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GRUPOS DE INVESTIGACIÓN



FROM TOTALITARIANISM TO DEMOCRACY IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The transition from a totalitarian regime to a democratic political system in Bulgaria has its particularities. They are based on specifics as history, geographical location, international situation, political culture, economy etc. Liberal democracy nowadays has been criticized and challenged as governance for the unsucces in certain spheres. Security has replaced freedom as a core value. Totalitarian political ideologies are not possible, but there exist other challenges to democracy in Bulgaria.

Keywords

Totalitarianism – Communism – Transition – Democracy – Open society

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Introduction

After the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule, the country went through several forms of governance. By the Constitution of the Bulgarian Principality (Tarnovo Constitution) from 1879, the country was declared to be a hereditary, constitutional monarchy with people's representation. The emergence and spread of communism after the October Revolution in 1917 had an impact in Bulgaria as well. After 1946 and following the enactment of a new constitution in 1947, Bulgaria was declared People's Republic of Bulgaria. A political regime bearing the characteristics of a totalitarian communist ideology was established on the territory of the state. A personality cult emerged in the Bulgarian society, the propaganda machine of the Communist Party shaped all aspects of the public relations and the repressive Committee for State Security in the country spied on "enemies" of the people's power. The adoption of the new constitution in 1971 strengthened the governing role of the Communist Party in the development of the society.

The changes into the socialist camp in the 1980s affected Bulgaria as well. The crisis in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc led to a transition into democratic political systems within those countries which until recently, were ruled by communist parties.

In Bulgaria there was a transition from totalitarian state to democratic system after 1989. This transition from totalitarianism to democracy in Bulgaria was controversial, continued and with uncertain outcome, but the direction of foreign and domestic policy development which has been taken, has no alternative.

Totalitarianism in the People's Republic of Bulgaria

Overall, Totalitarianism is defined as a regime in which "the government controls almost all aspects of citizen's life."¹ As stated by Iain McLean, totalitarianism is "a dictatorial form of centralized government that regulates every aspect of state and private behavior."²

The term is intended to designate communist and fascist regimes³.

One of the totalitarian ideologies with a major impact is communism while the most influential theoretician of the ideology is Karl Marx (1818-1883). He rejects utopian and immature forms of communism. According to him, true communism demands that by the abolition of the principle for private property, an interrelation between individuals on the one hand and individuals and nature on the other, would be established, which in turn would be characterized by true morality. Some other ideas are related to the production, which is cooperative as well as to the lack of distinction between mental and physical labor.

Since the upholders of the communism define it as a community as well, then this ideology represents a new and a different way of life which is based on cooperation and solidarity, and it is not only related to the abolition of the private property and wealth. In addition to these values, communism is associated with equality and fraternity, but also with freedom, which is seen as the simultaneously liberation of everyone subjected to exploitation

¹ Linda Cernak, *Totalitarianism* (North Mankato: ABDO, 2011), 12.

² Iain Mclean, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 501.

³ Iain Mclean, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics...* 501.

and oppression by the removal of the responsible for all of that institutions and structures. In this sense, communism represents a joint ownership of everything, including freedom.⁴

History reveals that the practical realization of these ideas has led to some of the most inhumane regimes of governance in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. After the Second World War, Bulgaria fell into the sphere of influence of the USSR. By the means of referendum, the form of government of the country was changed from a constitutional monarchy to a people's republic.

In the following years the state was governed by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCSP) in conformity with its totalitarian ideology. Nationalization and collectivization of property was being carried out, a planned economy was introduced, as a large part of the political, economic, intellectual and military elite of the country was brought to a trial by a specially established court, named the People's Court. A controversial industrialization was carried out. Labour camps for people disagreeing with the party line of government were created. Traditional Christian values were replaced by socialist ones and by the cult of the "leaders of the revolution". The repressive body of the Committee for State Security monitored the proper development of socialist society.

The next few decades were characterized by the rule of Todor Zhivkov who combined the major posts in the state. During this period, the People's Republic of Bulgaria is one of the most loyal allies of the USSR. The Communist Party applied all of the techniques and methods of the totalitarian communist ideology to change the society. The propaganda and the personality cult are executed on a satisfactory for the ruling level.

The demagogy and ineptitude of the ruling, along with the occurred changes in the international environment has led to the expected collapse of the attempt to build and establish a Soviet-model society in the late 1980's of the XXth century.

The period of transition in Bulgaria

There is not a definite assessment of the period of government of the Bulgarian Communist Party. There exist the nostalgia for the past times of totalitarianism in certain circles, which is being maintained by scientists and public figures associated with the previous regime. The remembrance of the operating factories, of the order and discipline, free education and health care are captivating for those who support the regime. At the other pole are those who completely reject the totalitarian regime because of its atrocity and inhumanity, and due to the economic downfall which caused the rule of the Communist Party.

There are differences of opinions among researchers, politicians and the society itself concerning the period of transition to liberal democracy and market economy in the country. More commonly, the time limits of the transition period are set since the fall from power of the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the BCP and Chairman of the State Council – Todor Zhivkov, to the accession of the Republic of Bulgaria to NATO (2004) and to the European Union (2007).

⁴ Deyvid Milar; Dzhanet Kolman; Uilyam Konali y Alan Rayan, Blekuel: Entsiklopedia na politicheskata misal. (Sofia: TsID, 1997).

The period from 1989 to 2007 is characterized by the frequent changes of governments; early elections; caretakers cabinets; active involvement in the political and economic life of people; associated with the totalitarian regime; hyperinflation; controversial privatization; currency board; emigration, etc. One of the challenges during this period was nationalism manifested by certain political parties in the country⁵. Despite of the difficult for the society times during these years, the basic principles of the liberal democracy, the market economy and the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country, have been developed and implemented. On reasonable grounds, it can be stated that “since the collapse of Communism, Bulgaria has managed to consolidate its democratic governance system with a stable Parliament, sound government structures, an active civil society, and a free media.”⁶

Democracy in the Republic of Bulgaria today

Modern democracy is a set of principles that need be followed in order for the political system to function properly. As a form of government, democracy is implemented differently in each country. It is characterized with certain particularities in Bulgaria, related to a number of factors. Systematically and structurally, all components of a democratic political system exist in the Republic of Bulgaria. The state is a parliamentary republic in the form of government and is unitary as a state system. The Bulgarian political system functions through majority rule (respecting the rights of the minority), constitutionalism, rule of law, separation of powers, pluralism (political, religious, etc.), elections (direct, equal, secret and universal), freedom, equality, etc.

There are some objective reasons that suggest the peculiarities of the political system and the results of its functioning in Bulgaria. They are related to:

- history;
- political culture;
- ideas and views peculiar to the Bulgarian society;
- international situation;
- geographical situation;
- economy;
- natural resources etc.

These are the factors which are at the core of the specific democracy which has been formed in Bulgaria after 1989. The transition from a totalitarian regime to democracy has created a sustainable democratic system in Bulgaria, and there exist no risk for the country of transition once again to authoritarian or totalitarian society, as the guarantees supporting this assertion are:

- the current active and basic principles of liberal democracy in Bulgaria;
- the country's membership in the European Union and NATO;
- the lack of a political ideology, such as communism, to provoke a change similar to the one which took place after the Second World War;
- the state of the international relations and the influence of the international law into their development;

⁵ Nikolay Popov; Aleksandar Katrandzhiev y Romyana Popova, “Rise of Nationalism as a Political Ideology in the Context of Globalization and Regionalization”, *Revista Inclusiones* Vol: 6 (2019): 214.

⁶ Jeannette Goehring, *Nations in Transit 2007: Democratization from Central Europe to Euroasia* (New York: Freedom House, 2007), 186.

- the technological revolution and digital competencies in the information and communication spheres of the society;
- the impossibility of a closed-type of society to be successful in the conditions of globalization and regionalization, etc.

Regardless the well-grounded criticism over liberal democracy in Bulgaria, it is stable in domestic and foreign policy nowadays.

Conclusion

Democracy in the Republic of Bulgaria is not endangered. As contenders of liberal democracy, authoritarianism and totalitarianism are able to manipulate as well as to mobilize masses more easily, but this proved to be an unstable phenomenon. Even emergencies such as economic and financial crises, terrorism, refugee and immigration crises, pandemics etc., are not able to discredit the existing political system, but reveal its adequacy and adaptability. It is beyond dispute that despite of the valid criticism, liberal democracy has no better alternative as a form of government and ideology. However, both in Bulgaria and as well as in the other countries democracy and the open society will have to adapt to the changing environment and new challenges.

Democratic political systems are part of the social system and are dependent upon it. The new challenges, technologies and respectively the new demands of the societies raise questions to politicians, who on their part, will need to provide adequate responses. Occasionally, totalitarian and authoritarian societies may have an advantage in the short term, but history explicitly reveals that the open society is more successful and with no actual competitor in the dynamic environment of contemporary social relations. Particularly in this environment innovative solutions at all system levels could be generated. Karl Popper is right in saying: „But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. We must go on into the unknown, uncertain and insecure, using what reason we may have to plan as well as we can for both security and freedom.”⁷

Nowadays, security has replaced freedom as a core value for a variety of reason, but despite that, the democratic, open societies are best placed to overcome the new challenges.

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⁷ Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies. (London and New York: Roudledge, 2002), 218.

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