

NEW MESSAGES OF THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE ELECTORAL PREFERENCES OF THE SOCIETY

Abstract. The functioning of a modern democratic state is impossible without observing certain electoral cycles, holding free elections, maintaining carefully thought-out electoral procedures, and sending new messages to voters that affect the formation of public electoral moods. The most important trend in this process is the search for electoral systems that fully take into account the will of citizens and ensure adequate representation of their interests in state bodies. The author proves that during the recent presidential and parliamentary election campaigns that took place in the Republic of Bulgaria, new electoral preferences were quite unexpected for the state. The Bulgarian Parliament quickly shifted to a new paradigm of political rhetoric without changing its structure. “Pro-Euro-Atlantic” parties (the Reformist Bloc, DOST) did not enter the Parliament, and those that are represented in the National Assembly (GERB, BSP, DPS) quite painlessly reoriented to “patriotic” or “state-oriented” messages. The nationalist parties with their new messages that most correspond to the desired new situation, managed to understand the situation in time: they united and were able to get seats in the Government in a new form. They said goodbye to their previous role in Bulgarian politics and became a part of the respectable participants in the political process.

Keywords: Republic of Bulgaria, presidential and parliamentary elections, political parties, new political messages.

Vira Burdiak¹

НОВІ МЕСЕДЖІ БОЛГАРСЬКИХ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ ПАРТІЙ ТА ЇХ ВПЛИВ НА СУСПІЛЬНІ ЕЛЕКТОРАЛЬНІ НАСТРОЇ

Анотація. Функціонування сучасної демократичної держави неможливе без дотримання певних електоральних циклів, проведення вільних виборів, ретельно продуманих виборчих процедур та спрямування нових меседжів до виборців, які впливають на формування суспільних електоральних настроїв. Найважливішою тенденцією цього процесу є пошук таких виборчих систем, які в повній мірі враховують волю громадян

¹ Доктор політичних наук, професор, професор кафедри політології та державного управління Чернівецького національного університету імені Юрія Федьковича; e-mail: vira.burdjak@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0037-2173>

та її адекватне представництво у державних органах. Автор доводить, що в ході останніх президентської та парламентської виборчої кампаній, які відбулися в Республіці Болгарія, виявилися досить несподівані для держави нові електоральні переваги. Болгарський парламент швидко перебудувався на нову парадигму політичної риторики, практично не змінивши структури. «Проєвроатлантичні» партії (Реформаторський блок, ДВСТ) не пройшли до парламенту, а ті, що представлені в Народних зборах (ГЕРБ, БСП, РПС) доволі безболісно переорієнтувалися на «патріотичні» чи «державницькі» меседжі. Націоналістичні партії, нові меседжі яких найбільше відповідають бажаному новому положенню, зуміли вчасно розібратися в ситуації: вони об'єдналися і в новому вигляді змогли отримати місця в уряді. Також вони зробили заявку на те, щоб попрощатися з минулою своєю роллю в болгарській політиці і ввійти до складу респектабельних учасників політичного процесу.

Ключові слова: Республіка Болгарія, президентські та парламентські вибори, політичні партії, нові політичні меседжі.

Statement of the scientific problem and its significance. Every modern democratic state periodically holds presidential and parliamentary elections and adheres to the developed electoral procedures, according to its legislation. These procedures are sometimes changed and improved in order to fully take the will of citizens into account and to provide adequate representation of their interests in public authorities².

Recognition of the importance of the electoral system in a democratic state is due to the fact that this element of the political system undergoes changes the most often. Researchers G. Taagepera and M. Shugart note that “comparing with the other elements of the political system, electoral rules are the easiest to manipulate for political purposes. This does not mean that the electoral system is easy to change, but that the other elements of the system are even more difficult to change”³.

Presentation of the main material. In a democracy, it is difficult for the ruling elite to make significant changes to the institutions of Legislative and Executive power, since they are usually well constitutionally protected and it takes a lot of effort from the elites to carry out such changes without violating democratic norms and procedures. But the ruling elites do not always choose and change the electoral system in order to optimize the functioning of democracy. Just like any other subject of the political process, they pursue their own interests, trying to consolidate their dominant position in the state power system, creating additional obstacles for the political opposition on its way to gain power.

² Иванченко А.В., Кынев А.В., Любарев А.Е. (2005). Пропорциональная избирательная система в России: История, современное состояние, перспективы. М.: Аспект Пресс. С. 7.

³ Таагепера Р., Шугарт М. С. (1997). Описание избирательных систем. Полис. № 3. С. 115.

Bulgaria held regular presidential elections in November 2016. The political parties hoped that the elections would give them the expected opportunity to correct the balance of power that had developed at that time in the Parliament. However, whether or not such changes were possible was questionable. After all, since 2014, governmental power in Bulgaria has been concentrated in the hands of the GERB party (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), since one of the founders of this party – Boyko Borisov – was the Prime Minister at that time; and the party’s nominee Rosen Plevneliev was the President of the Bulgarian state. For a long time, GERB was ruling the state in a coalition with the former right-wing forces of the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) (it was headed by former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov). Sometimes they were occasionally supported by the Vilen Siderov’s radical party “Attack”. The other parties represented the opposition, led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with its leader Sergei Stanishev, in coalition with the ethnic Turkish party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and the National Movement Simeon II led by Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (NDSV – party, which was formed in 2001 by the son of the last Bulgarian Tsar Boris. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became the first Republican Prime Minister in the begging of the XXI century).

In 2009 the GERB party won the elections for the first time, and until 2016 it consistently won all election races⁴. The only serious rival of the GERB party could be considered a spontaneous expression of discontent of citizens who came out to hold protest actions on the streets of many cities of the state. The leaders of the GERB party managed to build such a tactic and strategy where none of the existing parties in Bulgaria, and there are more than 240 of them, could seriously claim the role of the opposition.

Seven other parties joined the National Assembly – Parliament of Bulgaria – in 2014⁵. The Bulgarian press wrote that each political movement was represented by two parliamentary forces⁶. The right-liberal spectrum in addition to GERB was represented by the Reformist Bloc (RB). From the parties of the nationalist spectrum – the Attack Party and its competitor, the Patriotic Front, entered the Parliament. The left-wing forces were represented by the BSP and by Georgi Parvanov’s “The Alternative for Bulgarian Revival” (ABV) party, which had moved away from the socialists. This list of parliamentary political forces is completed by the ethnic party “Movement for Rights and Freedoms”, which split at the end of 2015 and two Turkish parties fought for the seats in the National Assembly in 2017: the DPS and the “Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance” (DOST).

So, each parliamentary party had its own rival who claimed the same electorate (with the possible exception of the ruling GERB party, the voters of which support the personality of

⁴ *Граждани за европейско развитие на България* (ГЕРБ). URL: http://www.gerb.bg/bg/news/spisyk-stanovishta_i_pozicii-3.html

⁵ The political party “Bulgaria Uncensored”, which also entered the Parliament, broke apart soon after the National Assembly started functioning.

⁶ Симеонов П. (2017). ГЕРБ и Обединените патриоти по-скоро имат условия в 44-ото Народно събрание да изпънят заявените политики. URL: <http://www.focus-news.net/opinion/2017/04/18/42635/parvan-simeonov-politolog-gerb-i-obedinenite-patrioti-po-skoro-imat-usloviya-v-44-oto-narodno-sabranie-da-izpalnyat-za-yavenite-politiki.html>

its leader Boyko Borisov rather than the program or ideology). BSP – the main opposition force, which traditionally challenged the GERB – according to G. Parvanov, was not in the opposition to the government, but to its main competitor on the left wing – the ABV party. GERB's potential rival in the fight for the right-wing electorate, the Reformist Bloc, fit into the role of its junior partner and dutifully accepted the resignations of its Ministers, which B. Borisov deliberately appointed to the most problematic Ministries⁷. Other parties (the ethnic Turkish DPS and the nationalist “Patriotic front” and the “Attack” party) were engaged in an inter-party struggle, and therefore did not so much criticize GERB as hoped for its support.

In the end, there was a system that was effective enough for the leadership of the party, in which B. Borisov – the leader of the GERB – kept all potential rivals under control. In almost every decision, the ruling party could create a majority in the Parliament, playing on the contradictions of its younger partners. Weakened rivals did not even try to challenge the party's rights, being content with their own place in the system that B. Borisov had created.

At the beginning of 2016 most analysts believed that the system of political relations built by the Prime Minister would allow his party to easily lead its candidate for the post of President, while maintaining its dominant position. However, subsequent events contradicted these forecasts.

It is known that Bulgaria is a parliamentary Republic in which the powers of the head of state are quite limited, but despite this, the President of the Republic is elected in general elections. The main contenders in the 2016 presidential election were Tsetska Tsacheva, representing GERB⁸, and BSP candidate Rumen Radev⁹. At the time of the election, T. Tsacheva was the speaker of the National Assembly of Bulgaria (this is the first female speaker in the history of Bulgaria)¹⁰. R. Radev is a professional military pilot who once headed the state air force.

What added to the significance and intrigue of these elections was the fact that the current Prime Minister of Bulgaria and the leader of the GERB party B. Borisov before the election said that if T. Tsacheva was defeated, the Parliament would be dissolved. In fact, he decided to turn the election into a referendum on the assessment of his policy, linking its results to the future fate of the working Government and the National Assembly.

Such political statements and dispositions are not a new phenomenon in modern politics. Quite often, politicians link the future of the government to the results of voting by citizens in elections or referendums, trying to ensure the desired result for themselves. However, this combination of the future fate of a politician and the results of the voting is a double-edged weapon. It is difficult to predict whether or not the voters will support a functioning government. But

⁷ Георгиев В. (2014). Заявка за програмиран провал. URL: <http://pogled.info/avtorski/Valentin-Georgiev/zayavka-za-pogramiran-portal.59572>

⁸ Антонова Д. (2016). Цецка Цачева, вече официално, кандидатът на ГЕРБ за президент. News.bg, 2 октомври.

⁹ БСП отрязва АБВ от преговорите за обща коалиция за президентските избори. От столетницата не са съгласни с предложения от партията на Гърванов проект за коалиционно споразумение. Blitz.bg, 2016, 23 август.

¹⁰ Борисов обяви официално Цецка Цачева за кандидат-президент на ГЕРБ: Нацията има нужда и от майка (допълнена). Дневник. bg, 2016, 2 октомври.

the defeat of the current government will inevitably lead to a resignation. In this regard, it is appropriate to recall two recent examples from the development of the electoral process and its results in the UK and Italy.

In the UK, the day before a referendum on the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, Prime Minister James Cameron said that if a majority of voters voted for the state's exit from the EU, he would resign¹¹. As you know, the majority of the voters voted for Brexit, which forced J. Cameron to keep his own promises and thus end his political career. At the end of 2016 the same move was made by Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who said he would resign if a majority of voters voted in a referendum against his proposed radical reform of the Constitution¹². The voters did not support the changes proposed by the Prime Minister and M. Renzi's political career was also sadly interrupted.

In Bulgaria B. Borisov followed the same slippery path, linking the fate of his Government with the results of the presidential elections, which in this case proved to be as disappointing as in cases of his Western European colleagues. In the very first round, on November 6, 2016, the Prime Minister's protege Tsacheva took only second place, gaining 3% less votes than R. Radev. Before the second round of elections, all government forces were activated to ensure Tsacheva's victory, who received mixed feelings from the Bulgarian society. That is because "T. Tsacheva, who was not that charismatic, failed to come out from B. Borisov's shadow, which is why she gave the impression of a weak candidate devoid of independence"¹³.

During the election campaign, R. Radev was believed to have "special ties with the Kremlin", because the BSP is considered a pro-Russian party. However, R. Radev responded to these accusations by saying that not only is he not a member of the BSP, but moreover, he is the first Bulgarian military officer who received military education in the United States. The moment of truth came on November 13, when in the second round, R. Radev won, receiving a convincing 59.37% of the votes and became the President of Bulgaria¹⁴. The next day, November 14, B. Borisov, following this word, resigned¹⁵. Therefore, an urgent need to hold snap parliamentary elections emerged in Bulgaria.

The reasons for the Prime Minister's resignation have been repeatedly discussed in the Bulgarian press and look obvious. The ruling party overestimated its resources by nominating a presidential candidate who lacked unique charisma, but was loyal and manageable. This caused public annoyance: seemed like no one asked the voters anymore, and the President was appointed as an ordinary official. The opposition quickly these public protests took into

¹¹ Почему британский премьер ушел в отставку? URL: <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20160627/236990095.html>; Дэвид Кэмерон освобождает для Терезы Мэй пост и квартиру. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-36781539>

¹² Итальянцы отклонили конституционную реформу, премьер-министр Маттео Ренци уходит. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3840538>

¹³ Час на політичні зміни в Болгарії. URL: <http://www.global-analyt.com/%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%>

¹⁴ Резултати от избори за президент и вице-президент на републиката 2016 (II тур) // Централната избирателна комисия на Република България. URL: <https://www.cik.bg/>

¹⁵ *Bulgarian PM Borisov tenders his government resignation*. Reuters. 2016. Nov 14.

account and proposed a candidate who was the complete opposite of the GERB candidate¹⁶. R. Radev is a general officer, a flying ace, independent candidate, and therefore not responsible for the problems faced by the state in recent years, respectable, well-educated and intelligent. In the end, R. Radev was supported by representatives of almost all political parties, while the GERB candidate failed to mobilize even the electorate of her own party.

If the GERB's defeat was transparent enough to explain it, then the much deeper changes that occurred during the presidential elections – changes in political rhetoric – are undeniably more difficult to track. Before the elections, the only absolute and universally recognized reference point of Bulgarian politics were the “Euro-Atlantic values”, which meant a wide range of concepts, both geopolitical and purely domestic. During the election campaign, there was a transition to a new paradigm in which “national interests” were recognized as a reference point.

So, the future President, the opposition candidate general officer R. Radev surprised the Bulgarian public with statements about the need to recognize the reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation. According to him, the denial of this fact does not help to protect the interests of Bulgarian citizens. He interpreted the relationships with the European Union and NATO in such a way that they turned from an ideological principle into a tool for protecting national interests: in his opinion, the state is interested in a more active participation in these institutions¹⁷.

It should be noted that out of the seven leading candidates, five other candidates, including his main competitor, the GERB candidate, expressed similar ideas. All of them tried to present themselves as pragmatists whose main goal is to protect public interests.

At the same time, the success of R. Radev showed the scale of the public need to replace the political elite and undermined the dominance of GERB. B. Borisov's team is trying to lead the protest electorate, hence the sudden support for the introduction of a plurality voting system, which allowed GERB to take its place in the vanguard of political changes. The victory of R. Radev, although he was formally a non-party candidate, gave the left-wing parties a chance to restore political positions weakened by numerous corruption scandals and the lack of reliable leaders. The socialists are trying to develop a new rhetoric, and have also supported the introduction of a plurality voting system. At this stage, it is difficult to assess the prospects for changes in the electoral law, but it is unlikely that the left-wing parties will be able to quickly develop a comprehensive reform that would respond to the requests of the citizens regarding the need for changes that exist in society¹⁸.

The new rhetoric of politicians has become news for post-Communist Bulgaria. Some journalists made hasty conclusions that the state was moving away from the Euro-Atlantic course and was almost preparing to leave the EU and NATO. However, this does not look like

¹⁶ България: выборы, до которых не дотянулась вездесущая «рука Москвы». URL: <http://izbircom.com/2017/04/23/%D0%B1%>

¹⁷ «Маркет линкс»: Цецка Цачева и генерал Румен Радев отиват на тежък балотаж». БТВ Новините». 2016. 4 октябрия.

¹⁸ Час на політичні зміни в Болгарії. URL: <http://www.global-analytik.com/%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%>

it, because in the last election, none of the leading candidates could be called fully eurosceptic or at least anti-NATO. If some of them allowed themselves to criticize the Euro-Atlantic structures, it was more directed against the sluggish position of the current Bulgarian politicians than against these organizations themselves. Therefore, we are not talking about the changes in the geopolitical orientations, but about a more mature attitude of the elite and society when determining policy priorities.

It is interesting that during the election campaign, the ruling GERB party tried to avoid direct criticism of Russia. Even the party leader and former Prime Minister B. Borisov said that EU sanctions are not directed against the Russian state, but only against those responsible for the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Donbass. Opponents of the BSP actively elaborated upon the topic of lifting anti-Russian sanctions, promising to block their extension in June.

Just before the election, the Wall Street Journal published a document intercepted by the Bulgarian security services, which contained a detailed strategy developed by Russian political strategists that may have helped R. Radev win the presidential election. It is not known whether the publication of the document affected the distribution of the electorate's sympathies. But in the elections on March 26th, the center-right party GERB significantly surpassed the Moscow socialist-followers, receiving 32.65% of the vote against 27.2% of the BSP. Although throughout the entire election campaign, the opponents kept apace¹⁹.

This trend, which emerged in the presidential elections, was further developed in the snap parliamentary elections in 2017. After the defeat of his candidate, B. Borisov resigned. The new Cabinet could not be formed under the old Parliament, so, in the end, parliamentary elections were scheduled for 2017. Bulgarian journalists noted the unprecedented intensity of patriotic rhetoric during these elections²⁰. Political parties changed their names so that the word "Bulgaria" or "Bulgarian" was there; they came up with new slogans that sounded patriotic; they accused each other of not paying enough attention to national interests and of "kowtowing" to representatives of the European Union and NATO.

Following the results of the parliamentary elections, deputies from five political parties were elected to the National Assembly. Bulgarian analysts note that the new Parliament is a simplified version of the previous one: each political direction is now represented by only one party, that is, the "duplicate" parties have disappeared from the Parliament²¹. After the victory of R. Radev, the BSP gained great popularity and became a worthy rival of the ruling party (which is still the GERB). The second left-wing party – ABV, failed to overcome the 4% barrier this time

¹⁹ Выбори в Болгарии: тиха поразка симпатиків Кремля. URL: <https://politeka.net/ua/reading/analytics/420336-vybory-v-bolgarii-tihoe-porazhenie-simpatikov-kremlya/>

²⁰ Бойчева М. (2017). Конкуренция по родолюбие в имената на партиите. URL: <https://trud.bg/>

²¹ Симеонов П. (2017). ГЕРБ и Обединените патриоти по-скоро имат условия в 44-ото Народно събрание да изпънят заявените политики. URL: <http://www.focus-news.net/opinion/2017/04/18/42635/parvan-simeonov-politolog-gerb-i-obedinenite-patrioti-po-skoro-imat-usloviya-v-44-oto-narodno-sabranie-da-izpalnyat-za-yavenite-politiki.html>

and did not enter the Parliament. A similar situation has developed for the “duplicate” parties from the right sector (the Reformist Bloc broke up into small movements that also failed to overcome the electoral barrier) and among the representatives of the ethnic Turkish minority (the DOST party did not enter the National Assembly and the DPS was the only representative of this direction). Only one movement from the nationalist spectrum remained in the Parliament: the “Attack” party united with the Patriotic Front, creating the coalition party of “United Patriots”. The eurosceptic party “Attack” is campaigning for Bulgaria to leave NATO and renegotiate the terms of its membership in the European Union. The “Attack” also stands in solidarity with Putin’s policy, supports the annexation of Crimea and the revoking of anti-Russian sanctions. V. Siderov is in contact with the leader of the French ultra-right party “National front” Marine Le Pen, and their views are similar about the need for rapprochement with Russia and the intensification of the migration regime²².

A political debutant, liberal party Volya, which does not have a clear political identity, also entered the Parliament. This is a personal project of businessman Veselin Mareshki. He was a candidate for the post of President in the 2016 elections, and then more than 400 thousand Bulgarian citizens voted for him. In the parliamentary elections, Volya’s achievements were more modest, as just over 140,000 people voted for the party²³.

The results of the parliamentary elections confirmed the presence of a new trend in Bulgarian politics. For one reason or another, the most loyal followers of the previous Euro-Atlantic paradigm—former members of the Reformist bloc—found themselves outside of the National Assembly. Two of the parties that remain in Parliament—GERB and the new party Volya—are built around the personality of the Prime Minister and easily adapt to new conditions. For these parties, ideological issues are not a priority. GERB, for example, took the United patriots party instead of the Reformist Bloc as a partner in the ruling coalition. Analysts believe that this choice of the GERB in these conditions can be regarded almost as a symbol of the changes taking place in Bulgarian society.

Thanks to the political power of the United Patriots, nationalist parties got seats in the Government for the first time in recent Bulgarian history. BSP, whose popularity has increased after the victory of R. Radev in the presidential elections, is trying not to lose its ratings and continues the course of patriotism and pragmatic policy initiated by the President. After the events of December 2015, DST party, when the DOST broke away from it, resolutely refused to play the role of a conductor of Turkey’s interests and declared the security and prosperity of Bulgaria as its main priority. Since that time, its political rhetoric often seems even more patriotic than that of nationalist parties.

²² Выборы в Болгарии: Кто здесь «тройанский конь» Кремля? URL: <https://112.ua/statji/vybory-v-bolgarii-kto-zdes-troyanskiy-kon-kremlya-379909.html>

²³ Новый болгарский парламент будет состоять из представителей пяти партий. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4128450>

Conclusion. Thus, the victory of R. Radev significantly affects new alliances in the political arena. Prior to the election, GERB collaborated with the Reformist Bloc, which had a dispute over whether to continue working with the B. Borisov. The Turkish minority and nationalist parties that provided partial support to GERB in Parliament until recently are likely to develop cooperation with the left-wing parties, and their electorate strongly supported R. Radev in the presidential election.

The Bulgarian Parliament has quickly changed to a new paradigm of political rhetoric, while practically not changing its structure (GERB still heads the government coalition, BSP and DPS are still in opposition, and the nationalists support GERB). “Pro-Euro-Atlantic” parties (the Reformist Bloc, the DOST) failed to get into Parliament, and those that are represented in the National Assembly (GERB, BSP, DPS) quickly and painlessly reoriented themselves to “patriotic” or “state-oriented” rhetoric. The nationalist parties that best fit the new situation managed to figure out the situation in time: they united and were able to get seats in the Government in a new form. Therefore, the nationalist political forces said goodbye to their previous role in Bulgarian politics and became a part of the respectable participants in the political process.

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