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The Social Context of the Post-Communist Transition in Bulgaria

Abstract: This article attempts to identify, describe, and explain the main historically shaped social factors that have influenced the post-communist transition in Bulgaria. Three groups of interrelated factors are of particular interest: the specific features of the former totalitarian regime, Bulgaria's social structure, and the cultural characteristics of Bulgarian society.

Keywords: transformation, Bulgaria, opposition, elite, politics, democracy

Introduction

First of all, it should be emphasized that the purpose of this paper is not to lay the foundations for any theory of transition in Bulgaria, as there have already been several such attempts (see [Prodanov 2012](#)). Furthermore, the analysis presented here will not be conducted from any particular established perspective, such as, for example, seeing various forms of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe as so-called criminal revolutions (e.g., [Sugarev et al. 2016](#); [Roth 2008](#); [Madiyar 2006](#)). Moreover, this paper does not aim to discuss the course of the transition in Bulgaria chronologically and comprehensively (many such works have already been published, e.g., [Andreev et al. 2019](#); [Kostov 2019](#); [Raychev and Stoychev 2008](#)). I adhere to the opinion that when analyzing such an unprecedented, complex, and still ongoing process as the “post-communist” transformation the approach should be one of “self-limiting theorizing,” that is, avoiding premature wide generalizations and resisting the temptation to create *ad hoc* theories and general concepts. Rather, the processes should be interpreted historically and comparatively, with limited reference to existing theories but with consideration of various particular factors that create the context for changes in a given country ([Frentzel-Zagórska 2001](#)).

This article's aim is primarily to identify and explain the main historically shaped social factors that have created the socio-political context and determined the type, course, and specific features of the transition in Bulgaria. I am mainly interested in three groups of interrelated factors: the specificities of the former totalitarian regime in Bulgaria; Bulgaria's social structure, which was largely conditioned and formed by the totalitarian period; and certain historically formed cultural characteristics of Bulgarian society.

It has to be noted at the beginning that at the turn of the twentieth to twenty-first century Bulgaria ranked very low—though still higher than certain other post-Soviet countries—

in regard to citizen support for democracy as the supposedly best political system. Not only did citizens have a very low opinion of Bulgarian democracy (Fuchs and Roller 2006) but various objective indices also gave a very low rating to the actual functioning of the country's democratic system (Słomczyński et al. 2016: 124–127). Further discussion should shed some light on the reasons for this.

The Bipolarity of Bulgarian Politics

We are witnessing and participating in epoch-making changes in Central and Eastern Europe. For almost half a century—a considerable period of time at the end of the past millennium—Europe was divided by an “Iron Curtain,” in a state of political division and antagonism. This political, ideological, and military division applied to the whole world: it was a global characteristic. The current transition, which is ongoing and far from complete in Bulgaria, has not been just a sort of political shift from a certain form of dictatorship or authoritarianism to democratic governance, as in Latin America or Africa (Schnitter and Kral 1992; O'Donnell et al. 1993; Tulchin 1995; Mohan and Zack-Williams 2004), but a general transformation of the entire socio-economic and political system—a transition from a communist, centrally planned economy to a capitalist market economy, and from an autocratic “people's democracy” to a liberal parliamentary democracy. This change has no precedent in human history. It set tasks for CEE societies that they had never dealt with before. Very importantly for us, especially in examining the Bulgarian case, is that the starting positions of the various state-socialist countries were quite different at the beginning of the changes.

The breakdown of the state-socialist system was such that a number of authors have defined the changes in Central and Eastern Europe as revolutionary (Ash 2001; Dahrendorf 1992), though some have preferred to call it a “self-limiting revolution” (Staniszki 1984; Smolar 2009) or, as Vaclav Havel used to say, a “velvet revolution” (Wolchik 1990; Shepherd 2000; Williams 2009). Self-limiting or velvet, it was not a bloody revolution anyway. After a long history of fierce and sometimes bloody political conflicts in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, both communist authorities and opposition circles in these countries perceived the situation as a stalemate and reluctantly decided to negotiate the rules for a future transition in a “civilized way.” Nevertheless, the scope of the transition was revolutionary indeed. It was a replacement of entire ineffective social, economic, and political structures and relationships with completely new ones. This involved radical changes in economic, political, administrative, and social institutions, and generated chain reactions in the redefinition of the values, interests, strivings, and positions of various social groups, strata, and communities. The inevitable clash between them has brought forth more political and social conflicts. In other countries than Bulgaria, many issues were peacefully negotiated between the Communist Party and opposition movement because both sides were strong enough that neither had a clearly dominant position, at that time at least. This was not the case in Bulgaria, where former communist “apparatchiks” dominated the discussions with a weak, practically newborn, and inexperienced opposition.

The revolutionary (meaning both radical and overwhelming) character of the transformation is important for our discussion insofar as it gave an initial impetus to the democratic

process and simultaneously predetermined the course and nature of the process. As already stated, Bulgarians have a negative opinion of their country's democratic system and demonstrate relatively low support for democracy in general. This seems to be compatible with the fears expressed in Claus Offe's (1991) very widely read paper "Capitalism by Democratic Design?" which was published at the very beginning of the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Offe expressed the opinion, based on ill-fated earlier communist reforms, that a radical post-communist transformation, leading to a convergence between East and West, would be very difficult mainly because of the necessity for a parallel transformation of the political system (building liberal democracy) and the economy (building democratic capitalism). The success in one dimension could hamper desired changes in the other. It would seem that this complication can be solved only by agents of change that include at least two different interest groups—the pro-democratic and pro-privatization ones. Both should be strong enough to insist on the necessary compromises. This does not preclude some reformers putting equal weight on both sides of the changes. Richter (1991) stressed that democratization may result from the general requirements of modernizing and westernizing an economy. However, he did not write explicitly that the interests of the post-communist elites would have to involve implementing the kind of economic development and modernization that require democratization. This has not happened in Bulgaria so far.

Countries such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland had a significant tradition of mass protests (which were sometimes quite bloody), and a more or less organized opposition, as well as relatively liberal communist parties with pro-modernization (officially "revisionist") tendencies. Such forces, which had a substantial influence on the success of the future transformation, did not exist in Bulgaria. In the Bulgarian case, the self-limited revolution began with a coup enacted not by any "anti-Party" opposition, mass protest, or non-Party intellectual groups but by the more flexible and less orthodox faction of the Bulgarian Communist Party. This fact determined the basic features of the ensuing changes. It allowed the formerly dominant, well-established members of the Communist Party apparatus to sit at the "Round Table" together with the weak and freshly formed opposition. These negotiations legitimized the basic political actors and the bipolar structure of the political space (the Bulgarian Socialist Party, that is, the former Communist Party, on the one hand, and the Union of Democratic Forces on the other). Almost immediately after the beginning of the democratic changes, a bipolar political model was formed.

The issue was which political force was supposed to accomplish the transition toward democracy and a market economy. The Round Table negotiations in Bulgaria served essentially to legitimize the presence of the previous elite and institutions, as well as new persons chosen by that elite in the course of the transition. The reforms were therefore initiated by a restricted circle of the former elite, which was directly connected to the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus of the old state, and was conducted so as to minimize any infringement on that circle's interests.

The "endogenous" model (Touraine et al. 1982) of social change in Western societies was replaced in Bulgaria by an "exogenous" model of change in post-communist society, where the substantive part of active agents—if not a majority—were part of the old political elite and used the slowly changing state apparatus to design and implement reforms. It is precisely this flow direction in the democratic process—that is, from the political sphere

toward the social base—that has created the basic axis of social and political conflict in Bulgaria: between the state and civil society.

The reason is that the state apparatus became the basic agent for designing and implementing the transformation program. The state apparatus, from the beginning of the changes up till the present day, has remained overall intact, both in terms of the continuity of a substantial part of its cadres and in terms of its structure, normative regulations, and ways of functioning. This is why so many fundamental political issues have remained unresolved for years and why there have been quasi-reforms and half-hearted political changes without sufficient corresponding transformations toward a market economy.

Together with such a “quasi-revolutionary” transition (and to some extent because of it), the second essential and predetermining feature of the changes has been that the disruption of the Soviet system found some societies of Central and Eastern Europe more or less unprepared for the impending changes (Lengyel 1994). That unpreparedness included, among other things, a lack of adequate theoretical basis for analyzing and shaping the ongoing changes and lack of adequate public imagination of what was happening. Here is how George Soros comments on the initial period of these processes in Eastern Europe: “We have been surprised by the course of events, because we lacked the basic criteria for understanding them. A revolution is taking place before our eyes, and we don’t even have at our disposal a theory of historical processes” (Soros 1992). In Bulgaria, this unpreparedness was associated with a lack of an established intellectual and political opposition, or even of communist “revisionists” of the kind who had been active for a long time in some countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, I do not agree with certain Bulgarian political scientists who consider that the end of Soviet dominance placed all post-communist European countries at the same starting point in regard to changing their political and economic system.

The “abrupt downfall” of communism also found the West unprepared. Being used to its confrontation with communism and snug in its own feeling of superiority, the West remained carefree and self-assured, as if it existed on a different planet. It is now obvious that the supposedly separate planets constituted in fact the opposite ends of a single indivisible world (Djilas 1999: 174).

The Communist Past and the Starting Point

Andrei Konchalovski (1994: 150) remarked that the confrontation between the concepts of an open and closed society proved very convenient for both sides. In my opinion, the West had the capacity to overthrow the communist system even before 1989. The West showed real interest in a change of status quo only when the need to globalize the commodity and finance markets reached a critical point. Then the West took an active part in destroying the communist system and building a different system. At the beginning, while offering moral advice on human rights, free elections, and privatization, as well as some material assistance, the West ultimately failed to grasp the nature and specifics of what was happening beyond the former Iron Curtain. Hence the kinds of assistance offered to most Eastern European countries followed a much used pattern (for instance, a model based on

the Polish case was mechanically transposed onto other countries without regard for the specifics of the regimes and political culture there, hence without substantial results). The problem was compounded by economic stagnation, as well as by the emerging crisis in the West of a liberal system on the one hand and welfare state on the other.

However, this was only one side of the coin. Despite the development of “Sovietology,” empirical and theoretical knowledge about “real socialism” in different Soviet-bloc European countries was and still is insufficient. This is one of the causes for the considerable explicatory weakness of contemporary sociology with regard to the systemic transformation in Eastern Europe, especially in more recent times. This is particularly true for Bulgaria. On the range of totalitarian Soviet-bloc regimes, Bulgaria was situated much nearer to the model of Soviet Bolshevism than such countries as Poland, Hungary, or even Czechoslovakia. Bulgaria hence falls in the category of countries where the tissue of social relations was more severely damaged by the totalitarian order, and where a heavier burden was left over from the past in all social dimensions (Zlatkov 1990, 1998, 1998a). We therefore need to go back to the past and to continue its study. Such retrospection always has a definite heuristic value for understanding the specifics of our various transitions.

At the start of the 1990s, after the fall of communist totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe, all post-communist countries in the region were confronted with the same problem: which road of transformation to take and what kind of capitalism and social development, generally speaking, to choose. The unprecedented transition away from political and ideological totalitarianism—with its inherent economic organization and military confrontation with the rest of the world—posed a number of problems for which history had no ready solutions.

Because of this and because of the lack of sufficient historical and sociological reflection on the past period, some people wrongly assumed that, with the political abolishment of the former system (or rather, in Bulgaria, the formal act of abolishment), the countries and their respective societies in the central and eastern part of Europe were placed in new but equal conditions, which would permit them to advance at the same pace.

With the lapse of time since the starting point, significant differences between the countries have become apparent and have placed them in much different positions in the world division of labor and in global politics. In the last five or more years, Bulgaria’s lagging far behind has led to enduring questions in the mass consciousness. Why did our reforms not succeed? What was the sense of the whole transition, when its end is still not in sight and it has turned into a string of frustrations in the personal lives of Bulgarians? Why did it turn out this way? Why did we turn out to be the failing pupils of Europe despite our relatively not very bad starting position in 1990–1992? Why did other countries of Central Europe succeed, while we have failed?

Why has Bulgaria’s Transition Pattern Differed?

The answer to the above questions may be found at different levels. Some believe that all our problems are due to the social rigidity produced by the polar confrontation between political parties and by the paramount role of former communists. Others see the personal

incompetence of politicians as the cause. A number of rather authoritative figures think that the situation is a result of applying inadequate models of transition. I will not confront each of these opinions with the reality. Obviously, there is some truth in each of them, but they are all, at the least, insufficiently comprehensive. The explanatory insufficiency of these opinions stems from the fact that they all fail to take into account some essential sociological properties of the society modeled by communist totalitarianism and left as a legacy of the former regime.

The Bulgarian form of totalitarianism and the characteristics of the social pyramid inherited from the communist period must be taken into account. The legacy of the previous system consists above all in the shape of the social structure: its specificity is that the social pyramid is weakly supported in the middle. I am referring to the form of the pyramid and also to the configuration and subordination of social agents—factors that are preconditions for the functioning and reproduction of certain patterns of social inequalities.

Social inequalities stem from mutually connected processes of building and crystallizing a certain kind of social structure and institutional channels of social mobility. The basic aim of my discussion is to trace the interaction between social mobility and changes in the social structure from a dynamic perspective.

Do all the traits of Bulgaria's changes result from specific characteristics of the transition itself or are there additional causes? If there are additional causes, are they genetically implanted by the difference in forms of communist totalitarianism and by social conditions that have limited and predetermined the kind and speed of the changes?

The former socialist countries used to be called the "Soviet bloc" or the "socialist camp," and thereby their unity, their sameness, was indicated. The differences between them were basically ascribed to their varying economic starting positions at the beginning of the "socialist construction." In fact, the differences were rooted in the characteristics of the totalitarian regimes in each country.

No matter how similar the regimes were in their essential features as totalitarian communist states, with regard to a number of other factors—historical, socio-cultural, psychological, and geopolitical (the duration of communist domination was also of no small importance)—the concrete manifestation of totalitarianism in each of these countries differed significantly and, more importantly, had varying consequences for their societies.

The most elementary example is that the regimes of Janos Kadar in Hungary and Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania were so different as to be incomparable. The specific forms and functioning of the particular regimes determined the differences in the starting conditions of their societies, which in turn determined the character and speed of the transformation changes. It is superfluous to point out that an in-depth knowledge of these conditions is of great practical importance and that had such knowledge been widespread at the beginning, as a necessary corrective tool, quite a few of our problems might have been avoided from the very start.

For our present analysis it is important to trace those of our social characteristics that influenced Bulgaria's belated transition and the continuing deformations of social-group structure.

Before discussing the damages inflicted by the Bulgarian communist regime on the country's social structure and on social relations in general, we should clearly bear in mind

the differences between that regime and similar regimes in Central Europe (specifically in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, which were generally recognized as the most successful cases of transition—at least until the latest authoritarian turn).

In Bulgaria, communist totalitarianism was much closer to the ideal model of a Stalinist dictatorship than in other countries (Zlatkov 1990). Ours was a far more “Soviet” kind of regime (one that copied the Soviet regime much more closely and was much more directly subordinated to it) than those of the above-mentioned Central European countries. The Bulgarian model included features such as concentration camps and the physical and social annihilation of entire categories of the social structure, for instance, proprietors, and the intellectual stratum, which was relatively small before the war. From its beginning the Bulgarian regime was considerably more repressive than its counterparts in the Central European countries; it cut short any attempts at dissident activity.

The means of controlling the minds and will of people had attained an exceptional level of perfection. This was the particular aspect of Bulgaria and Sofia that immediately struck me and left an imprint on my perception of the regime and of the effacing of the human personality that these methods had achieved: nowhere in the capital was there a trace of police or military... Here in Bulgaria, due to the longer and systematic crushing of minds and conditioning of people, there was no need [for the regime] to display force and power (Ferreira 1997: 21).

These were the observations made by a former Portuguese ambassador to Bulgaria, who compared Bulgaria to Latin America, especially to Cuba.

An essential circumstance is that, in comparison to the others, the Bulgarian regime was much more centered around a single person for 35 out of its 45 years: it was headed by the same man, Todor Zhivkov. Overall, the isolation of the country was much greater, as was its break with the traditions and values of European civilization. During the whole socialist period, of all its European counterparts, the regime here was the most dependent on and closest to the Soviet Union. As a result, the social fabric of our society, which was like the Soviet one, was far more strongly affected by pathological deformations than were the societies of the Central European socialist countries.

The most significant societal dimension of these damages—the most far-reaching and hard to overcome—was the dehumanization of social, public, and interpersonal relations and the ensuing demoralization of all strata of the population. This was mainly due, in my opinion, to the following two circumstances, which were more strongly present in Bulgaria than in the Central European states.

First was the breach of continuity in the basic regulators of social order and of group and individual behavior: law, traditions, and religion. The communist state took over ever more functions and went on to regulate all spheres of social activity. Religion was rejected and replaced by official atheism (in contrast to the role played by the Church in this period in Poland). Traditions were pushed aside by the “socialist system of rituals” (even Santa Claus was replaced by “Grandpa Frost”), and law was turned into a basic means for legitimizing the domination of one social group over the entire society.

The second feature consisted in the rupture and destruction of a number of social ties, relationships, and grassroots organizations, and their replacement by a pyramidal network of artificial organizations and structures (administrative and ideological, centralized, and external to the individual’s natural mode of organization) from the highest to the lowest level, which destroyed the normal interaction between groups and individuals and placed

the personality in a strong psychological dependence. Steven Fish calls this phenomenon the “destruction of horizontal bonds between individuals and groups of individuals” (Fish 1995: 22). In other words, unlike democratic “civil society,” its Bulgarian equivalent system of social relations was state controlled.

As an illustration of this thesis we can cite Petko Simeonov’s analysis (Simeonov 1991). He notes that in addition to the power of the central government in regard to employment, salaries, prices, privileges, public approval, and personal success, the government had such “powerful, and threatening means” as possession of full information concerning a person, control over a person’s important ventures, control over all institutions (lack of public control), and even control over publicity about the actions of the centralized administration, with the ability to maintain secrecy about events and processes in society and the world. The state restricted the flow of news, as well as all initiatives and ventures of individuals, to strictly determined and controlled channels.

The basic means for achieving these two features was to bring about a loss of group identity and of social commitment and solidarity. As a consequence of the latter, there was a total devaluation of moral and legal norms. A strong degree of alienation and mass anomie set in. After the official communist network was abolished, symptoms of alienation and anomie became manifest and flourished in different areas and forms: large emigration, growth of crime, and the escape into quasi-social niches such as sects and nationalist formations. The latter proved to be not so much a product of the formerly suppressed urge for national identity as a substitute for the natural need for social cohesion.

Besides the mass anomie, some authors point to the blocking of reforms, the plundering of state enterprises, and the slow course of privatization in communist times (Katsarski 1998: 79–96). I acknowledge the presence of all these phenomena but consider them to be a continuation of the processes of mass anomie during the socialist period rather than, as Katsarski states, “a tacit compromise between the basic groups and strata.” It is important to understand that these processes and phenomena are stronger in those societies where totalitarian regimes were, generally speaking, stronger, such as in the Bulgarian case.

Bulgaria’s lack of civil society, as a legacy of the socialist period, was also one of the basic differences between this country and the Central European ones—a difference that was decisive for the course of transformation. A basic characteristic differentiating countries during the communist era was the development and strength of civil society, especially in Bronislaw Geremek’s sense of the term as one having “a purposeful general programme for opposition to communism.” In Poland, such a civil society appeared in the second half of the 1970s in the form of an increasingly organized mass movement (Geremek 1996: 242). These, among other emerging movements, were the seeds of civil society which were growing in number during late communism in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, but not in Bulgaria.

The lack of tradition of mass opposition in Bulgaria proved to be the missing element of the transformation here, while in the Polish and Czechoslovak case it proved to be the most useful resource for change. Here, we should also discuss the role played by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which was quite different from the role played by the Catholic Church in Poland, where it was a pillar of civil society. In Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church was an appendage of communist power.

When assessing the impact of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the transformation, I do not want to get engaged in a theoretical discussion over whether religion in general facilitates or hampers democratization (e.g., Hayens 1998; Kraynak 2001; Motzkin and Fisher 2008) or over the degree to which the Orthodox religion is compatible with democracy and its values. Opinions in the latter respect vary quite substantially. Some theoreticians claim that Orthodoxy lacks the characteristics that would enhance public support for liberal democracy of the Western type, mostly because of values imbedded in the tradition of the Byzantine empire (e.g., Huntington 1998). At the other extreme is the opinion that the Orthodox religion's support for communitarian democracy (not necessarily modern and liberal democracy) is deeply rooted in the inner theological ground of this religion (e.g., Papanikolaou 2003). Finally, a middle-of-the-road opinion seems to prevail about the ambivalent attitude of Orthodoxy to democracy. The trinitarian theology of Orthodoxy positively values freedom and equality, and so is supposed to take a largely positive view of democracy. However, this is not necessarily the case in regard to such democratic values as pluralism, diversity, tolerance, and competition, about which many Orthodox believers and churches feel more ambivalent, if not negative (e.g., Prodromou 2004).

Lech Wałęsa pointed out three main factors that brought about the downfall of communism: the creation of the trade union Solidarity in Poland in 1980, the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and, importantly, the earlier election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope in 1978. This election strongly reinforced the Polish Church, which had already been playing an important role in protecting and strengthening the political opposition. The situation was quite different in Bulgaria, where the Church, being much more weakened by aggressive communist atheism, was more afraid of the regime and thus played the role of loyal subordinate to the authorities.

The following step of analysis explaining the processes of disintegration, marginalization, and even lumpenization of substantial groups of the social structure in the transition has to concern the specifics of this structure at the start of the changes.

The totalitarian social order, which lasted for nearly half a century, was characterized by a specific kind of social inequality and relations between social groups. This system was marked by inertia, that is, it changed slowly and with difficulty even when changes had taken place in the social basis that had produced it. The communist regime, like any regime, could not simply float in midair, in a social void. It needed a social basis of its own, and created it by producing a large, salaried party apparatus, an overgrown state administration, and a large repressive apparatus. These groups replaced the relatively small group of Bulgarian pre-war intelligentsia and created a sort of interconnected "educated party, governmental, bureaucratic, management" stratum rather than any kind of communist intelligentsia like those that emerged in post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Poland. Such a communist—and often "revisionist"—intelligentsia complemented the strong remains of the old pre-war intelligentsia and adopted increasingly oppositional attitudes in some Central and Eastern European countries (Frentzel-Zagórska and Zagórski 1989). Both groups were absent in Bulgaria, where a strong intellectual opposition—or at least intellectual "revisionist" groups evolving from the communist party—did not emerge.

Of course, when the transformation began, the representatives of the Bulgarian political-managerial-bureaucratic groups could not radically change their mentality or

behavior. Especially as during the period of state socialism they had grown into a “class for itself” (in Marxist terminology)—a class most significantly defined as one having the awareness of shared group interests and established mechanisms for their realization. Herein lies the asymmetry of social relationships in Bulgaria: during the socio-political changes one group defended and satisfied its interest at all costs, while all the other groups were amorphous with regard to their interest. Even if some among them were aware of their interests, they could not defend them, for they lacked the mechanisms to do so.

In this connection, we must point out a sociological problem *par excellence*, namely the social reproduction of the nomenklatura in the decades of socialism. Zygmunt Bauman defined the matter with precision: in the communist countries individual mobility was effectively “nationalized,” which means the state held a monopoly on the allocation of social positions and personal development (Bauman 1989). In such a system, the normal reproduction of the elite through a mobility of free circulation determined by human and social capital or a meritocratic mechanism is replaced by politically controlled—if not directed—social mobility.

This resulted in a devaluation of the quality of the elite under communism. Gradually a career in the apparatus became the most attractive path for those who were not particularly capable but were conformist. Such people used ideological activity as a vehicle for rising to higher power positions, which in turn provided them with corresponding levels of privileges.

Another basic barrier to the transformation of the system inherited from the Bulgarian state-socialist social pyramid (one that was most often discussed at the start of the changes) was the lack of a real middle class. Some authors consider that the former intelligentsia played this role, but this is disputable in Bulgaria, where such a group hardly existed. There was no such Bulgarian middle class that could have served as a basis for civil society thanks to their social and economic status, their abilities, interests, and spirit of initiative.

The main question here is why such strata have not even begun to emerge in Bulgaria while they have appeared in the Central European countries. Is it merely due to the lack of economic reforms here?

In fact, our social pyramid was much more deformed under the former regime than in the Central European countries. In Bulgaria, the middle range of the pyramid was smaller due to the more pronouncedly Stalinist character of our regime, that is, due to nationalization, collectivization, and coercive industrialization. These practically deprived society of any real private sector, of liberal free professions, and of an independent Church—all of which played an important role in Central Europe.

A step toward the formation of a middle class in Bulgaria could have been the restitution of property, including of land, but such efforts produced only meager results. As far as land restitution is concerned, various groups of the former power impeded it in any way they could. Moreover, no capital was available to run and develop private farms and small businesses properly.

In addition to this deformation of the social pyramid and the overweighting of its upper section, the collectivization of agriculture, and accelerated industrialization, with its strong emphasis on heavy industry, brought about negative changes in the two main groups of manual labor: the workers and peasants. Industrialization pumped out the demographic resources of Bulgarian agriculture and the present complete restoration of land property

no longer serves the formation of an independent and efficient farming class. Such a group can hardly be formed out of the few, elderly people remaining in villages, while the return of their descendants would be a complicated and difficult process. On the other hand, a strong peasant element was injected into the large cities and the working class, resulting in a decrease in the quality of the latter and in low labor activity.

Moreover, the excessive concentration of workers around large and inefficient enterprises proved an impediment to structural change. The shutting down of these enterprises and the ensuing unemployment of large masses of people was enough to topple any government, and this was one of the basic reasons why the Videnov government (1995–1997) did not dare to conduct the necessary structural and managerial changes in the economy and why the following governments met with enormous difficulties in this respect.

Another specific feature of the communist Bulgarian social structure—and one particularly important for the course of changes and for the nature of social inequality in the country—was a result of the interaction between the political system of state socialism and the functioning of its economic basis. The economy was characterized by extreme centralization (total and uncontrolled state power over it), combined with such a constant shortage of commodities that it was defined as a “deficit economy” or an “economy of shortage” (Kornai 1980) even long before 1980 and especially afterwards. This characteristic caused a “flourishing of cynicism and corruption” among both the political elite and part of society (Simeonov 1991: 110), and social dimorphism (Wnuk-Lipinski 1993: 53–72). It may be said that a kind of social strata emerged that operated a “shady,” if not outright illegal, economy under state socialism. Economic and other resources, as well as information channels, were taken and concentrated outside of public control in the hands of those operating in the remaining post-communist institutions or in a shadow or illegal economy. At the turn of the millennium, Bulgarians—more often than citizens of other post-communist countries, including even Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—were aware of strong social conflicts between those who obeyed the law and those who did not (Zagórski 2006: 7).

The last important consequence of the functioning of the Bulgarian communist regime is inequality in terms of people’s vertical dependence. The more a regime is characterized by the dependence of people on its apparatus, the greater the relative impoverishment of the population.

The societies and people of the countries of the former Soviet Union, as well as in Romania, Albania, and Bulgaria, were already poorer in state socialist times than those in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia, though the latter was regionally very differentiated. Poland seemed to be somewhere in-between in this respect. The poorer a society, the greater its degree of lumpenization, of spiritual impoverishment, and of the degradation of personal demands, and the larger its marginalized groups.

Another very important difference between Bulgaria and the countries of Central Europe was the interrupted process of “socialist modernization.” The process consisted of early socialist industrialization. It lasted till the end of the 1960s, after which it stopped, if not reversed backward. Even if we assume that state socialism brought about a kind of early modernization of society, this would be true only with regard to the swift mass industrialization. After that industrialization, the system acted contrary to the normal course of world civilization processes.

Here too, Poland may serve as an example at the other end of the range. Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski (1993: 17) wrote in this respect that communist Poland was farthest from the ideal type (in the Weberian sense) of monocentric society (Wnuk-Lipinski 1993: 17). In Poland, though industrialization was still underway in the 1970s, it was directed more than before at producing consumer goods rather than investment goods. While this process occurred at the expense of national debt, it was associated with limited but growing openness, wider relations with the West, and with deliberate if not very successful attempts to modernize economic management.

The further a regime is from the ideal Soviet type, the more the respective society is open, especially to the exchange of ideas and people. This feature allowed a limited modernization under communism in Poland. Bulgaria (together with the Soviet Union, Albania, and Romania) was at the other end of the range: here there was complete political, cultural, and informational isolation and lack of exchange with the external world. (I leave aside the case of East Germany, which was atypical in many respects). All this brought about a cultural and civilizational lag in Bulgaria and even a regress from the level the country had attained before the establishment of communist power.

Piotr Sztompka (1994) offers a good methodological scheme for analysis of the civilizational and cultural context of changes—a scheme that permits defining the differences that determined the nature and speed of changes in the former communist countries. He points out that socialism had produced a certain bloc cultural syndrome. Each society established its own means of adapting to the syndrome. The differences in this respect were based on the varying strength of influence of three cultural contexts: the national, regional, and global. As a counterweight to the general bloc culture “Poland had strong national traditions, encoded in Polish Catholicism and preserved by the Church, and a greater openness than other countries to the world, a more liberal flow of ideas and people” (Sztompka 1994: 14). For Hungary, Sztompka sees the tradition of the Habsburg Empire as a cultural counterweight to the communist bloc culture. The situation was quite different in Bulgaria: the regional and national tradition acted not as a counterbalance to bloc culture, but rather as a factor aligned with this culture and enforcing it. In addition to the political factors mentioned above, we may add the tradition of various forms of collectivism in the Bulgarian countryside, the traditionally strong relations between the Orthodox Church and the state, and traditionally warm attitudes toward Russia, stemming from the Russian contribution to Bulgaria’s fight for freedom from Turkish occupation.

In addition to the lack of preparedness, which is now pointed out as one of the major causes of difficulties in the political and economic transformation of post-communist societies, there has been yet another feature determining the nature and slow rate of reforms: the values of Homo Sovieticus have not disappeared, although they have been strongly undermined. I do not intend to describe this syndrome, but I must point out its present-day manifestations, which to some degree weigh down the course of current and future changes in Bulgaria. Foremost, a strong egalitarian attitude, in a crude socialist form, prevails in the minds of wide circles of Bulgarians, irrespective of their social standing. Moreover, as Hankis says, the “infantile irresponsibility” created by state socialism permitted people to live in a clear and simple world and to hide from the dreary problems of modern times; it has continued to prove comfortable and attractive for many people even today (Hankis 1994: 73).

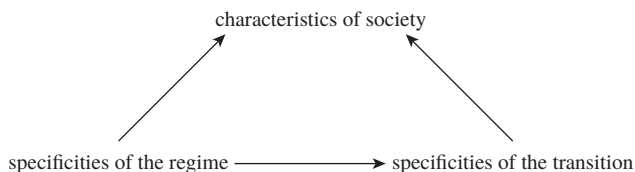
The lack of a Western European-type system of values, moral norms, and cultural standards in the mass consciousness of post-communist societies is one of the important causes of anomie, of people's inability to orient themselves under the new conditions, and of their difficulty to self-identify themselves and their long-term interests. Thus they have a desire to "escape from freedom," as Erich Fromm puts it. The differences in this respect between the nations strongly influenced the way the reforms were conducted and the way the capitalist system started to be built. In general, this has led to a great space between Bulgaria and other European post-communist countries. The reforms half-heartedly implemented by Bulgaria's post-communist governing circles have played a detrimental role in regard to social stratification and inequality.

The Political Regime, Society, and the Transformation—an Attempt to Generalize

The former state-socialist countries were collectively called the "Soviet bloc" or the "Socialist camp" in order to indicate their supposedly monolithic unity, their sameness. The differences between the countries were basically ascribed to their different economic positions at the commencement of "building socialism." The truth, however, was that the differences were rooted in the characteristics of the totalitarian regimes across the various countries as well. Not without reason, East Germany was called the wealthiest (though most grim) and Poland the most cheerful barrack in the "socialist camp." Neither of these things could be said about Bulgaria and Romania, despite their partial opening because of international tourism, mostly from other state-socialist countries. No matter how many essential features state-socialist countries had in common—features that could generally be defined as "communist totalitarianism" or "communist authoritarianism" and a centrally planned economy—their manifestation had significant specificity due to a number of historical, socio-cultural, and geopolitical conditions. The length of time the communist parties ruled over society was also not negligible. Of more importance at present, these features have had different consequences for the current situation as well.

The specific modes of functioning of communist regimes determined the differences in starting conditions for the post-communist transformations, which in turn determined the nature and pace of changes. The great practical importance of an in-depth understanding of these variations hardly needs to be demonstrated. If such an understanding had been used to correct the form of the transformation at its beginning, Bulgarians would have been spared a considerable share of their adversities.

For the needs of my analysis, I will use a simple analytical scheme:



It is essential to identify those characteristics of Bulgarian society that caused the slow pace of the transition, particularly the factor that continued to distort the social structure,

namely the growing marginalization of certain strata and socio-professional groups. We should be very aware how Bulgaria differed in this respect from other regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

As we have already said above, our totalitarian state-socialist system was much closer to the ideal model (the Stalinist dictatorship), and included concentration camps and the physical and social annihilation of whole categories of the social structure (Zlatkov 1990).

The next sociologically significant difference between Bulgaria and other CEE countries was the interruption of the multi-faceted processes of modernization (in the Weberian sense) of a monocentric society (Wnuk-Lipinski 1993: 17). The more distant a regime was from the ideal Soviet type, the more open the country was, especially in terms of the exchange of ideas and people. As I have already said, such openness—even if limited—was a precondition for some forms of modernization in Central and Eastern Europe. Bulgaria (together with the Soviet Union, Albania, and Romania) were at the other end of the continuum, with almost complete cultural and informational isolation, and lack of exchange with the outside world. Moreover, unlike Romania and Albania, Bulgaria was fully dependent politically on the Soviet Union. All this produced a cultural and civilizational lag, even a regress, compared to conditions in pre-war Bulgaria, before communist rule. It is no coincidence that this has led eminent researchers to general conclusions about the importance of the international context for the theoretical framework of the social transformation.

The influence of Soviet-bloc culture consisted in a complex system of values and their manifestation in social relations and social action at all three levels. Macro-, meso- and micro-incompetence, as a negation of the civilizational competence typical of Western civilization, was present in the following dimensions: a) market culture; b) legal culture; c) democratic culture; d) the culture of discourse; e) organizational culture; f) technological culture; g) ecological culture; and h) the culture of everyday life. A separate accounting of how far we have moved from society's pre-communist condition should be done for each of these dimensions.

Unpreparedness has to be indicated as one of the main causes of difficulty in the political and economic transformation of post-communist societies. But there is one more circumstance, common to such countries in transition, that determines the pace and quality of the changes: the fact that the world of values of *Homo Sovieticus*, although strongly undermined, has not disappeared.

In those last years under communism, the “deficit economy” brought about flourishing cynicism and corruption on the one hand, and enhanced social dimorphism on the other (Wnuk-Lipinski 1993: 53–72). It also led to the emergence of certain social strata that later became the driving force of the “shadow economy,” the main feature of which is that it eludes public control and concentrates resources (economic, informational, etc.). These strata are now fundamental to what is considered to be the mistaken model of transition in our country.

The last significant social effect of the functioning of a given communist regime in regard to social stratification is that the more a regime possesses the above-mentioned characteristic, the greater is the relative and absolute impoverishment of its population. And the poorer a society is, the more lumpenized it is in terms of cultural impoverishment, decreased needs, growth of marginal groups, lack of civil society, and so forth.

Another set of factors can be derived, to various degrees, from the tendencies described above, though they were determined by other causes as well. These are social-psychological correlates of the structure and functioning of society during the previous system. After the disappearance of their ideological and political determinants, these correlates have continued to exist as independent social facts. In turn, they determine many different elements of people's activity and mentality.

Here, I am not considering these factors in the global sense in which Fukuyama views them in connection with the process of democratization (Fukuyama 1996). The specific social-psychological correlates of the socialist way of life that need to be considered are those that proved to be obstacles to the radical change of society after the start of the transformation. For instance, Zhelyo Vladimirov definitely sees these obstacles as having a fundamental counteractive effect on democracy and the market; he describes them in general as "a cultural legacy of communism" (it is not clear, however, whether he is referring only to Bulgaria or to all the post-communist countries) (Vladimirov 1999). He pays special attention to mass culture under communism and to "the values of the late nomenklatura" (the group produced by a formal list of positions in politics, public administration, and the economy for which candidates had to obtain approval from persons on precisely defined levels of the communist party apparatus) (see: Ibid: 138–144, 167–174). I agree with him, but believe some additional factors should be taken into consideration. Prominent among these is that the past Bulgarian regime created a type of personality known as "Homo Sovieticus," who embodied the general features of mass communist culture but had some specific characteristics as well. This type of person did not disappear with the abolishment of the political foundation that had created him. In addition to the simplified egalitarian attitudes mentioned above, and infantile irresponsibility, another important characteristic of Homo Sovieticus is authoritarianism, a feature that has come to be the focus of analyses recently in connection with the course of systemic changes (Mach 1998).

In discussing the value system of the late communist nomenklatura (especially if we assume that it was gradually spreading to the mass of people), I should add that these values were not formed solely by the inner development of the system. They were reinforced by the fact that the authorities obtained huge loans from the West and these loans began to corrupt not only them but also larger parts of the society. The loans gave the nomenklatura self-confidence and created the hope that modernization could be achieved without a change in the basic system of values. Subsequently, this would prove damaging both in regard to creating a greedy nomenklatura and in terms of the indebtedness weighing on the societies. It would become a social ill that bred corruption and criminality in the mass consciousness for years to come.

Such factors as the more liberal mass culture and the values that were shared by members of the "reformist" or even "revisionist" nomenklatura in CEE countries but were slow to emerge in the South-East countries make it difficult to identify the determinants of change in all the former state-socialist countries, because the complex of factors was not common to all. Therefore, it seems that Sztompka's scheme, as described above, is far more adequate to our purpose. After being further developed by establishing a continuum for all dimensions, the scheme might allow for the position of each of the countries at

the start of changes and at the present time to be located. It would then be possible to assess to what extent the traditional virtues that Polikarov proposes we should return to—“industriousness, studiousness, qualification, national dignity, responsibility, common sense, conscientious discipline, honesty, humaneness, altruism” (Polikarov 1998: 17)—are in harmony with the dimensions of civilizational competence indicated above (see pp. 11–13).

All these groups of factors determined the kind, direction, and pace of changes, and caused Bulgaria to lag behind the Central European countries (the Visegrad Four).

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