„EURO-“[1] OR RUSSIA: PARADOXES OF BULGARIAN EUROSCEPTICISM

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Introduction

Bulgaria and Russia have long-standing relations. The attitude towards Russia has been crucial in shaping the political system of Bulgaria. One of the earliest cleavages, dating back to the 1878 Liberation of Bulgaria and subsequent years, but detectable under various forms even today, is that of Russophiles vs. Russophobes. Neither can historical superimpositions exclude the state socialism period and the decades when Bulgaria was situated within the Soviet sphere of influence. It is no coincidence that Russia's influence on Bulgarian current politics is allegedly hard to exaggerate and that it is being exerted via disparate avenues, mechanisms and dependencies of political, economic and cultural order. The war in Ukraine has given prominence to these issues and has made them the principal compass in the political debate of today. Topics in the political agenda are highlighted along the „pro-“ vs. „anti-“ Russia line.

This article offers an analysis of Bulgarian Euroscepticism with its paradoxes, as reflected by this particular line of opposition.

What is Euroscepticism?

Euroscepticism is a difficult concept to define. One of those concepts, which embody the rule that one knows their meaning unless one has to explain them, or as written by some of its famous researchers, *„something that has proved profoundly elusive“*[2]

The term came into use in the mid-1980s in the United Kingdom in connection with certain Members of Parliament within the Conservative party who had reservations about the course of European integration [as designated] in the post-Single European Act and were sceptical about Europe[3]. Researchers have outlined several problems.

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[1] „Euro“ here signifies not the monetary unit but the prefix which has established itself in front of roots referring to EU and its institutions.

[2] Leruth et al. 2018, p. 4

[3] Spiering 2004 in Leruth et al. 2018, p.4

The first is that the term 'Euroscepticism' was coined by non-academics using academic jargon. The second is that the suffix „ism" suggests some underlying ideology. The third is that from being something specifically British, its original scope quickly changed: *„From that narrow and precise germ, the phrase grew in use, first to sweep across much of the British political system, and then across the entire continent. Since the advent of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, a key turning point in terms of the crystallisation of opposition towards the EU, it has become a transnational and pan-European phenomenon, and the term Euroscepticism has become common political language in all EU member states (FitzGibbon et al. 2017). More recently with the advent of the Great Recession and the Eurozone crisis, Euroscepticism has become increasingly 'embedded' within European nation states (Usherwood and Startin 2013)"*[4].

This, in its turn, poses several subsequent problems. Euroscepticism, in similarity to populism, as I have already said, does not represent an ideology in itself, although it is an „ism". For that reason it can be found to coexist with other ideologies, and in this sense also among representatives of both right and left parties, if this classical distinction is to be employed: *„Euroscepticism has become de-aligned from left - right, as both the far left and far right oppose Europe"*[5]. Furthermore, if originally Euroscepticism was largely a marginal phenomenon, characteristic of parties outside the status-quo, today it can be detected also among the mainstream parties. Here also there is a visible resemblance with populism.

Classical typology proposes two forms of Euroscepticism: a 'hard' and a 'soft' one. Styczynska summarizes these two types: *„Soft Eurosceptics do not oppose European integration in general, but criticise selected aspects of the European Union and are associated with „qualified" and „contingent" opposition. Hard Euroscepticism refers to a general rejection of membership of the European Union, rejecting the entire European project"*[6]. This typology, however, has drawn a lot of criticism: Kopecký and Mudde (2002) suggest four types of party standpoints on Europe: Euroenthusiasts, Europragmatists, Eurosceptics, and Eurorejects[7], but due to its complexity their model did not meet with broad popularity, especially in media analyses. Of course, there were also other attempts at typologization: *– Other definitions include that of Conti, [introducing] the differentiation between hard Euroscepticism, soft Euroscepticism, no commitment, functional Europeanism and identity Europeanism. Some scholars [have] proposed a more concise [categorization of] attitudes [pertaining to] European integration, such as Vasilopoulou, who mention[s] three categories of attitudes - rejecting, conditional and compromising - or Sorensen, who focused on public-based Euroscepticism, identifying economic, sovereignty, democratic and socio-political types of Euroscepticism"*[8].

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[4] Leruth et al. 2018

[5] de Wilde et al 2018

[6] Styczynska 2015, p.3

[7] Kopecký and Mudde 2002

[8] Styczynska 2015, p.3

This range of endeavours to distinguish between various types of Euroscepticism are a further evidence of this phenomenon's complexity. There are a number of inherent features of the phenomenon to be distinguished as they are displayed in various contexts. However, I cannot agree with Natasza Styczynska that one of the best approaches is for it to be studied within the individual national states[9]. Bulgarian Euroscepticism, however, except in the national context of Bulgaria, should also be viewed through an external but in an unlimited extent interiorized dimension - that of Russia.

Euroscepticism *a* la Bulgare

In 2015, Natasza Styczynska[10] published an article under the title „(Non) Existence of Bulgarian Party-Based Euroscepticism - Why Should We Care?". The provocative title has its prehistory, which I would like to revisit now before giving an answer to the question posed by the author.

The change of leadership in the Bulgarian Communist Party of November 1989 launched the notorious „transition period". These changes proceeded in a manner which largely explains why Bulgaria emerged from communist rule with a very strong nomenklatura elite and a weak and poorly organized opposition[11]. Not surprisingly, Bulgaria was one of two countries where former communist party, re-styled as Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), won the first democratic elections[12].

In the 1990s, the principal political encounter developed between the former communists and the democratic opposition (the Union of Democratic Forces - UDF). A third actor - the ethnic-Turk „Movement for Rights and Freedoms" (MRF) - plays a significant role in determining political outcomes by making strategic alliances on either side[13].

Several regular and interim governments took turns in power before 1997. In the meantime, Bulgaria signed a 1990 Trade and Partnership Agreement and a 1993 Association Agreement with the EU, making official its intention to join the EU in 1995 (Kostadinova, 2020). Researchers recall, however, that there was not much promise in the initial steps taken by the country and its integration made a slow progress, lagging behind Central European former communist states[14].

Following 1997 pre-term elections, a government was formed by pro-democracy forces, which initiated the real effort of Bulgaria's EU integration. „*The [accession negotiations] started in 2000 and the country made a significant effort to progress*

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[9] Styczynska 2015, p.3

[10] Ibid.

[11] Zankina 2017

[12] Ibid.

[13] Zankina 2017

[14] Stoyanov&Kostadinova 2021, p.4

during this process, and to compensate [for] the time lost during previous government [terms]" (Kostadinova, 2020). As a result of this effort, in 2000 Bulgaria obtained a visa-free regime with EU member states, with its effect being evaluated by researchers as fostering civil support for the integration[15].

On the overall, parties in Bulgaria in this period shared a positive stance on EU-related issues; they were, on the average, in favour of European integration[16]. This is also true in the case of the BSP. As noted by Dandolov, „*Representing an additional testimony to the existence of a permissive consensus in Bulgaria with respect to EU membership are the classifications by Taggart relevant to the late 1990s and early 2000s – in this theorist's categorization of various political parties within diverse countries, not a single one in Bulgaria was [perceived] to warrant the label of a „hard" or even a „soft" Eurosceptic*"[17].

2001 marked the end of the bipolar model. In 2001, several months before the parliamentary elections, former king Simeon of Sachs-Coburg Gotha returned to Bulgaria and founded a political party named after himself – NDSV[18]. The formation unexpectedly won the election of the same year with 43% of the votes and headed a coalition government with the MRF (Zankina, 2017). During the term of this coalition government, Bulgaria became a NATO member (2004), and received confirmation from the European Council that its EU accession is to be made effective as of 2007[19]. In 2005, following prolonged negotiations, the BSP formed a coalition government with NDSV and MRF, which also completed its full term of office. Bulgaria became an EU member in 2007.

The last parliamentary elections before Bulgaria's EU accession marked an important change in the country's party politics: this was the first time a national-populist party, „Ataka", succeeded in achieving representation in the National Assembly[20].

Nevertheless researchers like Styczynska highlight that „*Bulgaria [is apparently] the only EU country without a clearly defined Eurosceptic political party – European elections of 2007, 2009 and the last ones of 2014 were treated as a „litmus test" of the current government's popularity without to pointing at Eurosceptic political actors. Treated as a domestic issue for the opposition in the EP campaign, the elections served as a measure for the possibilities of winning the next parliamentary elections*"[21].

Nevertheless, one has to clarify that the 2005-founded political party „Attack" employs a radical political discourse, targeting not just the minorities, but the establishment as well – national and international, including the EU.

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[15] Stoyanov&Kostadinova 2021, p.4

[16] Ibid.

[17] Dandolov 2014, p. 180

[18] Abbreviates for National Movement Simeon II.

[19] Stoyanov&Kostadinova 2021

[20] Ibid.

[21] Styczynska 2015, p.2

Let us go back to the title of Styczynska's article – „(Non)Existence of Bulgarian Party-Based Euroscepticism – Why Should We Care?". The problem with the nonexistence – if we agree that Euroscepticism is predominantly nonexistent – is that this nonexistence is based not on the negation of the European in itself, but on the overall lack of interest in European issues, in the European Union and the functioning of its institutions. If we have a look at that type of Euroscepticism that is available, we will see that it largely denies the European on account of something else.

The paradoxes with Bulgarian Euroscepticism are numerous but I will highlight several of them. The first one is that resistance to EU appeared not before but with the actual EU membership. The second is that despite its EU membership Bulgaria has failed to interiorize European topics in its political agenda. This, however, does not prevent the emergence of Eurosceptic parties. The third is that the more Bulgaria's Eurointegration advances, the more anti-Europeanized the establishment in Bulgaria becomes. This also takes place largely through the process of normalization of populism and its institutionalization.

Populism and/or Euroscepticism

Although there are many similarities between populism and Euroscepticism, one should differentiated them with regard to their better understanding. A theoretical distinction is to be made at this point between the varieties of populism which are featured on the Bulgarian political scene. On the one hand, there were several waves of anti-elitist, but pro-European – at least on the discursive level – political parties or projects. The first wave relates to the emergence of NDSV. The second is marked by the advent of GERB after 2009, which has been in power in various configurations for the recent twelve years. The most recent relates to the emergence of various pop-up political projects following the 2020 protest wave, such as the „We Continue The Change" party, which headed the coalition government formed in late 2021.

On the other hand, one can note certain nativist or national-populist political entities. In the first years after 1989, nationalist formations gravitated around the two major blocs – democratic right (inheritors, for example, of pro-fascist ideas from before 1949) and the successor of the Communist Party (the circles in the communist regime responsible for the so-called „Revival process"[22]). However, national populism became an important factor with the emergence of „Attack".

This analysis is concerned precisely with the second type. One can cite numerous examples of the relationship between national populism, Euroscepticism and pro-Russian positions. This kind of political actors presents viewpoints involving socio-economic as well as socio-cultural argumentation.

[22] Policy of forced assimilation practiced by the Communist Party in the 1980s.

The Russian dimension

A recent Eurobarometer survey has shown that, compared against the rest of European respondents, Bulgarians are least sympathetic to Ukrainians (39%) and least inclined to blame Russia for the war (27%). Additional data from an ESTAT survey indicate that 68% of Bulgarian society are in favour of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, whereas adherents of support to Ukraine against Russia represent a minority.

Populist Euroscepticism in Bulgarian context should be viewed in terms of Russia – Europe contraposition, especially in the current situation. The first and most salient exponent of this tendency, is „Attack".

Founded in 2005 following a merger of several nationalist and far-right parties, „Attack" made use of a TV channel and a newspaper of the same title and its far-right ideology did not take much time to spread[23]. „Attack" won seats in the Bulgarian Parliament at the 2005, 2009 and 2013 elections. Reprising his office as prime minister following GERB 2017 re-election, Boyko Borisov (GERB) formed a coalition with the United Patriots (UP) featuring three (including „Attack") far-right and pro-Russian parties. „Attack" became the first political party after the fall of communism to openly contest the legitimacy of the MRF and its increasing participation in the higher echelons of the political system, bringing an ethnic slant to corruption and other issues of the political order, etc[24]. Alongside nativist (anti-minority) and anti-establishment / anti-corruption („against the status-quo") rhetoric, „Attack" openly took a stand against NATO and the EU (Foundation, 2017). „Attack" leader Volen Siderov has demonstrated repeatedly a pro-Russian stance and a personal attitude to Vladimir Putin. Most indicative of this posture was choosing Moscow as the place to launch his 2014 Europarliament electoral campaign. A 2017 ECFR survey positioned „Attack" first among thirty other anti-West parties (Gressel, 2017).

Following the decline of the undeniably pro-Russian „Attack", recent years have seen the advent of „Vazrazhdane" („Revival"), whose ties to Russia and its economic circles have been repeatedly targeted by media investigations.

The party leader is a figure known in public circles by his sobriquet „Kopeykin", while political scientist Evgeny Dainov wrote about him: „*Kostadinov makes no secret of his wish to see Bulgaria leave the EU and NATO in order to make a new, „Euro-asiatic" [geopolitical] choice and thus regain the status of a „transdanubian governorate" of Moscow*"[25]. Sociological agencies have recorded increasing support for „Vazrazhdane", which managed for the first time to secure entry into the Parliament on another in a succession of pre-term elections in the end of 2021.

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[23] Dandolov 2017

[24] Dandolov 2014

[25] Dainov 2022

Oriented within the same pro-Russian spectrum is the most recent actor to emerge on the Bulgarian political scene – „Bulgarian Ascent", founded by the President's former advisor and his appointment for interim Prime Minister, General Stefan Yanev.

Worthy of still greater attention is empowered pro-Russian Euroscepticism, whose most remarkable exponent is the incumbent President and former air-force pilot, General Rumen Radev, who stated overtly during his last electoral campaign (2021) that Crimea is Russian. Radev won his first term in office in 2016 and even then, the opinion circulated in certain public circles that he was named directly by Moscow despite his USA specializations and the fact that he had served as a NATO general. Authoritative Western editions also subscribe to this view, e. g. a Deutsche Welle[26] article from May 2022 states that his nomination has been discussed with Leonid Reshetnikov, a retired intelligence general and chairman of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, in hopes that Radev would succeed in reorienting Bulgaria from the West toward Russia. Both at discursive level and in many of his standpoints, Radev has confirmed these hypotheses. He gained popularity by appropriating the 2020 democratic anti-government protests abandoning institutionalism and his constitutional powers and appearing at the protest forum. Radev actually has been the one-man ruler of Bulgaria via interim cabinets since the spring of 2021.

Pro-Russian positions were voiced by functionaries in the left-wing BSP, which explicitly and adamantly took a stand against the provision of military assistance to Ukraine and threatened to affect the disbanding of the government coalition, of which it was a member. Both Radev and the BSP are prominent exponents of conservative positions, for example on such topics as migration and sexual minority rights, opposition to the Istanbul Convention, etc.

Conclusion

Although the early years of Bulgaria's democratic development were marked by a consensus regarding the state's European course of development and EU membership, the West-vs-Russia axis has remained in one way or another among as the principal public lines of division. These cleavages and their political manifestations have intensified following the actualization of Bulgaria's EU membership with the emergence of the first openly anti-European and pro-Russian party, „Attack". Other identical political actors have emerged in recent years, such as „Vazrazhdane" and „Bulgarian Ascent". Similar trends of reversal or return to the pro-Russian roots and embracing of dominantly conservative anti-liberal tendencies are also observable in other parties similar to BSP. Particularly alarming is the fact that politicians of such pro-Russian, anti-European and anti-democratic views occupy leading positions in the state, President Radev being the most demonstrative example.

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[26] Deutsche Welle 2022

Thus, a little more than 15 years from Bulgaria's EU accession and the emergence of the first openly anti-European and pro-Russian party, the state is de facto governed by individuals with anti-European and pro-Russian stance.

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