recognized it as a potential partner. PES further pushed for unification of the left space in Bulgaria. It tried to bring together BSP, BEL and BSDP, but in vain. Consequently, the unification happened without the participation of BEL, which was marginalized. As a result, PES gave observer's status to BSP in 2002 and associate membership in 2005, leaving no doubts for its involvement in the formation of the left space in Bulgaria³⁶. The desire of BSP to improve its legitimacy through membership in the Party of European Socialists accelerated its reformation and hence, accelerated the transformation of the party system itself.

Similar is the involvement of the European People's Party (EPP). In the early years of the transition, it recognized and incorporated the Democratic Party (DP) and the BZNS. Already in power, SDS received associated membership in 1998. Like PES, EPP also pushed hard for the consolidation of the right in Bulgaria. The success of these efforts was marked by the foundation of ODS – large right coalition around SDS, that won the elections in 1997. The major success was marked by the election of one of the SDS leaders Nadezhda

Mihaylova as Deputy Chair of EPP.³⁷

However, the loss of the 2001 elections disintegrated the right union. SSD and DSB sliced from SDS. EPP tried to reunite the right again in 2004, but failed. In the 2005 elections DSB ran alone, SSD and BZNS together with VMRO formed a separate coalition – NS, while SDS and DP remained in ODS. As shown in table 1, the results were highly unsatisfactory. These five parties not only ran against the EPP initiative, but against the “expectations and the common sense” as well³⁸.

Unlike PES and EPP, the European Liberals did not recognize a kin party in Bulgaria. In the conditions of the bipolar party system, this was not a surprise. Bluntly put, in the Bulgarian party politics there was no room for the center. Yet, since the 2001 elections the situation has changed. The parties supported by PES and EPP were in opposition. For the first time since 1989, the government was neither left nor right. The coalition in power was ideologically non-aligned, and in domestic plan the two poles were discredited by the popular dissatisfaction. This was a convenient moment for the European liberals to intervene in Bulgarian politics. That is why the

³⁶ Ibid, 13.

³⁷ Ibid, 16.

³⁸ Ibid, 17.

candidacy of DPS for associated membership in the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) was eagerly approved in 2001.

DPS was in power, so it was attractive to ELDR. On the other hand, the party was trying to blur its purely ethnic image in order to keep its pretensions to be a national and responsible for the government party. The membership in ELDR was the perfect tool for political legitimization and for delimitation from the discredited left and right.

After its foundation in 2001, NDSV tried to legitimize itself as a right party and applied for membership in EPP. However, SDS blocked its candidacy, which on its turn pushed NDSV into the centrist part of the political specter. The party, with the cooperation of its coalition partner DPS, became a member of the ELDR in 2003, which is determinative for the coalition potential of NDSV.

The stimulus for the Bulgarian parties to associate with the Euro-parties is not only the external and internal legitimacy they would obtain. The aid delivered by the rich German foundations supporting the right, left and center appeared to be a high esteem for its members, especially for the small ones. The Euro-parties did not only change the electoral behavior of their Bulgarian

members, but their values as well, since the foundations aimed at promoting specific principles and ethics.

In summary, the European party families have continuously influenced the behavior of the major Bulgarian political parties from the very beginning of the transition. Both PES and EPP pushed for consolidation of the left and the right specter respectively, with a varying success. When the right was united, the left was not and vice versa.

Effects of Europeanization

So far, I have presented arguments disclosing the substantial role of European integration for the transformation of the Bulgarian party system. Nevertheless, what is more intriguing is whether this phenomenon is positive or negative. Is it possible that Europeanization actually has caused negative effects over the party system? The answer is twofold.

On one hand is the civilizing effect of the European party federations over the Bulgarian parties. This effect was of great importance for democratization. Moreover, the influence of PES was one of the key factors for the reformation of the former communist party, which was a great improvement. Further, the Bulgarian party system is adopting

a Western model of organization: “more united left, more fragmented right.”³⁹

On the other hand, however, the Europeanization has caused some negative effects as well. They are denoted by the *populist drift* that is on the rise since the 2001 elections. This drift is characterized by the advent of political parties that share several common features: 1) they proclaim themselves against the present political elite, 2) they have no clear economic program, 3) their platforms are rather critical to other parties politics than offering any substantial developments, 4) they are leader-type parties, 5) they are catch-all protest parties, 6) they lose electoral support very fast. The first populist party in contemporary Bulgarian politics is the Bulgarian Business Block that obtained almost 5% of the vote in the 1994 and 1997 elections and disappeared subsequently.⁴⁰ The first considerable example of a populist party in Bulgaria was the advent of NDSV. The movement won the elections in 2001 upon the charisma of its leader – the former tsar and his solemn promise to significantly improve the lives of the people for 800 days through the economic program of his team. The latter did not take place and logically NDSV halved its electoral support in the 2005 elections.

At the same elections, a new populist party emerged – Ataka. The party was named after the TV show of its leader Volen Siderov, who gained the sympathy of voters dissatisfied with the transition by means of nationalistic, xenophobic and chauvinistic rhetoric. Ataka obtained considerable support in the elections. Furthermore, its leader was the main contestant of the current president in the 2006 presidential elections receiving more votes than the joint candidate of the right parties.

The *populist drift* boosted at the end of 2006 with the establishment of the party “Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria” (GERB). The party is created around lieutenant-general Boyko Borisov who started his political career as secretary general of the Ministry of Interior in the government of NDSV and DPS. Borisov ran in the 2005 parliamentary elections as a candidate of NDSV and was elected MP from two constituencies, but refused the seat and left the party. In the autumn 2005, he ran for the mayor elections in Sofia as an independent candidate and won the office.

Since as mayor he is not allowed to take party leadership, Borisov appointed his deputy mayor Tsvetanov leader of GERB. The party proclaimed as its fundamental principles “civil liberties”,

³⁹ Enyedi, “*Europeanisation*,” 8.

⁴⁰ Spirova, “*Europarties*,” 9.

"Europeanization", "equal opportunities" and "prosperity"⁴¹. At the founding assembly, Borisov and Tsvetanov proclaimed themselves against the existing political elite. Borisov went even further by declaring his will to deliver the power directly to the people. GERB defines itself as a right party and a potential member of EPP. At the same time it keeps its distance from the rest of the right parties. Currently, the party appears to be the only alternative to the BSP domination in Bulgarian party politics (Table 2). Its growing support is explained by the charisma of its "informal" leader Borisov who personifies the fiction for a strong-hand in politics and of its criticism towards the present political elite.

The *populist drift* distorts the professionalization of the political elite and thus hinders the consolidation of the Bulgarian political process. The populist parties are a stepping-stone for newcomers in politics. Half of the present MPs are newcomers (Table 3). Only one of the Ataka incumbents has been Member of Parliament before. A dozen of the NDSV MPs are for the first time in parliament, 38 repeat their mandate

and only two of them have their third mandate. NDSV had 120 MPs in the previous parliament, out of which 80 are no longer in parliament or in politics.

The vast majority of the members of these parties have never dealt with politics before. They come from a wide range of professional fields. Most of them are well known lawyers, doctors, economists, engineers, university professors, and all have their careers outside politics. Their stay in parliament is temporary and not a serious occupation, nor is their party activities. All this questions the efficiency of the political process and leads to ineffective and incompetent law-making and governmental policies.

Paradoxically, it appears that the Europeanization of the Bulgarian party system along with its consolidation leads to an increase of populism which distorts the professionalization of the political elite. The Europeanization led to the reformation of the former communist party and to overall enlightenment of the political parties, but it provoked the populist drift as well.

Tentative Conclusions

In this article I argue that the transformation of the Bulgarian

⁴¹ Bulgarian National Radio (December 4, 2006), available at:

http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission_English/Theme_Politics/Material/gerbconstit.htm; accessed on May/20/2007

Table 2

Voters attitudes in Bulgaria August 2005 – March 2007

Vote Intentions	VIII.2005	IX.2005	XII.2005	I.2006	II.2006	IV.2006	V.2006	VI.2006	VIII.2006	XI.2006	XII.2006	I.2007	III.2007
BSP	23,0%	25,5%	24,3%	22,9%	23,5%	19,4%	21,4%	21,1%	23,3%	27,5%	25,5%	25,3%	21,5%
HMSS	12,2%	10,8%	9,7%	9,4%	8,6%	5,2%	4,8%	4,6%	5,1%	3,3%	2,8%	3,8%	2,9%
Attack	10,3%	8,7%	7,2%	7,9%	9,1%	6,0%	6,0%	5,7%	4,6%	8,9%	7,4%	7,8%	9,1%
MRF	9,3%	8,3%	6,0%	6,5%	7,0%	7,5%	6,7%	6,7%	6,4%	7,1%	6,9%	7,6%	9,3%
UDF	5,2%	6,5%	5,0%	4,5%	3,5%	4,2%	4,0%	4,2%	4,5%	4,1%	3,3%	3,5%	2,1%
BHU	2,8%	2,5%	1,5%	1,5%	1,5%	1,1%	1,1%	1,1%	0,9%	0,6%	0,7%	0,6%	0,2%
DSB	2,7%	3,0%	2,9%	2,5%	2,8%	2,4%	3,2%	3,3%	2,3%	1,8%	1,0%	1,1%	1,3%
GERB			-	-	-	14,4%	12,4%	15,6%	14,2%	7,8%	14,2%	13,6%	17,4%
Other	1,3%	2,2%	4,5%	5,6%	5,6%	1,7%	2,5%	2,6%	1,2%	3,8%	3,9%	2,7%	2,0%
I will not vote	33,0%	32,5%	38,9%	39,2%	38,4%	38,1%	37,9%	35,1%	37,5%	35,1%	34,3%	34,0%	28,5%

Source: Alpha Research: http://www.aresearch.org/european_union.html; accessed on May/20/2007

Table 3.

Distribution of the Members of Parliament of the 40th National Assembly by parliamentary experience

1 st term	50%
2 nd term	32%
3 rd term	18%

Source: National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=ns&lng=en&nsid=4>; accessed on May/20/2007

party system is a result of the European integration of the country. The existence of a pro/anti EU cleavage supports this proposition. The EU and NATO integration of the state was an issue determining the positions of the parties during the so-called first party system. The questionable support of the unreformed BSP for the EU integration and its firm opposition to the NATO membership was attractive point for its supporters who were susceptible to the nostalgia towards the old regime. At the same time this position was a mobilizing and unifying factor for the right parties who relied heavily on their integrationist image.

The end of the first phase of the party system occurred when the BSP changed its position towards the integration issue and declared pro-European. The right coalition lost its image of genuine guarantor of the European future of the country, since there was no threat for this future. However, the cleavage was not depleted and was utilized by Ataka, whose leader Siderov accused the political elite of being too yielding in the negotiations with the European Union and appealed for revision of the treaty chapters.

Apart from the structural importance of the pro/anti EU division, great influence over the transformation of the contemporary party system in the country is exercised by the European party families. Since the very beginning of the transition, the Euro-parties were trying to model their Bulgarian chapters. The way the parties entered

coalitions, split or unite was in most of the cases denoted by the approval of the European partner. The EPP, PES and later ELDR along with the German foundations supporting them, played an enlightening role in the transformation of Bulgarian party politics.

However, it appears that the effects of Europeanization are not only positive. It provoked a drift of populism in Bulgarian party politics, which hindered the recruitment and professionalization of the political elite. Ironically, the process which caused the reformation of the former communist party and turned it pro-European, led to the advent of a party challenging the European integration of Bulgaria itself.

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