

BEHIND BULGARIA'S DEMOCRATIC FAÇADE:

Political Conditions of
Backsliding

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8 June 2021
Word count: 11 987

On the cover: (Sketches of Sofia, 2020)

Executive summary

More than three decades after the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the expected triumph of the liberal democracy did not prove to be a straightforward phenomenon. The post-communist states entered the process of democratization with the plan of reuniting with their Western counterparts (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). However, instead of progressing linearly towards its goal of democratic consolidation, the region increasingly faces the challenge of democratic backsliding (Cianettia, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018).

As part of the wave of post-communist democratization, Bulgaria is one of the acute, but rarely researched examples of democratic decline. Considering its differing transition and its consistent progress towards consolidation, this dissertation aimed at expanding the scope of the academic framework by analyzing the political conditions, which have contributed to its democratic backsliding. Therefore, main question of this research was: "Why is democracy in Bulgaria backsliding?"

Through analyzing the existing literature and conducting three semi-structure interviews with professionals in the fields of democracy, populism, and civil society, the research concluded that the democratic backsliding in Bulgaria is a result of a combination of unfavorable political developments. It was proven that Bulgaria's democracy struggles with deficiencies, in relation to the rule of law, judicial and media independence, and corruption.

Three main political conditions have a particularly unfavorable and long-term impact on the country's democracy. Firstly, the participation of the communist political elite in the early transition of the state led to the compromised institutionalization of the fundamental democratic values and contributed to the development of clientelism and corruption. Secondly, the practices of executive aggrandizement, used by opportunistic politician, erode Bulgaria's democracy through their connections with oligarchs. Finally, the inability of the European Union to address Bulgaria's deficiencies prior to its accession, rewarded rather than punished the insufficient democratic conditions.

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Introduction

In 1989, the states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) emerged from decades-long communist rule to pursue the merits of the liberal paradigm. The predominant narrative of that time was rather utopian, proclaiming the end of an ideological battle. The Western political values had prevailed, and the majority of the post-communist states swiftly initiated their transition towards liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1989).

Within this framework, Bulgaria was characterized as one of the “success stories” of the democratization processes (Dawson & Hanley, 2016, p. 23). In 2007, its accession into the European Union (EU) signified its democratic consolidation. The country had achieved the fundamental requirements of liberal governance by institutionalizing judicial independence and facilitating fair and competitive elections (Dorosiev & Ganev, 2007). However, the democratic utopia was short-lived, and its performance slowly but consistently deteriorated. In 2009, Bulgaria had already lost its consolidated status, which continued to decline (Dorosiev & Ganev, 2009). In the last decade, the state has been subjected to multiple scandals of corruption and abuse of power from the political elite, which culminated in prolonged public unrest and deep parliamentary crisis. In the summer of 2020, protests against the then Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov, prompted the European Parliament to express its concern over the compromised state of the rule of law in Bulgaria (European Parliament, 2020). The public dissatisfaction was reflected in the succeeding elections, resulting in a fragmented parliament, unable to appoint a government. Currently, Bulgaria is governed by a temporary cabinet, which proactively dismisses Borissov's appointees, due to concerns of clientelist practices and systematic corruption.

Scholars recognize such decline in the quality of democratic governance as democratic backsliding (Cianneti & Hanley, 2020). While Bulgaria's case might be perceived by some as the inability of a single state to overcome its anti-liberal practices, this would omit to consider the broader framework of analysis. In the last decade, the democracy in CEE has been consistently deteriorating, which not only challenges the post-communist transition in the region but also the integrity of the liberal paradigm (Cianettia, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018).

Democratic backsliding is often discussed in the field of political science; however, the literature disproportionately concentrates on the “dramatic cases” of Hungary and Poland (Cianettia, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018, p. 243). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to expand the analytical

framework by examining the causes of Bulgaria's democratic deterioration. Additionally, the country's distinct transition and political development contribute to the broader consideration of the general integrity of liberalism. To achieve its objective, the present paper analyses the political conditions, which have contributed to Bulgaria's democratic decline. This is necessitated by the limited scope of the research and the fact that the establishment of the political framework of backsliding facilitates future examination of the socio-economic aspects of the topic.

In line with this, the central question at the basis of this dissertation is: "*Why is democracy in Bulgaria backsliding?*". To facilitate the research and narrow its scope, the following sub-questions are to be examined:

1. What is democratic backsliding?
2. What are the European Union's democratic criteria?
3. How does the state of democracy in Bulgaria differ in comparison to the European Union's understanding of democracy?
4. How did the Copenhagen criteria impact the building of democracy in Bulgaria?
5. How does the democratic backsliding in Bulgaria align or differ from backsliding theory?

With this in mind, this paper will proceed by analyzing the relevant literature on the topic. By adopting a broader perspective, this dissertation considers not only democratic backsliding as a phenomenon, but also the processes of transition and consolidation and how they influence the democratic development. The established framework of analysis is substantiated by highlighting the utilized methods of research and examining their relevance and limitations.

Furthermore, the dissertation provides a critical overview of Bulgaria's transition processes, which differ from other CEE states, and evaluates their impact on the political development of the country. As the research chronologically follows Bulgaria's democratic progress, the succeeding chapters juxtapose EU's democratic criteria to the current conditions in the state and examine the efficacy of the Copenhagen criteria in addressing the main challenges in the country. Before analyzing the findings and establishing the answer to the central question of this research, the leadership of the former Prime Minister are considered based on his decade-long career and controversial practices.

1. Literature review

The following chapter aims to provide an overview of the hypotheses, related to the topic of democratic backsliding. Firstly, the research defines democratic transition and consolidation, which later facilitates the conceptualization of democratic backsliding. Secondly, this chapter concentrates on the varying perceptions of the phenomenon and its characteristics. Finally, the causes of backsliding are discussed, both in general terms and in relation to CEE.

1.1. Democratic transition and consolidation

The ebb and flow of democratic governance has been a persistent topic of research in the field of political science, guided by the objective of understanding the conditions, which influence its emergence, quality, or potential demise (Croissant & Merkel, 2004). The following analysis concentrates on the processes leading to the development of new democracies and their consolidation. According to Croissant and Merkel, the democratization literature has two core streams. In the period of the 1970s and 1980s, scholars were focused on the exploration of the processes leading to the transition from authoritarian or totalitarian regimes to democracies. On the other hand, since the 1990s, the academic direction has shifted towards the examination of the factors necessary for the consolidation of newly established democracies (Croissant & Merkel, 2004).

The earlier transition-centered perception of democratization is often associated with Schmitter and O'Donnell, who provided an initial understanding of the transition away from autocratic regimes, maintaining that it is a top-down approach, conducted through negotiations with the political elite (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 2013).

The hypotheses established by Schmitter and O'Donnell were later further developed by Huntington, who described democratization as a process occurring in waves, characterized by clusters of states transitioning within a specific period of time (Huntington, 1991). Interestingly, he asserts that each surge in democratization is followed by a "reverse wave", whereby states revert to a form of dictatorship (Huntington, 1991, p. 12). Huntington notably defined the post-communist transition in CEE as the third wave of democratization, a period spanning from 1974 to 1990. The regime changes in the region occurred as a result of both internal and external driving forces. The former included the decreasing stability and authority of the communist regime, and the latter the prominent examples of the political transformations in Southern Europe and Latin America, as well as the influence of the then European Communities (Huntington, 1991).

When it comes to the discussion on democratic consolidation, according to Ambrosio, there are two approaches to its conceptualization. The threshold-based definitions identify specific moments after which the process is completed (Ambrosio, 2014). For example, Huntington established the “two-turnover test”, according to which, states are consolidated democracies if they have peacefully transferred power through elections twice after the initial transition (Huntington, 1993, pp. 266-267). The second approach to conceptualizing democratic consolidation is process-based (Ambrosio, 2014). Merkel established a framework of gradual consolidation consisting of four levels, including the creation of institutions and political parties and the adoption of democratic values by military and economic stakeholders (Merkel, 2008). According to Ambrosio, the second method better highlights the incremental development of democracies (Ambrosio, 2014).

Furthermore, Linz and Stepan operationalized the process by connecting the nature of the previous regime to the most likely transition trajectories and the minimum consolidation requirements. While their work highlights four different dictatorial types, the scope of this research is concerned with the totalitarian and post-totalitarian categories. The former has an underdeveloped civil society, one dominant party, which controls all levels of governance, and a state-managed economy (Linz & Stepan, 1996). According to Linz and Stepan, the most likely methods of transition in this case include the internal collapse of the regime or its transformation into a post-totalitarian type. The options are quite limited because totalitarian regimes do not allow for active mobilization of civil society or military groups. Thus, consolidation could be achieved only after the institutionalization of the rule of law and pluralism, the development of civil society, and the conversion to a market economy (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

On the other hand, the post-totalitarian regimes are characterized by a more mature and active civil society with the tendency to shift away from ideologies (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Therefore, the transition could be initiated through elections, public rebellion, or the internal collapse of the regime. The minimum actions necessary for consolidation are similar to those required for the totalitarian type; however, the developed political engagement and social awareness are likely to facilitate the process (Linz & Stepan, 1996). This is important to consider because Bulgaria was categorized as an early post-totalitarian regime; thus, exhibiting aspects of both previously mentioned types (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The hypotheses discussed in this section are fundamental to the research because they have significant implications for the theorization of democratic backsliding. Additionally, the correlation between the preceding dictatorial regime and the transition trajectories highlights specific areas of concern for the quality of democratic governance, which re-emerge during the discussion of the conditions in CEE.

1.2. Conceptualizing democratic backsliding

The conceptualization of the democratic backsliding paradigm is generally multifaceted and broad. As maintained by Bermeo, the difficulty of providing a clear definition of the phenomenon stems from its association with a variety of actors and processes (Bermeo, 2016). Therefore, the concept itself is highly dependent on the individual circumstances in the state, explaining the lack of a universally accepted definition in the literature.

The most common perspective on democratic backsliding is supported by Waldner and Lust, who argue that the concept refers to the erosion of the elements, associated with democratic governance in any political regime. Based on this, democratic backsliding could also occur in autocracies, whereby a weakening of the “qualities of democratic governance” is present (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 95). This definition directly contradicts Bermeo's approach, who asserts that the concept delineates “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an *existing democracy*” (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). This suggests that the existence of democratic consolidation is a pre-condition for the occurrence of democratic backsliding.

Thus, the two perspectives of the conceptualization of democratic backsliding characterize a much broader area of disagreement between scholars, namely whether the process denotes a transition from a form of democratic governance to an authoritarian political regime. While this research concentrates on the causes of democratic decline, it is pivotal to consider this controversy because it delineates divergent frameworks of analysis.

The proponents of the transition-based approach maintain that the backsliding process necessarily leads to the breakdown of democratic governance. Bermeo argues that democratic backsliding takes two forms. On the one hand, the reversal to authoritarianism could occur as a consequence of extreme actions, such as coups d'état. On the other hand, regimes could be declining gradually towards authoritarianism, as a result of an accumulation of deliberate actions that erode its democratic features (Bermeo, 2016).

However, according to Cianneti and Hanley, this problematizes the democratic backsliding paradigm because it imposes a linear trajectory of regime changes. While Cianneti and Hanley ultimately agree with the fact that backsliding could lead to authoritarianism, they argue that this approach threatens to omit the cases, which do not align with the expected trajectory. Furthermore, the categorization of regimes as purely declining could result in the overlooking of positive democratic changes (Cianneti & Hanley, 2020). This aligns with Carothers, who maintains that there is a diverse specter of hybrid regimes in the “gray zone” between consolidated democracy and authoritarianism (Carothers, 2002). Based on this, Knott elaborates that the hybrid regimes are in a constant state of fluctuation between democratic progress and decline, without reaching authoritarianism (Knott, 2018). Thus, democratic backsliding should be viewed as a non-linear, dynamic process, which does not necessarily require the existence of a consolidated democracy, nor does it necessarily result in authoritarianism.

Furthermore, Bermeo's definition highlights another aspect of the concept, namely the question of whether this is a process initiated and maintained by state actors (Bermeo, 2016). While scholars mostly agree that democratic backsliding is led by political elites with executive power, Klima outlines an important conceptual alternative specific to the states in CEE. According to Klima, the post-communist transition in CEE established an idiosyncratic environment for informal politics, referring to the state capture not only by political elites, but also by businessmen and oligarchs (Klima, 2019). To this end, as asserted by Cianneti and Hanley, exclusively analyzing democratic backsliding as state-led homogenizes the process (Cianneti & Hanley, 2020).

The final aspect of the conceptualization of democratic backsliding to be considered is its structural nature. Predominantly, the existing body of literature agrees that backsliding consists of the accumulation of incremental changes over time. To elaborate, Bermeo highlights three possibilities for the drastic occurrence of democratic backsliding, namely coups d'état, executive coups, and obvious election fraud. However, she concluded that while not obsolete, these actions are becoming increasingly rare (Bermeo, 2016). Thus, backsliding undermines the democratic conditions in a subtle way that does not necessarily include the breakdown of institutions or discernable violations of the constitution (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Considering the previous analysis, it could be concluded that democratic backsliding refers to the weakening of the components of democratic governance in any political regime, as a result of gradual changes that may or may not be provoked by state actors.

1.3. Characterizing democratic backsliding

The lack of a universally accepted definition of democratic backsliding also leads to difficulties in delineating when and how the process occurs. Waldner and Lust refer to two streams of operationalization, namely the “minimalist” and the “maximalist”, whereby the former concentrates solely on the existence of fair and competitive elections, and the latter includes the active participation of civil society. To that end, they provide a systematic method of determining whether the democratic conditions in any state are declining, which combines both perspectives (Waldner & Lust, 2015, p. 2). According to Waldner and Lust, democratic backsliding is present when there are deliberate distortions in the electoral systems, the levels of accountability, and the civil and political rights of citizens (Waldner & Lust, 2015). While this approach is not universally accepted, it was considered suitable for this research because it takes into account a multitude of aspects, related to the quality of democratic governance. The fixation on one element of democracy oversimplifies its functioning.

Moreover, Waldner and Lust highlight the fact that liberal democracies are based on free, fair, and competitive elections, overseen by independent bodies (Waldner & Lust, 2015). The importance of the state of electoral procedures for the quality of democratic governance is rarely disputed in the backsliding literature. Corrales elaborates by re-asserting the distinction between electoral fraud and electoral irregularities. The former occurs rarely and denotes the use of illegal measures to obscure the results of the elections. On the other hand, electoral irregularities encompass a variety of actions that impact the level playing field of the process, such as using biased media coverage, and compromising the secrecy of the votes (Corrales, 2020). Corrales argues that election irregularities are crucial to the quality of democratic governance because they might be a pre-condition for the restriction of competition and the accumulation of power (Corrales, 2020).

When it comes to accountability, Waldner and Lust delineate two forms, namely horizontal and vertical. The former concentrates on the existence of independent institutions, which regulate each other to prevent the accumulation and misuse of power, referring to the so-called checks and balances (Waldner & Lust, 2015). The latter includes the level of answerability of the political leaders to the people. As maintained by Anders and Lorenz, the weakening of checks and balances is an intentional process achieved through the elimination or subordination of the responsible institutions (Anders & Lorenz, 2020). Pech and Scheppele connect this to an erosion of the rule of law, whereby

political leaders seek to maintain and expand their power by interfering with the judiciary, the independent media, and law enforcement services (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). On the other hand, in relation to vertical accountability, Lindberg et al. argue that it is directly connected to active civil society, including citizens, media, and non-governmental organizations, which has the capacity to prevent the accumulation of power by incumbent leaders (Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, & Lindberg, 2019). Thus, the political interference with civil society constitutes a potential threat to the quality of democratic governance.

1.4. Outlining the causes of democratic backsliding

The following section of this chapter aims to analyze the main causes of democratic backsliding, including, respectively, general theories and conditions specific to CEE.

1.4.1. Overarching theories

Kapstein and Converse maintain that it is pivotal to consider the circumstances governing the initial stages of the democratization process (Kapstein & Converse, 2008). As previously discussed, the existence of institutionalized checks and balances prevents the concentration of power (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). Thus, Kapstein and Converse argue that newly established democracies, characterized by weak institutions, are much more likely to experience backsliding (Kapstein & Converse, 2008). This is in alignment with Diamond's position that successful democracies require prior alleviation of corruption, institutional dependency, and inequalities to ensure the trust of the people (Diamond, 2008). Gerschewski asserts that fragile institutions, not only do not prevent the misuse of power, but facilitate it by permitting potentially autocratic leaders to create co-dependencies and to silence the opposition (Gerschewski, 2020).

Most prominently, the backsliding literature refers to the concept of executive aggrandizement as a reason for the decline in democratic governance. According to Bermeo, executive aggrandizement is a process, characterized by the intentional erosion of checks and balances, initiated by incumbent political leaders, in order to accumulate power and undermine the opposition (Bermeo, 2016). Khaitan agrees that the process aims to erode vertical and horizontal accountability by limiting the opposition and silencing the independent media and civil society (Khaitan, 2020). Additionally, there is a consensus among scholars that executive aggrandizement is legally achieved through strategic, incremental actions (Bermeo, 2016). Freeman operationalizes this by delineating three specific approaches, namely colonization, duplication, and evasion. Firstly, Freeman argues that potentially

autocratic leaders seek to colonize the institutional apparatus of the state by appointing their allies to positions in independent institutions and, thus, diminishing checks and balances. Secondly, if the infiltration in these institutions is not possible, Freeman considers the possibility of the creation of duplicate establishments. Lastly, leaders with autocratic tendencies might evade the accountability channels by intentionally creating loopholes in the legislation and establishing a multitude of institutions, which do not serve a specific purpose (Freeman, 2020).

The final general cause to be analyzed is the correlation between populism and democratic backsliding. Populism much like the decline in the quality of democratic governance is a complex and controversial concept. Thus, there is no consensus in the body of literature on whether the existence of populism could lead to democratic backsliding (Riedel, 2017). Before further consideration is provided, it should be acknowledged that the analysis of the multitude of definitions of populism is beyond the capacity of this research. However, to provide clarity Schmitter summarizes the main points of the concept, stating that populism is an ideology, whereby a charismatic political leader pledges to resolve previously unaddressed issues (Schmitter, 2006). Additionally, Mudde argues that populism is fundamentally an ideology representing the cleavages between the people and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Moreover, Mudde maintains that populism is the antipode of pluralism, which concentrates on the diversity of society (Mudde, 2004). This is a particularly relevant point to consider in relation to Riedel, who claims that populism is not only the opposite of pluralism, but that it is "anti-pluralistic" (Riedel, 2017, p. 294). According to Riedel, populism threatens democracies by questioning the legitimacy of institutions and the state's legislation (Riedel, 2017). On the other hand, Schmitter offers a more optimistic position, stating that it engages citizens who have been previously absent from the political scene, challenges the status-quo and leads to a "reinvigorated party system" (Schmitter, 2006, p. 3). While populism should not be considered undemocratic by definition, it has the capacity to lead to actions that might impact the integrity of the democratic process.

1.4.2. Conditions specific to CEE

According to Klima, the communist regime pre-determined the path to democratization in CEE. Klima asserts that the absence of a system of checks and balances, the centralized economy, and the lack of a politically active civil society have generated a favorable environment for what he deems as the most commonly occurring phenomenon, namely informal politics (Klima, 2019). The concept is

reinforced by other scholars in the field, such as Knott, who refers to it as “extra-incumbent factors” of democratic decline (Knott, 2018, p. 357). This delineates an important divergence from the generally established causes of backsliding. Informal politics is closely related to executive aggrandizement; however, while the former denotes the accumulation of power by elected leaders; the latter refers to the state-capture by both elected and unelected actors (Klima, 2019). The informality of politics in CEE stems from the participation of businessmen and oligarchs in the consolidation of power (Knott, 2018).

Klima establishes two main phenomena, which maintain the informal politics in the region, namely clientelism and patronage. Clientelism refers to the allocation of positions and resources along party lines to facilitate the accumulation of power. This is particularly problematic for the quality of democratic governance, due to its connection to the buying of electoral votes. Similarly, patronage denotes the appointment of party supporters to key public positions, with the objective of undermining checks and balances (Klima, 2019). Both clientelism and patronage are intrinsically connected to high levels of corruption, which according to Dimitrova, in conjunction with the use of public resources for personal gains facilitates state-capture (Dimitrova, 2018).

The final point to be discussed is the potential correlation between the decline in the quality of democratic governance in CEE states and their accession in the European Union (EU). This is a topic of contestation in the existing body of literature, whereby some argue that the conditions for membership in the Union have contributed positively to the democratic development in the region, while others maintain that the process resulted in a superficial progress (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). According to Dawson and Hanley, the “incentive-driven” nature of the EU accession has been an indication of the decline in the region, due to the temporary benefit of the approach, which has allowed for the weak institutionalization of democracy (Dawson & Hanley, 2016, p. 22). This is largely in alignment with Mungiu-Pippidi, who argues that CEE states underwent a period of rapid democratic progress during the pre-accession phase, followed by stagnation or backsliding, as a result of the re-emergence of unresolved political issues (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007).

To summarize democratic backsliding refers to the subtle and incremental deterioration of the democratic qualities of governance in any political regime. This is predominantly exhibited through distortions in the electoral processes, decreased levels of accountability, and limited civil and political rights. While the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon necessitates the consideration of the state-

specific conditions, the literature highlights the correlation between the type of preceding dictatorial regime and the occurrence of backsliding. Therefore, the hypotheses derived from the literature analysis are applied to the Bulgarian case to provide a structural understanding of its democratic condition.

2. Methodology

In order to substantiate the credibility of the research process and the validity of its results, the following section aims to delineate and justify the choice of methods, used in answering the determined central question. Additionally, this chapter further considers the limitations of the research and their impact the quality of the findings.

The present research is of a causal nature, aiming to establish a link between socio-political factors and the deteriorating democratic conditions in Bulgaria. The rationale for this decision is based on the well-developed literature on the topic of democratic backsliding but its limited application to the Bulgarian case. Therefore, a causal research allows for the consideration of the already existing concepts through the prism of the state's reality. However, it should be acknowledged that causal links are rarely completely indisputable. As maintained by Marczyk et al., causality could be influenced by variables external to the scope of the research, which could undermine the accuracy of its conclusions (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005). To mitigate this, the findings are based on information, provided by specialists working in the field, and the analysis of the existing literature.

The research utilized both primary and secondary sources of information. The former consists of ideas and facts, which have not been previously interpreted by other scholars, facilitating the development of new hypotheses and perspectives (Greetham, 2019, p. 174). In the process of this research, primary information was obtained through European Union documents and interviews. As a member state, the democratic conditions in Bulgaria should abide by the standards and values of the EU. Therefore, the papers published by the relevant institutions provide an indication of the circumstances in the country.

Furthermore, primary information was gathered through field research in the form of semi-structured interviews. As maintained by Greetham, they consist of pre-determined questions identical to all interviewees, in combination with topics that arise during the conversations. This allows for both comparison between the opinions of the different interviewees and flexibility to explore unexpected topics (Greetham, 2019, p. 195). During the research process, four interviews were conducted through digital conference calls. The democratic processes in Bulgaria were the overarching theme of the conversations in combination with questions specific to the interviewees' areas of expertise, which were aligned with the perceived gaps in the literature.

Firstly, Maria Mateeva – Kazakova, a Doctor of Philosophy in Post-communist Populism and a policy advisor specialized in European Union affairs, provided an insight into the development of populism in Bulgaria and its impact on the country's democratic qualities. This was essential to the research due to the ambiguity related to the role of populism in the democratic backsliding process. Mateeva-Kazakova responded in a professional manner, without exhibiting opinions based on her personal beliefs. However, unfortunately, the audio file with her interview was compromised. Therefore, not the full text is present in the transcript.

Secondly, Daniela Bozhinova, a Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science and founder of the Bulgarian Association for the Promotion of Citizens Initiative, provided valuable analysis of the legitimacy of electoral process and their relation to corruption practices. It should be acknowledged that Bozhinova was highly critical of the leading political party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), and shared both her personal and professional reflections.

Thirdly, Helene Kortländer, a Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science and Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Bulgaria, predominantly discussed the state of civil society, minority groups, and the attitudes of the political elite. Kortländer's work within FES concentrates on civil and political rights, rule of law, and pluralism. In view of her involvement in the democratic processes in the country, consulting Ms. Kortländer on the topic was fundamental.

Finally, Petar Vitanov, a member of the European Parliament, analysed the political conditions in Bulgaria and their development since the fall of the communist regime. While the conversation with Vitanov was insightful, the provided information is not included in this work. Unfortunately, Vitanov did not return the signed consent form, which hinders the use of the interview. Additionally, his views were naturally affiliated with his membership in the opposition party. Upon reflection, it was established that this is likely to introduce subjectivity to this work, which is intentionally avoided.

The interviews with Mateeva-Kazakova and Bozhinova were conducted in Bulgarian, while the conversation with Kortländer was in English. Furthermore, they consented to the use of their names and information in this academic work.

In contrast with the primary sources, the secondary materials provide details, which have been already analysed by other scholars. According to Greetham, the use of secondary information enables the in-depth understanding of the theories and opinions on the topic (Greetham, 2019, pp. 175-176).

This provides the foundation of the research, predominantly reflected in the literature review. An important aspect to evaluate is the level of objectivity and reliability of the chosen sources. The use of biased and unsubstantial materials jeopardizes the quality of the research. Thus, the secondary information was derived from academic publications and books, peer reviewed by scholars in the field. This was achieved through conducting desk research, which is an accessible method of gaining an understanding of the main concepts and hypotheses. The main sources include periodicals, such as the *Journal of Democracy*, *East European Politics*, and the *Annual Review of Political Science*, obtained through the digital databases of Project Muse, JSTOR, and the Royal Library of the Netherlands.

Additionally, the research further distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative information. The former consists of numerical data, which facilitates objective analysis and comparison, while the latter concentrates on the presentation of ideas, opinions, and attitudes (Greetham, 2019, pp. 168-172). According to Greetham, qualitative information enables the exploration of abstract notions related to the central topic (Greetham, 2019, pp. 168-172). Therefore, it is considered fundamental to this research, due to the multifaceted nature of democratic backsliding. On the other hand, the use of quantitative information is limited to the introduction of data from the Nations in Transit index.

The final point related to the methodology is its limitations. Democratic backsliding is a highly politicized topic, which was reflected in the process of gathering primary information. While difficulties in arranging interviews were expected, the research encountered issues in consulting active political figures and analysts in Bulgaria. Thus, this work would have benefited from a more diverse spectrum of opinions, especially in the representation of the stakeholders, who firmly argue that the country is on the right path to becoming a consolidated democracy. Additionally, the increased possibility of personal bias during the process was counteracted by the selection of interviewees with both academic and professional experience. Finally, the scope of the research was limited, which did not allow for an in-depth consideration of all related elements. Therefore, further examination of specifically the economic and human rights factors connected to democratic backsliding are recommended. Nevertheless, this work offers a comprehensive overview of the conditions, which have led to Bulgaria's current state of democracy.

3. Bulgarian democracy within the European Union framework

To provide an in-depth understanding of the main issue of this research, the following chapter aims to contextualize the current democratic conditions in Bulgaria within the framework of the European Union. The concentration on EU's democratic perspective is guided by its influence on the development of the country. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of EU's definition of democracy and its core characteristics, which are then juxtaposed to the socio-political circumstances in Bulgaria.

3.1. Democracy as a fundamental principle

According to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, democracy is one of the founding values of the bloc, equally applicable to all Member States, which are expected to maintain a pluralist and just society. However, while the Treaty elaborates on the democratic provisions of the Union as a political entity, it omits to provide a comprehensive definition of the phenomenon in general (European Union, 2012). This necessitates the consideration of key EU documents, which clarify the concept.

As maintained by Scheppele et al., the fundamental values of the EU are embedded in the Copenhagen criteria, whereby democratic governance and the rule of law are prerequisites for the accession of states (Scheppele, Kochenov, & Grabowska-Moroz, 2021). According to the European Parliament, this denotes the existence of "political pluralism, the freedom of expression and the freedom of religion". Additionally, the democratic conditions are associated with the independent functioning of the judiciary and the establishment of free, fair, and competitive elections (European Parliament, 1998).

In its 2009 Conclusions on Democracy Support in EU's External Relations, the Council of the European Union recognized the lack of a universal democratic approach. However, it highlighted that democracy, regardless of its form, requires the protection of human rights and freedoms (Council of the European Union, 2009). This position was reinforced in the revised conclusions from 2019, whereby the Council further established the importance of independent media, pluralism, and transparency to the quality of democratic governance (Council of the European Union, 2019).

In addition, democracy's position on the policy agenda was enhanced by the goal of the current College of Commissioners, led by President Ursula von der Leyen, to strengthen the fundamental

values of the Union. The Commission published two strategic documents, notably the European Democracy Action Plan and the new Rule of Law Mechanism. The former underlines the importance of active civil society, which can participate in free and fair elections, and has access to independent and diverse media (European Commission, 2020b). The latter highlights the interdependence between the rule of law and democracy, emphasizing the need for transparency, accountability, separation of powers, and justice (European Commission, 2020c).

Thus, it could be concluded that the European Union abides by a maximalist definition of democracy, whereby it monitors both its institutionalization through elections, separation of power and the rule of law, and the development of an active civil society with independent media.

3.2. Bulgaria's democratic conditions

In the context of the European integration, Bulgaria was often presented as one of the triumphs of the democratic processes in CEE. In 2007, the country became a member of the EU, which many considered as a fundamental step towards democratic consolidation (Dawson & Hanley, 2016). However, as Dawson and Henley argue, rather than a "success story", Bulgaria's political development is "emblematic of the malaise afflicting the region's young democracies" (Dawson & Hanley, 2016, p. 23). The shallow acceptance of the liberal paradigm led to a consistent deterioration of the country's performance.

According to the 2007 Nations in Transit report, Bulgaria had successfully reached a level of democratic consolidation through stable governmental institutions, dynamic civil society, independent media, and free and fair elections. While the report recognized the need for improvement in the areas of corruption, the rule of law, and judicial independence, it highlighted the remarkable liberal progress of the country. However, the democratic landscape in Bulgaria changed only two years later (Dorosiev & Ganev, 2007). In the 2009 Nations in Transit report, its position was lowered to one of semi-consolidated democracy. Notably, the country's economy was severely impacted by the global economic crisis of the previous year and members of the political elite were accused of misusing EU funds. Additionally, the autonomy of the media was undermined by the intervention of law enforcement into a journalistic investigation, which uncovered connections between employees of the State Agency "National Security" and criminal figures. This is considered as the starting point of what would become a trend of democratic decline (Dorosiev & Ganev, 2009).

In 2013, protests signifying the dissatisfaction with the government and the deteriorating economy, resulted in deep political instability (Ganev, 2014). While the fluctuation between progress and descend is inherent to the country's transition, the uprisings indicated the increasing power of civil society and provided a blueprint for the present circumstances. In 2020, daily protests against the ingrained corruption of the political elite and the dependence of the judiciary attracted the attention of the European institutions. The European Parliament expressed concerns over the institutional interdependence in the country, the lack of accountability, and the deteriorating press freedom. In addition, the Parliament highlighted the discriminatory behavior and decision-making against non-heterosexual people and members of the Roma community (European Parliament, 2020).

Furthermore, in its most recent report, Nations in Transit granted Bulgaria the lowest democracy score since its accession into the EU. The document scrutinized the political involvement of the Prosecutor General, Ivan Geshev, who publicly supported the Prime Minister in his denouncement of the presidential institution, which compromised the independence and objectivity of the judiciary (Petrov, 2021).

In terms of corruption, Bulgaria was identified as the least transparent country in the EU (European Commission, 2020a). In line with this, the Center for the Study of Democracy stated that 77% of Bulgarians are of the opinion that oligarchs and businessmen command the political elite. Furthermore, the media is predominately categorized as being captured (Stefanov & Filipova, 2020). According to the Nations in Transit report, the largest media group in Bulgaria is owned by a businessman, associated with the leading party (Petrov, 2021). Additionally, the European Commission underlined its concern over the possession of media outlets by active politicians (European Commission, 2020a).

The conditions of democratic deterioration were discussed during the interviews with Bozhinova and Kortländer, whereby both confirmed the concerns of the European institutions and the Bulgarian civil society. According to Bozhinova, the corruption in the country is not only applicable to the political elite but is rather systematic and present in all levels of decision-making. The provided example was related to the normalization of the use of connections for simple actions, such as meeting arrangements with municipal authorities, which is normally a right to any resident (D. Bozhinova, personal communication, January 1, 2021). Additionally, Kortländer emphasized the limited political and social pluralism, and the problematic attitudes towards gender diversity and the integration of

the Roma community. As was discussed during the interview, the antagonism and negative rhetoric, used by members of the political elite, undermine the democratic development of Bulgaria (H. Kortländer, personal communication, February 2, 2021). This is particularly relevant to deeply patriotic political parties, such as the Bulgarian National Movement, which was part of the previous coalition government.

With this in mind, Bulgaria's democracy has been persistently declining in terms of institutional independence, press freedom, pluralism, the rule of law, and corruption. The current political conditions have not only resulted in public dissatisfaction and distrust, but also defy EU's fundamental values.

4. Bulgaria's early democratic transition

In the early stages of the post-communist transition, the Central and Eastern European states were perceived as the proof of the democratic triumph. As Fukuyama famously proclaimed, there was no remaining ideological alternative robust enough to challenge the liberal victory (Fukuyama, 1989). The regime transformations in the region were marked by unprecedented social movements, which led to incremental reforms in some states, and revolutions in other. However, Bulgaria's democratic trajectory was initiated in a subtle and exclusive manner (Linz & Stepan, 1996). According to Dawson and Hanley, this was an "elitist-driven process", denoting the central role of the political figures in the regime changes (Dawson & Hanley, 2016, p. 23). This chapter further examines the transition processes in Bulgaria, which facilitates the analysis of their implication for the state's democratic conditions.

4.1. The staged retirement of Zhivkov

As previously established, the route to democratization differs based on the nature of the preceding dictatorial regime. Linz and Stepan assert that prior to 1988, the anti-communist sentiments in Bulgaria were limited to individual efforts of opposition, which did not have a significant impact on the status of the regime. Thus, the civil society and pluralism in the country were highly underdeveloped, minimizing the possibility for a transition through public uprising or negotiations with the dictatorial leaders (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Rather, Bulgaria underwent what many refer to as a 'coup d'état within the party', a systematic effort of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) to remove its leader Todor Zhivkov (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 337).

Paraskevov argues that the downfall of Zhivkov was caused by the accumulation of unfavourable circumstances both externally and internally. While Bulgaria was not a member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, its political and socio-economic direction was highly influenced by Moscow (Paraskevov, 2012). However, according to Spirova, when Mikhail Gorbachev announced the reformation of the Soviet Union towards a more competitive economy and open society, Zhivkov extended the so-called *perestroika* and *glasnost* even further (Spirova, 2008). As Paraskevov maintains this led to concerns in Moscow about the integrity of the communist ideology in Eastern Europe, incentivizing Gorbachev to support changes in the governance of Bulgaria. This was in alignment with the cleavages within BCP and the ambitions of the then foreign minister Petar Mladenov to replace Zhivkov (Paraskevov, 2012).

The difficult circumstances in the country culminated in the pressure by prominent BCP members to remove Zhivkov, who was forced to retire in November 1989, and unsurprisingly, Petar Mladenov was appointed as his successor (Paraskevov, 2012). It is important to highlight that Mladenov was a Soviet loyalist, whose ambitions did not involve any plans of democratization, but rather of salvaging the party and the political future of its members (Spirova, 2008). Nevertheless, according to Spirova, the instability in BCP provided a window of opportunity for pro-democratic organizations to gain public attention. Thus, the development of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) marked the first political movement in opposition to the communist party (Spirova, 2008). UDF was the representative body of a large number of smaller anti-communist factions, which increasingly populated the social circles. The International Republican Institute categorized UDF as the liberal alternative in the Bulgarian party system. This denoted the support for limited state interference in civil freedoms and the transition to a market economy, which fosters foreign investments (International Republican Institute, 1996).

However, as maintained by Linz and Stepan, this did not contribute to a pluralist or less technocratic transition. The so-called "round table", meant to foster a dialogue between the dictatorial regime and the democratic movements, was organized by Andrei Lukanov, an eminent member of BCP and one of the leading conspirators against Zhivkov (Linz & Stepan, 1996, pp. 333-343). Additionally, Melone asserts that the structure of the negotiations could be misleadingly viewed as progressive. While the "round table" included 15 opposition organizations, they represented a small fragment of the Bulgarian society. On the other hand, BCP had immense influence and a large membership, which gave it leverage in the initial transition processes (Melone, 1994).

In parallel, Spirova highlights that the communist party was transforming too, though on a superficial level. Its name was changed from the Bulgarian Communist Party to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and its official messaging indicated democratic ambitions (Spirova, 2008). However, Spirova argues that in practice, BSP's revised ideology did not forgo the old communist approaches. The party promoted economic interventionism, nationalistic ideas, and uncertainty towards the West (Spirova, 2008). This is important to consider because BSP won with an overwhelming majority in Bulgaria's first free elections in 1990 and 1994; implying that the public sentiment had not shifted much either (Spirova, 2005).

4.2 Inherited clientelism

The initial transition processes in Bulgaria are fundamentally connected to its democratic development. Linz and Stepan emphasize the difficulties a narrowly pluralist society imposes on democratic consolidation, stating that it leads to a self-perpetuating lack of political engagement and skepticism (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Additionally, Karasimeonov argues that the exclusion of civil society from the “round table” negotiations signifies the intentionally limited interaction between political parties and citizens. He elaborates that the process was rooted in elitist power accumulation, which ultimately translated into a clientelist system (Karasimeonov, 2004).

Clientelism is a phenomenon often associated with the post-communist political structures, directly inherited from the ‘nomenklatura’ mentality of granting party supporters with political and economic benefits (Klima, 2019, p. 11). According to Dimitrov, the communist elite, which remained in power during the early transition period, had the unique opportunity to allocate previously state-owned assets to key figures. This is especially relevant for the members of the State Security, an agency gathering intelligence for the regime. The beneficiaries became owners of some of the first privatized corporations and accumulated economic and political power, which blurred the line between state and business (Dimitrov, 2009). As Dimitrov maintains, between 1990 and 2009, at least 100 elected officials were related to the former State Security (Dimitrov, 2009).

While clientelism cannot be singularly blamed for the occurrence of democratic backsliding, the phenomenon often threatens to develop into even more exclusive practices, namely corruption (Klima, 2019). Klima asserts that when clientelism is in symbiosis with dishonest mechanisms for accumulation of power and resources, the corruption becomes structural rather than individual (Klima, 2019). In Bulgaria, the clientelist practices of the early transition period mutated into corruption schemes, normalized and applied to all levels of society. (Benovska-Sabkova, 2015). This is particularly concerning in terms of the electoral processes in the country, whereby clientelist-based corruption is connected to the buying and manipulation of votes. As Manolov maintains, “vote purchasing” occurs when citizens are offered money or goods in support of a specific political party (Manolov, 2010, p. 303). This could be financed either by external forces, such as businessmen and oligarchs, or by the party itself using state resources (Manolov, 2010). It is important to highlight that this cannot be attributed to a single political force, because it is rather a systematic phenomenon, eroding the democratic practices in the country.

Bozhinova confirmed the severity of the issue, emphasizing on its pervasive nature. However, she underlined another form of electoral irregularity as particularly damaging to society, namely the mobilization of votes on the basis of employment (D. Bozhinova, personal communication, January 27, 2021). This is related to institutions and companies, which are directly or indirectly affiliated with a political party and pressure their workers to vote in alignment with the interests of their employer. This practice utilizes unequal power dynamics and financial dependencies to manipulate the electoral process (Mares, Muntean, & Petrova, 2018). According to Mares et al., “employer intimidation” is one of the common forms of clientelism in Bulgaria, especially in economically vulnerable regions, where the livelihood of families is threatened if they do not vote for a particular political force (Mares, Muntean, & Petrova, 2018, p. 348).

Therefore, the clientelist practices in Bulgaria, inherited from the communist regime, have significant implications for the democratic institutionalization in the country, through their connection to corruption and electoral volatility. As for the initial regime transformations, Karasimeonov concludes that Bulgaria is a “deviant case” in comparison to the other former communist countries in CEE (Karasimeonov, 1996, p. 254). Bulgaria is a state that fundamentally preserved the past practices in an attempt to alter them into a skewed version of liberalism.

5. European Union accession and democracy building

After 1989, many of the post-communist states in CEE perceived the transition towards democracy as their 'return to Europe' (Krastev, 2016, p. 11). The stability and socio-economic progress of Western Europe projected the liberal ideology in a positive light, resulting in the ambition of CEE countries to join the then European Communities (Bugarcic, 2008). In line with this, the later stages of Bulgaria's democratic transition are associated with its journey to becoming a member of the European Union, which is considered by many as pivotal to the country's institutionalization of democracy. Therefore, this chapter aims to evaluate the democratic significance of the pre- and post-accession criteria applicable to Bulgaria.

5.1. Pre- and post-accession procedures

As stated by Nikolova, to safeguard the integrity of the European project, the former communist countries were subjected to the Copenhagen criteria; pre-accession conditions, which ensure the political, economic, and legal alignment with the rest of the Member States. Firstly, the CEE countries were expected to have reached a level of institutionalized democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights. Secondly, the criteria required the presence of a free and competitive market. Thirdly, the accession necessitated the transposition of the European legislative framework, known as *acquis*, into national law (Nikolova, 2006).

In comparison to the other CEE states, Bulgaria was considered as a "laggard" (Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012). By 1995, the country had already initiated the accession procedure, however, the European Commission observed significant omissions in its political and legal development (Nikolova, 2006). Bulgaria struggled with the weak institutionalization of the rule of law and the insufficient representation of the interests of the Turkish and Roma communities. Nevertheless, the government led by UDF implemented changes, which established stable institutions and legally ensured the civil rights of minority groups (European Commission, 1998). This was perceived by the European Commission as a positive democratic development. In 1998, Bulgaria had officially achieved the political criteria, which opened the main negotiation process (European Commission, 1998).

The literature on the accession conditionalities is particularly divided in relation to the efficacy of the political criterion. While Bulgaria reached a state of political stability in the period between 1995 and 2007, scholars argue that the European Commission prematurely announced the country's alignment with the fundamental values of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Dimitrov & Plachkova,

2020). This is mostly related to the nature of the Copenhagen criteria, which are used to incentivize systematic changes. Considering the delayed democratization in Bulgaria, the Commission confirmed its political progress to accelerate the process and encourage commitment to economic and legal transformation (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2020).

The political criterion is subjected to criticism, due to its broad nature. While establishing a free market and transposing the *acquis* are measurable goals, phenomena such as democracy and the rule of law are highly multidimensional. Therefore, the evaluation of the democratic sufficiency of a state within a constrained time frame could result in a superficial liberal system (Kochenov, 2014). Based on this, Mungiu-Pippidi argues that the political criterion was unsuccessful in ensuring democratic transition because the ruling elite could mask its illiberal practices (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). This resulted in gaps in Bulgaria's democratic performance, specifically related to high levels of corruption, organized crime, and weak implementation of the rule of law (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2020).

As established, the accession procedure was powered by incentives. Therefore, to address the remaining issues under the political criterion, the European Commission subjected Bulgaria and Romania to the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CMV) (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2020). This constitutes a system of benchmarks, mostly concentrated on corruption and the independence of the judiciary, which aims to evaluate the continuous progress of the countries. Interestingly, in its most recent reports, the European Commission highlighted the satisfactory performance of Bulgaria in relation to systemic corruption, organized crime, and judicial independence (European Commission, 2019). This contradicts the previously discussed conclusions by the Nations in Transit reports and the European Parliament.

In terms of areas of improvement, the Commission acknowledged the issues with high-level corruption and its prosecution (European Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, in 2020, there were already discussions on whether Bulgaria should be phased out of CMV (Petrov, 2021).

5.2. Carrots and sticks

The most common criticism of the Copenhagen criteria and specifically of the political pre-conditions, is the fact that they were purely powered by an incentive (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). On the one hand, this captured the momentum in CEE and ensured ideological orientation towards liberalism during the early transition phase. Most post-communist states were motivated by the prospect of being reunited with the West through their membership in the EU. The incentive of accession influenced

political changes on national level in alignment with the criteria (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). However, this is fundamentally problematic because membership, and not necessarily democracy, was perceived as the end-goal of the process. As Mungiu-Pippidi maintains, after the objective of accession was achieved, the EU lost its leverage in the promotion of democracy within CEE (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). This was further exacerbated by the structural issues of the criteria. Kochenov argues that the European Commission implemented a low threshold for the completion of the political conditions and failed to provide systematic and thorough analysis of the specific liberal gaps in the states. This enabled the de facto success of countries, which had not fully institutionalized democracy (Kochenov, 2014). Unfortunately, this was the case for Bulgaria, which had to be subjected to further post-accession supervision.

However, it would be inaccurate to argue that the benchmarks under CMV successfully compensate the omissions under the political criterion. According to Dimitrov and Plachkova, while the Copenhagen criteria encouraged good performance based on the possible punishment of delayed accession, CMV does not have the same function. Its role is rather to provide recommendations for future developments (Dimitrov & Plachkova, 2020). Therefore, the “carrot and stick” dynamic was skewed after the accession.

This is especially problematic considering Bulgaria's role as a beneficiary of EU funding. As maintained by Surubaru, the funds are crucial to the socio-economic development of the country, but they are vulnerable to clientelist practices. This is exhibited through the mismanagement of the funds and the creation of low-value projects (Surubaru, 2020). Furthermore, according to Sabev, the agricultural funds granted by the EU are connected to corruption practices. Bulgaria is one of the leading recipients of financial support in the agriculture sector, whereby the majority of the funding is allocated to the biggest farmers. Sabev highlights that some of the agricultural beneficiaries not only have significant connections to the political elite, but also are elected for public positions (Sabev, 2021). In addition, Ms. Kortländer's opinion aligned with the literature, whereby she maintained that the financial benefits granted to Bulgaria have the potential of worsening the corruption in the country (H. Kortländer, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

Thus, the initial gaps in the implementation of the political criterion remain an issue in the country. This is partly a consequence of the need for accelerated accession and the unbalanced dynamic between reward and punishment established by the EU.

6. Covert decisions and charismatic leaders

Bulgaria's political scene has been particularly influenced by one party and its leader, namely Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and Boyko Borissov. Since 2009, GERB has been the leading formation in all parliamentary elections, resulting in Borissov's decade-long career as a Prime Minister. The literature and the public discourse in the country often highlight Borissov as the culprit of Bulgaria's democratic decline (Ganev, 2018). Therefore, this chapter aims to elaborate on key practices and tendencies of his leadership and their influence on the country's state of democracy.

6.1. Populism and charisma

Borissov's political strategy is necessarily associated with populism. In 2006, he founded GERB as a center-right force fighting against corruption and organized crime. As maintained by Smilov, GERB bases its political identity on core 'symbolic issues', which are typical for the rhetoric in most CEE states (Smilov, 2008). In addition, Mateeva-Kazakova emphasized the adaptability of GERB's peripheral political concerns, which shift with the interests of the electorate (M. Mateeva-Kazakova, personal communication November 9, 2020). This could result in significant fluctuations in its agenda, often including economic and ethnic topics. In line with this, Gurov and Zankina highlight the flexible structure and ideological scarcity of the party, which facilitate ad hoc changes in its membership, predominantly controlled by its leader (Gurov & Zankina, 2013).

Borissov's populism is powered by his charisma as a political figure and his natural media presence. His informal language and behavior align with the anti-elitist sentiments in Bulgaria (Gurov & Zankina, 2013). For example, Borissov's recent approach to communicating with his electorate is in the form of social media videos, recorded from his car or home. This contributes to his strategy of simplifying politics and projecting himself as an "ordinary" man. Moreover, Kortländer observed Borissov's divergent attitudes on the domestic and international stage. Nationally, he adopts a "macho" behavior, exhibited through assertiveness. In contrast, internationally, Borissov maintains a humble presence. According to Kortländer, this could be a contributing factor to the limited knowledge of the democratic deficiencies in Bulgaria (H. Kortländer, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

As the literature suggests, the connection between populism and democratic decline is not straightforward. On the one hand, scholars argue that Borissov's populist strategy diminishes the quality of accountability. While he communicates consistently with his supporters, Borissov often disregards the so-called Parliamentary Control. Established by the Constitution, the practice consists

of weekly hearings of the Prime Minister, which allows the Parliament to keep him accountable for his decisions (Gurov & Zankina, 2013). On the other hand, Mateeva-Kazakova asserted that the failed promises of GERB to mitigate the corruption in the country, have strengthened Bulgaria's civil society (M. Mateeva-Kazakova, personal communication, November 9, 2020). This is exhibited through the mass protests of 2013 and 2020, and the public outrage towards the actions of the political elite.

6.2. On the path to executive aggrandizement

The civil anger is a consequence of the accumulation of corruption scandals, deteriorating media, and institutionalized democratic façade. Borissov's practices are subtle. His pro-European agenda and populist rhetoric mask actions, which erode the democratic integrity of the country (Ganev, 2018). While Ganev maintains that Bulgaria has not yet reached a level of executive aggrandizement, Borissov's "behavior shows that his personal priorities far outweigh any sense of commitment to constitutional or legal norms" (Ganev, 2018, p. 100).

The clientelist practices inherited from the communist regime are not foreign to Borissov. According to Dimitrov, the early stages of his political career were supported by a wealthy former employer of the State Security. While this might not directly signify the anti-democratic tendencies of Borissov, it does indicate that clientelism in Bulgaria is present regardless of the political ideology (Dimitrov, 2009). In line with this, Borissov's pledge to fight against corruption highly contradicts the practices of his own political party. During over a decade of leadership, multiple members of GERB were subjected to allegations of power abuse. This includes key figures, such as the party's former deputy head, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, and appointed ministers of agriculture and justice. The only form of accountability was their resignation or removal by Borissov, who distanced himself from the cases. Additionally, as asserted by Ganev, the government populates the country with anticorruption organizations, which are not only formally managed by GERB appointees but also initiate targeted investigations against critics of the party (Ganev, 2018).

Ganev further maintains that the antagonism towards the opposition is also present in the media sphere, whereby outlets have become increasingly dependent on stakeholders associated with GERB. For example, the director of the Bulgarian National Television, Emil Koshlukov, is a former politician and a supporter of Borissov. Moreover, the oligarch and previous member of the Parliament, Delyan Peevski, owns several outlets. In both cases, GERB's opposition is restricted, and journalists are pressured to maintain a positive narrative of the party (Ganev, 2018).

Finally, GERB undermines the rule of law through systematic anti-democratic actions, which erode the independence of the judiciary. This is mostly related to one of the core judicial institutions in Bulgaria, namely the Prosecutor General's office. The Prosecution is an institution inherited from the communist regime, which has the authority to initiate investigation (Ganev, 2018). According to Vassileva, the problematic nature of the institution stems from its concentration of power in the hands of the Prosecutor General, whose position is politicized and dependent on the incumbent. Ivan Geshev, the current Prosecutor General, became the center of the 2020 protests, due to his public support and connections to Borissov. Ganev argues that GERB used the compromised state of the institution to endorse and conceal corruption practices (Vassileva, 2019).

7. Analysis

Bulgaria is part of a broader political transition within the post-communist framework, applicable both in terms of the democratization processes and the trends of liberal decline (Dawson & Hanley, 2016). The socio-political developments in CEE are at times similar, yet the threat of homogenizing the experiences in the region is prominent. While this research establishes a framework based on the commonalities between states, it applies it to the individual experiences in Bulgaria to avoid generalizations. However, before paralleling the country's reality to the theory, it is necessary to consider two arguments, which shaped the research.

Firstly, this work was fundamentally based on the hypothesis that Bulgaria's democracy is not only deteriorating but that this is occurring in a consistent manner, which enables analysis. This has proven to be accurate. As highlighted by the Nations in Transit reports, Bulgaria reached a level of democratic consolidation, after which its score continued to decline (Dorosiev & Ganev, 2009). Additionally, in comparison to EU's broad definition of democracy, the country underperforms in relation to the rule of law, media and judiciary independence, and pluralism.

Secondly, a re-occurring argument is that backsliding cannot occur if the state is not democratic to begin with. While some scholars maintain that only consolidated democracies can deteriorate, the majority of the academics in the field recognize backsliding as decline in qualities associated with democratic governance (Cianneti & Hanley, 2020). Therefore, the presence of optimal liberal conditions is not a prerequisite for the analysis of Bulgaria's backsliding.

In terms of juxtaposing the country's experience to the backsliding theory, Bulgaria predominantly aligns with the expected trajectory. The hypothesis that the type of preceding regime influences the democratic development in the state is applicable to the Bulgarian case. As maintained by Linz and Stepan, the former early post-totalitarian system contributed to a suppressed civil society, economy highly dependent on the state, and complete lack of political pluralism. Therefore, the limited civic engagement in the regime transformation was not unforeseen (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Additionally, the dependence on the political elite was exacerbated by the top-down transition, which was exclusively guided by the former communist leaders. Their dominance especially in the founding stages of the democratic institutionalization allowed for the integration of anti-liberal practices within the new system (Dawson & Hanley, 2016).

Arguably, clientelism and corruption are not unique to Bulgaria. The former is a common consequence of communist regimes, its exacerbation leading to systematic corruption. Klima provides the Czech Republic as an example of clientelist political parties, which are fundamentally connected to the private sector in a symbiotic relationship based on favors (Klima, 2019). The intentional blurring of the line between state and business is highly characteristic to Bulgaria as well.

The issue with clientelism and corruption is twofold. Firstly, “transformed” communist politicians were predominantly interested in securing positions and benefits for their network of connections (Klima, 2019). Secondly, the blatant corrupt practices led to social cleavages and growing discrepancies between the political elite and the “ordinary” people (Klima, 2019). This created fertile ground for the development of anti-elitist populism, which has dominated the public sphere for decades.

As previously discussed, populism, or rather the failure of the populist promises, has contributed to a more active and vibrant civil society (M. Mateeva-Kazakova, personal communication, November 9, 2020). The dissatisfaction of the Bulgarian people with the political parties and their performance has resulted in increased non-electoral accountability (Ganev, 2014). This ultimately can be considered as a positive democratic development. On the other hand, the involvement of the former communist leaders continues to damage the liberal conditions in the country (Dawson & Hanley, 2016). Bulgaria did not experience the catharsis of regime changes, nor did it address its anti-liberal practices.

This posed serious challenges to the efficacy of the accession processes, and as Mungiu-Pippidi maintains, EU's membership was “no ‘End of History’” for CEE (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007, p. 1). It should be acknowledged that the EU had a pivotal role in the most formative years of the country's new political orientation. The 1990s, was a period of uncertainty and chaos. The bloc provided a blueprint of liberal values and a clear objective to guide the democratization. However, to maintain the momentum, the accession was purely powered by the incentive of membership, which proved to be insufficient in addressing some of Bulgaria's issues. Mungiu-Pippidi states that the objective of accession and the interconnected benefits led to a tactic of concealing the anti-democratic behavior of the political elite (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). Therefore, this work argues that Bulgaria's impressive progress in completing the political criteria was to a certain extent superficial. However, this should not be exclusively attributed to EU's approach because its nature has proven to be successful in other CEE states. Rather, this is the result of the unfavorable combination between Bulgaria's tendency to

depend on procedural loopholes and EU's soft power in relation to democratization. Thus, the democratic institutionalization, inherent to the accession process, was compromised from the beginning. While the EU maintains its supervision over Bulgaria's performance through CVM and provides new incentives, such as entrance into the Schengen area, it has not proven to be successful in facilitating transparent democratic governance (Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, the democratic quality in Bulgaria began to decline immediately after the main incentive of its transition was secured, which coincided with the first mandate of Boyko Borissov (Dorosiev & Ganev, 2009). In the most recent political discourse, he has been almost exclusively villainized for the country's democratic backsliding. This stems from the continuous accusations of corruption and misuse of power, both towards him and his appointees (Ganev, 2018). Borissov's governance has never been fully transparent, and his "bread and circuses" tactics depend heavily on distractions. He resorts to cabinet rotations to appease his electorate, often single-handedly taking decisions and diminishing the importance of core institutional procedures (Gurov & Zankina, 2013). Borissov's political leadership is a form of underdeveloped executive aggrandizement, which ultimately concentrates the decision-making in his hands, while diluting the level of accountability and the rule of law (Ganev, 2018). In line with this, it is accurate to argue that Borissov has contributed to the democratic backsliding in Bulgaria. However, it should be acknowledged that Borissov inherited a system, which already promoted anti-democratic practices. Therefore, it would be misleading to accuse a single individual of causing backsliding.

This leads to a much broader discussion and two divergent streams of analysis. According to Dawson and Hanley, the occurrence of executive aggrandizement and the compromised rule of law are symptoms rather than causes of backsliding. They argue that Bulgaria never truly adopted the liberal values, nor did it institutionalize democracy. Dawson and Hanley maintain that a superficial democracy, which is not based on the liberal philosophy is doomed to fail, potentially turning Bulgaria into an "illiberal trailblazer" (Dawson & Hanley, 2016, p. 25). The deep-rooted elitism and corruption compromise fundamental features of well-functioning democracies, such as transparency, pluralism, and accountability (Dawson & Hanley, 2016). The results from this research predominantly align with this. Bulgaria's issues are persistent and present in all stages of the political development. The corruption scandals and misuse of power are not specific to a singular party but are rather present across the political spectrum.

On the other hand, Krastev disagrees with Dawson and Hanley, stating that CEE countries should not be blamed for their unstable democracies because the liberal paradigm failed to fulfil its promises (Krastev, 2016). This categorizes Bulgaria as part of a broader trend of anti-liberal changes. According to Krastev, the democratic crisis stems from the economic instability and inequality, the revolt against globalization, and the changing position of the EU on the global political stage. He emphasizes that the difficulties of liberalism are especially challenging for the young democracies in CEE (Krastev, 2016). Holmes and Krastev emphasize that the “return to Europe” created a perception that the political structures and values of the West are “normal” (Krastev & Holmes, 2019, pp. 11,48). This resulted in a sense of abnormality in CEE and in a fixation to abide by the status quo of liberalism. They argue that the political elite attempted to imitate its Western counterparts on the international stage, but nationally, it still participated in the old practices, familiar to the citizens. This led to an internal clash between the values of liberalism and the more traditional and conservative societies in CEE. Based on this, Holmes and Krastev maintain that the post-communist states experienced a form of disassociation with democracy (Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

To a certain extent, this is applicable to Bulgaria. In a recent survey, the Center for the Study of Democracy established that 45% of the Bulgarians would prefer being governed by a strong leader who is not accountable to a parliament and is not subjected to elections (Stefanov & Filipova, 2020). This is a concerning tendency because it signifies democratic fatigue and an interest in more authoritarian practices. However, it would be misleading to generalize the experience of the Bulgarian society and conclude a common dissatisfaction with liberalism. The country's civil society has progressed remarkably since the fall of the communist regime and actively seeks accountability from the political elite in the form of protests (Ganev, 2014).

Ultimately, this work does not fully agree with either of the analytical streams. Indeed, Dawson and Hanley are justified in their criticism over the problematic early transition in Bulgaria. However, the results of this research indicate present but insufficient institutionalization, which did not address fundamental gaps in the governing of the country. Thus, it would be inaccurate to argue that Bulgaria never accepted liberalism. In relation to Krastev's position, the dissatisfaction with the economic and societal outcomes of liberalism are present in Bulgaria. There is a palpable longing among the older generations for the communist past, which is often praised for ensuring equality and good standard of living. However, the opposition against liberal values is not applicable to all spheres of society. As

Krastev himself recognizes, Bulgaria's leading political parties have remarkably remained in line with the liberal policies of the EU (Krastev, 2016).

Conclusions

The fundamental purpose of this dissertation was to establish the main causes of the democratic backsliding in Bulgaria. The scope of the research was concentrated on exploring the political conditions, which have contributed to the country's liberal deterioration. However, before further considering the main outcomes of this research, it is necessary to highlight that the hypothesis, inherent to the central question, has proven to be accurate. Bulgaria's democracy is backsliding, not only in terms of EU's standards, but also in line with quantitative systems of analysis, such as the Nations in Transit ranking.

Considering the multidimensional nature of democratic backsliding, the political conditions, which have influenced Bulgaria's experience are complex and interconnected. In alignment with the literature, the highly centralized and restricted nature of the country's past regime slowed the democratic progress. However, the most problematic aspect of the communist regime is that its representatives remained in power during the most formative years of transformation. The paradoxical democratization managed by anti-liberal actors led to compromised institutionalization and lack of commitment to fundamental liberal values. Additionally, it contributed to the normalization of undemocratic practices, which erode the political integrity of the country.

The second political condition, contributing to the democratic decline in Bulgaria, is the use of tactics of executive aggrandizement by political leaders. Highlighted by the literature as the main cause of backsliding, executive aggrandizement is present in the country but not to its full extent. Borissov has not fully concentrated the executive power in his hands, even though he successfully eludes accountability through political rotations. Nevertheless, his failure to address the country's fundamental issues with corruption and his elusive connections to oligarchs deteriorate the already struggling democratic system.

Finally, the European Union's inability to sufficiently assist Bulgaria in its difficulties with corruption and the weakened judicial and media independence is a contributing factor to the country's continuous democratic decline. This stems from the fact that Bulgaria's political development was prematurely categorized as sufficient before long-term liberal practices were institutionalized. The incentive of membership was effective, but the rather accelerated procedure rewarded a vulnerable democracy with access to economic and political benefits.

In line with the disagreement on whether the democratic decline in Bulgaria results from its inherent aversion to the liberal values or the failure of liberalism to fulfil its promise of democracy and prosperity, this dissertation concludes that both factors are crucial to backsliding processes in the country. To answer the central question of this research, the democratic backsliding in Bulgaria is caused by the unfavorable combination of the elitist post-communist transition, opportunistic political leaders, and the inability of the European Union to ensure the institutionalization of democratic values prior to the country's membership.

Recommendations

Based on the limited scope of the present dissertation and the indicated findings, further research is recommended in line with the socio-economic factors contributing to the decline of democracy. This should examine the condition of human rights and the role of minorities in the democratic governance of the country. Additionally, it is recommended that further analysis is provided on the correlation between Bulgaria's misuse of European Union funding and the corruption dynamics within the country. Finally, the state's unfavorable economic development should be examined in the framework of clientelism and corruption.

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Appendices

Interview with Helene Kortländer

Prior to the beginning of the interview, the interviewee was asked whether they consent to the recording of the interview.

Kortländer: I think what's very problematic the big role is that informal procedures play between the institutions and persons. This includes all institutions of democracy in Bulgaria.

Interviewer: You mention this is basically a structural issue, but I was wondering if you can chase back to a specific moment in time or a reason that has led to this tendency to use informal communication for political decisions?

Kortländer: I am not part of these conversations, but they are happening all around us and how things and issues pop up from one day to the other, for example, if there has been a report by, e.g. Venice Commission, there will be a very quick reaction in the Bulgarian government's part, which is obviously not something well prepared for weeks and weeks, as you may expect. So, it is a spontaneous reaction to something that comes from outside. So instead of continuing to work on certain governmental problem, there are ad-hoc reactions to things that come in, which I see as problematic. Also, when we talk about a draft constitution that has been drawn up within a week or so, which is beyond ridiculous, really, this would be a prime example of informal procedures, if you draw up a constitutional process, you will have to include many stakeholders, include the opposition, and not just assign it to someone who seems to be close, for him to draw up a draft constitution. Let me think of other instances of informal procedures.

Interviewer: Do you trace this back to the concentration of power of the political regime right now or to the quality of the political lead in general?

Kortländer: It is hard to detach on the politics from elites. We have the leader of the government, Boyko Borisov, who makes a point of not following the ways of professional politicians, and playing dumb, this way connecting to a certain electorate. It seems that if you are looking for real expertise on certain issues, not only in the governing party, but in the other political spectrum, this layer of expertise that also addresses ad-hoc issues is very thin. People are assigned certain resources, and have to work in a very fast way, without developing any expertise in the field. This also reflects itself

in the policy of government. As you know there is a lot of fluctuation in the governing operators, that people in the top ministries come and go, being reshuffled, and reassigned, so there is probably no time to actually find the professionalism that is needed.

Interviewer: Is this related to the tendency of being more concerned with the persona and charm of the politicians instead of their resume?

Kortländer: Persona are very important anywhere, but in Bulgaria there is intense personalization of politics, and it doesn't seem to be considered a problem. It is not something the pp's would push against. It comes with pp being kind of weak, without a detailed program, or not one that is set for a long time.

Interviewer: To elaborate on this point, in literature often you see this connection to the previous communist regime and the fact that Eastern European democracies are very young, can this personification of the political parties be connected to the previous tendencies of the communist regime?

Kortländer: I'm not sure it's specifically of the former communism. I rather think not, because ideology was very important during communism and the program of communism. I think it's more of a sign of any young democracy, maybe, or of an electorate that hasn't developed a policy preference. From what I see in Bulgaria, there are very few policy issues that have a very large base in the electorate. There is the question of being pro EU or EU critical, and there is a very small share of people who EU are critical. So, you could not form a party on this. There is also a big issue on poverty, issue of more state or less state. Apart from this, it does not go very much else. Bigger share of voters would be able to spell out more in regard to what the political programs would be.

Interviewer: During the electoral process of national and EU elections, we see a very low percentage of people voting, so you can feel the low engagement in Bulgarian society. Have you noticed any tendencies or reasons that have led to this, or do you think it's because it's a very young democracy and we haven't realized how we want to develop from now on?

Kortländer: I supposed it is the other way around. The numbers of political engagement are declining than increasing. From my perspective, it looks like a disillusionment with the opportunities of how democracy has delivered. The biggest disappointment is that Bulgaria is still a country where poverty is widespread, has not caught up with the rest of the EU countries. I am a social democrat, as a

disclaimer but in the 1990s it was capitalism and democracy who came to Bulgaria and some of the shortcomings of capitalism are blamed on democracy and the high inequality that it brought. The differences between societies, cleavages of countryside and cities. Democracy is not to blame for this, but it is to blame for not being able to bolster the effects. There is a disillusionment where the opportunities or promise that democracy should have brought in combination with capitalism, and this seems to be the reason why people do not take part in politics and elections anymore. Also, because there are no political actors that seem to be trusted anymore. There was a survey during the protests in the summer, where they asked what people thought, which parties were connected to the so-called mafia, and more than 50% answered all of them.

Interviewer: Definitely. With my parents, for example, there is this sentiment that it was better during the communism, because they had stable work and could provide for their families. I was also wondering, and you mentioned high levels of poverty compared to the rest of the EU and the economic disparities, does this have any effect on the fairness of the electoral process? By this I mean, our electoral processes are often accused of being corrupt or unfair, and during another interview, someone mentioned that sometimes political leaders use their connection with corporate organizations to convince the employees to vote for them. You work with trade unions, so you might have an interesting perspective on this.

Kortländer: This is obviously something nobody would talk about, especially not with me, but I hear this a lot, so there might be something to it, not only at the workplace, but I have heard reports on whole villages, where the government is the biggest employer, so there might be pressure. I am not sure how big of an issue the narrative of fraud in the elections of Bulgaria is. At least when we look at the surveys done before elections the results are similar. There is no big deviation there. People respond the way they are pushed by pressure; I am not sure about this. I would guess that if you are being asked in a survey, especially one or two years away from elections, you would name your actual preference. My assessment is that it does not have a large effect. There may be effects of buying and influencing votes, but it does not flip elections. It might account for a few percentages, but not being a majoritarian system, the effect is not enough to make the reports.

Interviewer: I would like to discuss the influence of the accession in the EU on the development of democracy, your general opinion, but also when it comes to the large funds we get from the EU and how this might impact the political corruption in the country.

Kortländer: It's obviously a problem, ironic and sad. Corrupt networks need money where to rally around. A system has been developed on how to channel these funds from the EU. I think more than 50% of public investment funds if from the EU. This is huge, so obviously people will try to get hold of these funds. Sad irony that the accession from the EU has deepened the corruption in Bulgaria. This was part of the protest in the summer. There are other side effects. On the market where, this is off topic, but agricultural funds support large cash crowdfunds, which is not good for the agricultural economy, so I guess there is a downside of being part of the EU Single Market.

Interviewer: Definitely, and there are parts of Bulgaria that are very dependent on these EU funds, which contributes to the lack of economic development. Conscious of the time, I want to move to discussing several sections of Bulgarian society and how issues related to them might impact the quality of democracy. I know the work of your organization has contributed a lot to the discussion about the Roma community. What is in your opinion the role of the Roma community in the Bulgarian political climate?

Kortländer: From what I see, the numbers are clear, the Roma are sidelined and at the back of every table. From the political standpoint, I had the feeling that things got worse in the last years, which I would blame on the accession of the United Patriots into government and that they were able to speak in a way to make a rhetoric and bring that back to the first line of politics to where it had not been before. This was detrimental to the situation of the whole country, and it changes the way people think of the Roma community, and changes the politics.

Interviewer: How is the Roma community even represented politically, outside of the NGOs that work with them?

Kortländer: I do not know any Roma politician, not even an intellectual who can speak for them besides the Roma organizations who are not numerous either.

Interviewer: To conclude this topic, does this impact the pluralism of the Bulgarian democracy?

Kortländer: One of the reasons there is no real representation to the Roma community, is that the community itself is very divided. In my impression Bulgarian politics are not very pluralistic at all, they are quite homogenous, from what I see. What could be positively underlined is that the number of women in politics is rather high. When it comes to ethnic pluralism, I put a question mark behind

that. There is the party of, allegedly, the Turkish minority, but I'm not sure that is really proof of pluralistic political way, because these interests should be among all parties, and not in a single party.

Interviewer: The second minority group I wanted to discuss is the LGBTQ+ community and the fact that we do not have any rights related to it. I was thinking about how this impacts the quality of democracy, compared with the standards in other EU countries.

Kortländer: In a way it is similar to the Roma community, because any time there is a push forward, there is a massive pushback. I suppose you follow the discussion around the Istanbul Convention, which threw Bulgaria back by 20 years, I suppose on the debate of gender LGBTQ+ rights. This is extremely difficult, especially how civil society is disconnected from the political process. Civil society organizations do not want to collaborate with political parties and vice versa. There are no ideas that come through political channels unless there is publicity for it. A more mature democracy would have these channels and interconnection between civil society organizations and political parties. There is a serious underfinancing of civil society organization unless they are close to the government. It is extremely difficult to get funding, so they rely on foreign funds, which is also an issue. So, they are in a very difficult situation to bring forward their interest. It does pay off well to insult them and be dismissive of their issues.

Interviewer: I want to ask you whether this is connected to the general patriotic/ nationalist values in the society, because right now we have an extremely patriotic party in the government. Is this causing the distress between NGOs and political parties?

Kortländer: It adds to it. Especially on these issues. It is a very sharp and aggressive rhetoric. They rely on making cheap points without any constructive agenda. There is a reason they can do this, and there is a demand on this rhetoric, it reverberates somehow in the society. From my point of view, parties like the United Patriots never have been part of the government, but when they are, it's the problem of the whole society and not only of the state.

Interviewer: It is discouraging to know that despite being part of the EU and the younger generation being very progressive, but there is no dialogue or discussion, even on a family level, and no understanding of the issue. The EU values and standards have not really penetrated Bulgaria for one reason or another. Is there something you expected me to ask but I did not?

Kortländer: Generally, the situation of the media is being explored from abroad, so this is a common question. For me, the poverty and the inequality do play a very decisive role in the development of democracy here. These intergenerational issues are interesting. We did a youth study in 2019 which was interesting in terms of how attitudes towards democracy and institutions change over the years.

Interviewer: You are right that these things are highly discussed, and I touch upon the media point in my research, but also the intergenerational differences.

Kortländer: What I find very particular about Bulgaria is how the facade of democracy works, how all institutions and rhetoric are there, apart from the anti-Roma, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. How when you look upon Bulgaria at first glance, it looks alright, but all these formalities of democracy are hollow, which I find unique in comparison to other countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding.

Interviewer: I think Borisov has this very adjustable attitude to all issues, he is never very assertive.

Kortländer: He has built up an interesting model. In comparison to the region, Bulgaria seems to have a very realistic understanding of its role in the world, which is small. It is not the case for all countries, who have the ego of an empire or so. "This relatively humble approach on the international stage and the macho nationalist rhetoric is directed inwards."

Interviewer: Thank you for the interview and your time, we discussed valuable points.

[Interview with Daniela Bozhinova](#)

Prior to the beginning of the interview, the interviewee was asked whether they consent to the recording of the interview.

Interviewer: What is the condition of the democratic governance in Bulgaria, according to your observations?

Bozhinova: The level of the democracy in Bulgaria is not good. Until the summer protests of 2020, the international community did not pay attention that Bulgaria is struggling with similar anti-democratic processes like Hungary. For example, foundational aspects of democracies, such as the rule of law and human rights are compromised. Bulgaria is a unconsolidated democracy with a grey economy.

Interviewer: To what extent and in what ways is the communist past of Bulgaria affecting its democratic development?

Bozhinova: Our closer relations with the Soviet Union in comparison to other post-communist had an influence on how the transition occurred. The privatization processes in the countries that were not as impacted by the Soviet Union are much more efficient. In my opinion, our privatization was to a large extent criminalized. The transition was extremely elitist. There was a transfer of power from the communist elitists to the post-communist elitists. A problematic aspect of the transition was also the fact that the Bulgarian citizens did not participate in the creation of the Constitution. The totalitarian reflections are strong in Bulgaria. There is limited space for a direct democracy. Bulgaria abides by a minimalist democratic approach by dependency on elections.

Interviewer: Did typical communist political values remain after the transition?

Bozhinova: Yes, definitely. Clientelism and favoritism rule in Bulgaria. They are connected to the corruption and are extremely normalized. The example provided included loopholes for even normal practices such as arranging meetings with public authorities.

Interviewer: Was this present since the beginning or did it develop later?

Bozhinova: It was different right after the fall of the communist regime, there was seemingly more pluralism. But with the coming in power of GERB and the accession into the EU, the corruption increased. This is also connected to the access to the EU funds, in my opinion.

Interviewer: Do you think Bulgaria benefited democratically from its membership into the EU?

Bozhinova: We thought that we are joining liberal values, but they were compromised by the practices of the political elite and the access of funding. For example, Bulgaria media has access to public funding, which also leads to its dependence.

Interviewer: You mentioned that the privatization was criminal, can you please elaborate? Who does this benefit?

Bozhinova: This benefited both the old and new economic elite. Some of the privatization deals were in the gray zone, and not all companies were privatized transparently?

Interviewer: Did the transition lead to civic or economic inequalities?

Bozhinova: Yes. Bulgaria struggles deeply with wealth inequalities, even though it is in the EU. It is surprising how much inequality accumulated in 30 years?

Interviewer: I would like to transition the topic to electoral activities. Do you believe that the electoral processes in the country align with the democratic standards?

Bozhinova: We do have voter purchasing both during the electoral day and prior. Before elections, companies provide benefits to their employees to incentivize voting for specific parties.

Interviewer: Thank you! Before we finish with the interview, can you tell me more about the development of civil society in Bulgaria? Has dynamism of the society developed?

Bozhinova: I believe that Bulgaria's civic rights are quite limited. Also, some parties, like GERB, have started as NGOs, so the lines are blurred.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for the opportunity! The information you provided was very valuable!

Bozhinova: You're welcome! I wish you good luck with your dissertation.

Interviewer: Thank you!

[Interview with Maria Mateeva-Kazakova](#)

Prior to the beginning of the interview, the interviewee was asked whether they consent to the recording of the interview.

Interviewer: Very often in the literature we see that there is an overlap of the elements of populism in post-communist countries, but there are also differences in the use of rhetoric when it comes to minorities, for example between Bulgaria and Hungary. What role do minorities play in the populism of Bulgaria?

Mateeva-Kazakova: If we guide ourselves by the two types of populism, we cannot specify what role, but we do see the presence of both types in countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and any other country that has minorities. If we speak of quantity of xenophobic populism, this can be “measured” by how many political parties mobilize it. Or precisely, through methodology that measures the quantity of phrases that can be qualified as populist, or national populist. Based on my research, this is not something that is consistent. Most leaders’ use of populist rhetoric can vary in different situations.

Interviewer: Have you noticed a change in the progress of topics regarding populism?

Mateeva-Kazakova: This depends on the individual leader and the competition between the leaders. It is easier to observe the occurrence of national populism in different occasions.

Interviewer: Have you noticed a specific moment that can be identified as the starting point of populism in Bulgaria.

Mateeva-Kazakova: This is difficult to identify, because this is something that has always existed in small quantities. The year of 2001 is often brought up as a turning point with the elitist populism that was brought with Simeon Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. But even in the late 1990s leaders in Bulgaria began using this rhetoric. It has been a slow process.

Interviewer: Is it because of the feeling of the communist regime still existing in the air?

Mateeva-Kazakova: The difficulty in the personal progress makes it difficult for people to develop an open worldview, which pushes people to develop similar outlooks and xenophobic ideas.

Interviewer: Have you noticed a relation between populism and our membership in the EU from the perspective of loss of sovereignty?

Mateeva-Kazakova: I am not sure why the EU can be regarded as a factor in this, because this relation can be researched by anti-EU theses by nationalists, which is not a proven thesis. To a large extent, the government has stayed stable in Bulgaria, which is a mutation of the regime internally.

Interviewer: Does the antagonism and negativity towards the opposition, as much as in Poland or Hungary, for example?

Mateeva-Kazakova: Certain social groups apparently do not like the opposition, but another part of society are obviously supporters.

Interviewer: What can the society in Bulgaria do to help its democratic development?

Mateeva-Kazakova: There have been signs of willingness to speak, debate more in Bulgaria. We see willingness to be part of those, regardless of the impression that there are many opposing groups among the people.

*The rest of the file was compromised.

Forms



European Studies Student Ethics Form

Your name: Kristin Tsenkova

Supervisor: Guido van Hengel

Instructions:

Before completing this form you should read the APA Ethics Code (<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>). If you are planning research with human subjects, you should also look at the sample consent form available in the Final Project and Dissertation Guide.

- a. Read section 2 that your supervisor will have to sign. Make sure that you cover all these issues in section 1.
- b. Complete section 1 and, if you are using human subjects, section 2, of this form, and sign it.
- c. Ask your project supervisor to read these sections (and the draft consent form if you have one) and ask him/her to sign the form.
- d. Always append this signed form as an appendix to your dissertation. This is a knock-out criterium; if not included the Final Project/Dissertation is awarded an NVD.

Section 1. Project Outline (to be completed by student)

(i) Title of Project: Behind Bulgaria's Democratic Façade: Causes of Democratic Backslidir

(ii) Aims of project:

The aims of this project are to (1) provide an overview of the deteriorating democratic conditions in Bulgaria, (2) analyse the factors, which have contributed to this development, by applying hypotheses from the existing body of literature to the Bulgarian case, (3) consult specialists in the field of democratization to evaluate the alignment between literature and reality.

(iii) Will you involve other people in your project – e.g. via formal or informal interviews, group discussions, questionnaires, internet surveys etc. (Note: if you are using data that has already been collected by another researcher – e.g. recordings or transcripts of conversations given to you by your supervisor, you should answer 'NO' to this question.)

Yes

If yes: you should complete the section 2 of this form.

If no: you should now sign the statement below and return the form to your supervisor. You have completed this form.

This project is not designed to include research with human subjects . I understand that I do not have ethical clearance to interview people (formally or informally) about the topic of my research, to carry out internet research (e.g. on chat rooms or discussion boards) or in any other way to use people as subjects in my research.

Student's signature  _____ Date 12/05/2021

Section 2 Complete this section only if you answered YES to question (iii) above.**(i) What will the participants have to do? (v. brief outline of procedure):**

The participants participate in a semi-structured interview, meaning that they have to respond to a set of questions, prepared prior to the conversation, and follow-up questions, which arise during the meeting. To do so, the participants are encouraged to answer based on their professional experience and/or academic observations. The interview itself is scheduled and guided by the interviewer by contacting the participants, providing the objectives of the research and the interviews, organizing the conversations logistically, sending all of the necessary information, including a form of consent.

(ii) What sort of people will the participants be and how will they be recruited?

The participants are both experienced professionals and scholars on topics related to democratization and the quality of democratic governance. They were recruited through research into the leading organizations working in the field in Bulgaria and through media references. All of the interviewees were contacted via email initially, while the conversations were conducted through a conference call. The participants include:

- Maria Mateeva-Kazakova, PhD in Post-communist populism and policy advisor;
- Daniela Bozhinova, PhD in Political Science and founder of Bulgarian Association for the Promotion of Citizens Initiative;
- Helene Kortländer, PhD in Political Science and the Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Bulgaria.

(iii) What sort of stimuli or materials will your participants be exposed to? Tick the appropriate boxes and then state what they are in the space below

- Questionnaires
- Pictures
- Sounds
- Words Summary of the project prior to the interviews.
- Other

(iv) Consent: Informed consent must be obtained for all participants before they take part in your project. By means of an informed consent form you should state what participants will be doing, drawing attention to anything they could conceivably object to subsequently. You should also state how they can withdraw from the study at any time and the measures you are taking to ensure the confidentiality of data. A standard informed consent form is available in the Dissertation Manual. Appendix the Informed Consent Form to your Final Project/Dissertation as well.

(vi) What procedures will you follow in order to guarantee the confidentiality of participants' data?

Firstly, the interviewees consented to having their names used in the research project itself. Additionally, they agreed to the recording of the conversations for academic purposes. Therefore, the information provided by the participants will be used exclusively for the writing of this dissertation. After the end of the research process, the recordings of the interviews will be deleted. Finally, no names or contact details are mentioned in the recordings, and no contact details will be mentioned in the summaries and transcripts derived from them.

Student's signature:



Date 12/05/2021

Supervisor's signature: guido van hengel

Date 17/05/2021

(if satisfied with the proposed procedures)

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

- 1) Research Project Title: Democratic Backsliding in Bulgaria (provisional title)
- 2) Project Description (1 paragraph)

The process of the deterioration of democratic values in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), commonly referred to as democratic backsliding, has been a prominent topic of research in the field of political science. With this in mind, considering the disproportionate concentration of the existing body of literature on the two cases of Hungary and Poland, the current research aims to expand the topic by centering on the democratic decline in Bulgaria.

After its completion of the accession conditionalities, Bulgaria became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2007, a period marked by the state's highest democratic performance. According to the Nations in Transit reports, Bulgaria was on the verge of being announced a consolidated democracy; however, since 2009 the level of democracy in the country has been steadily deteriorating. Thus, the research aims to analyse the reasons behind this decline by considering the pre-existing conditions in the state and contrasting the existing body of literature to the Bulgarian case.

If you agree to take part in this study please read the following statement and sign this form.

I am 16 years of age or older.

I can confirm that I have read and understood the description and aims of this research. The researcher has answered all the questions that I had to my satisfaction.

I agree to the audio recording of my interview with the researcher.

I understand that the researcher offers me the following guarantees:

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence. My name will not be used in the study unless I give permission for it.

Recordings will be accessible only by the researcher. Unless otherwise agreed, anonymity will be ensured at all times. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.

I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and anything to be deleted from it.

I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: *Helene Kortländer*

Signature: *[Handwritten Signature]*

Date: *1.2.21*

Informed Consent Form

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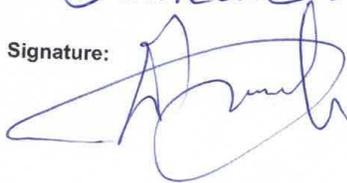
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I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and anything to be deleted from it.

I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: *Daniela Bozhinova*

Signature:



Date:

27.01.2021



Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

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- 2) Project Description (1 paragraph)

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I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and anything to be deleted from it.

I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: Maria Mateeva-Kazakova

Signature: MM-K

Date: 19/11/2020