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# Democracy in Bulgaria: still fragile after 30 years of transition



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# Perception of Democracy

Bulgarians' attitudes towards democracy and democratic transition have been complex and equivocal.<sup>1</sup> The trends emerging from polling have been consonant with the larger patterns characterizing Bulgarian political attitudes both in the more recent, post-communist and the more distant past. The most critical contradiction can be observed between the Bulgarians' overall **dissatisfaction with how democracy works in the country** and their concomitant overwhelming preference for a 'strongman' (authoritarian) leadership model. It seems that Bulgarians believe that the reason

democratic arrangements do not function in the country are not some locally specific gaps, which could be improved with 'more' democracy but that its flaws are inherent and can only be fixed through authoritarian measures. Such an **authoritarian reflex** can be explained culturally – as democratic attitudes are not firmly consolidated in the public mind given the legacy of authoritarian rule, and also experientially – as the Bulgarians have not been able to experience the benefits that a democratic system should ensure, including rule of law and an equitable allocation of public goods.

## Which of the following forms of government is better for Bulgaria?



- Having liberal democracy with regular elections and multiparty system.
- Having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections.

## Deficiency in justice

In line with the pattern of democratic disillusionment, the majority of Bulgarians express a negative attitude to current political arrangements. Some 59% believe that nothing will change no matter who holds the power in government, 77% think that oligarchs and financial groups hold sway over the Bulgarian government and 84% consider that certain groups in society are favored over others. Particular **grievances are directed at minorities** since 65% of the polled think that they receive special treatment. It is usually the Roma minority that is believed to be favored, as they are allegedly allowed to evade the law, get away with crimes and unfairly live on benefits. That is linked to a widely spread suspicion that the Roma are not punished for cheating the system because they are considered an easily manipulable source of votes during elections.

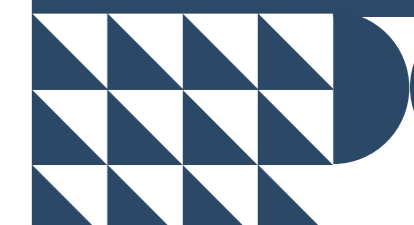
A strong **feeling of social injustice** is also reflected in the fact that an overwhelming proportion of the polled believe that people with contacts to the political elite (76%) and those who earn more (60%) are preferentially treated. An outpouring of this sentiment was observed in the form of protests and grievances vented on social media when an outspoken journalist was killed in a car crash by a person considered to hail from a privileged background.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the public opinion results show that 44% of the respondents agree with the statement that most people in their country can be trusted. That is, the political-economic circles are not trusted but more sympathy is reserved for fellow citizens. Although still not representing a majority, this result points to the **potential of building stronger horizontal linkages** among the population, including for civil societal activism.

# 59%

of Bulgarians believe that nothing will change no matter who holds the power in the government.

# 77%

believe that oligarchs and financial groups have strong control over the government in Bulgaria.



<sup>1</sup> This short paper presents the results of a recent public opinion poll conducted among the Bulgarian population by the Slovak think tank GLOBSEC in partnership with the Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia. The opinion poll was conducted among 1001 respondents from Bulgaria between 19. 03. 2020 and 27. 03. 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Capital Daily, "Милен Цветков загина от безнаказания произвол (Milen Tzvetkov Perished out of Lawless Arbitrariness)," 2020.

# Captured media

This social and political context shapes a belief shared by the majority of around 53% of Bulgarians that the **mainstream media in Bulgaria are not free**. This opinion is commonly expressed by majorities within the various societal strata defined by gender, age, level of education, rural vs. urban

dwellers and inhabitants of particular regions of Bulgaria. The only exception is within the category of individuals with elementary or no formal education, where those who think that the media is completely or rather free prevail by 10% over those who think the press is not free.

## Media is distrusted and seen as unfree.

Do you believe the media in your country is free?

12%



Completely free

26%



Rather free

53%



Not free

Hence, there is a relatively unified societal perception that is distrustful of the media and considers it as being instrumentalized in the name of vested interests. Such a perception corresponds to actual trends in the media landscape, as previous studies have demonstrated that media in the country is captured by political-oligarchic circles.<sup>3</sup> The outflow of foreign investors from the Bulgarian media market since the 2008 financial crisis freed space that has since been occupied by local oligarchic groups, seizing control of most of Bulgaria's media companies. This further facilitated the **penetration of foreign, and in particular Russian disinformation and misinformation** in the country. As the majority of the population and the Bulgarian government is generally sympathetic towards Russia,<sup>4</sup> such local oligarchic media conglomerates tend to

peddle Russia-friendly narratives<sup>5</sup>, acting as proxies of the Kremlin's interests in Bulgaria. A major pattern identified in Bulgaria is that the greater a Bulgarian media outlet's level of political-economic enmeshment with (pro)Russian groups and interests, the more undeviatingly the outlet relates Russian narratives through more explicitly biased literary-presentational techniques.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the deterioration of the overall media environment in Bulgaria (as judged by a consistent slide in international press freedom indices<sup>7</sup>) has been characterized by the proliferation of pro-Russian propaganda as a function of and in the service of political-oligarchic interests and dependencies.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rumena Filipova and Todor Galev, "Bulgaria," in *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience* (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018), 49–56.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Milo, Katarina Klingová, and Dominika Hajdu, "GLOBSEC Trends 2019, Central & Eastern Europe 30 Years after the Fall of the Iron Curtain," GLOBSEC, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Rumena Filipova and Todor Galev, "Bulgaria," in *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience* (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Such explicitly biased techniques aim at overtly shaping readers' attitudes such as through strongly evaluative epithets, sarcasm, cultivation of hatred and hostility. In contrast, implicitly biased techniques try to achieve suasion more subliminally by for instance sowing doubt, uncritically citing a preferred viewpoint, presenting figures/statistics in a manipulative or one-sided way. For more see Filipova and Galev, "Bulgaria."

<sup>7</sup> Bulgaria was ranked on 111th place in the World Press Freedom Index in 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Rumena Filipova and Todor Galev, "Bulgaria," in *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience* (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018). [https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications\\_library/files/2018\\_09/Russian\\_Influence\\_in\\_the\\_Media\\_Sector\\_en.pdf](https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2018_09/Russian_Influence_in_the_Media_Sector_en.pdf)

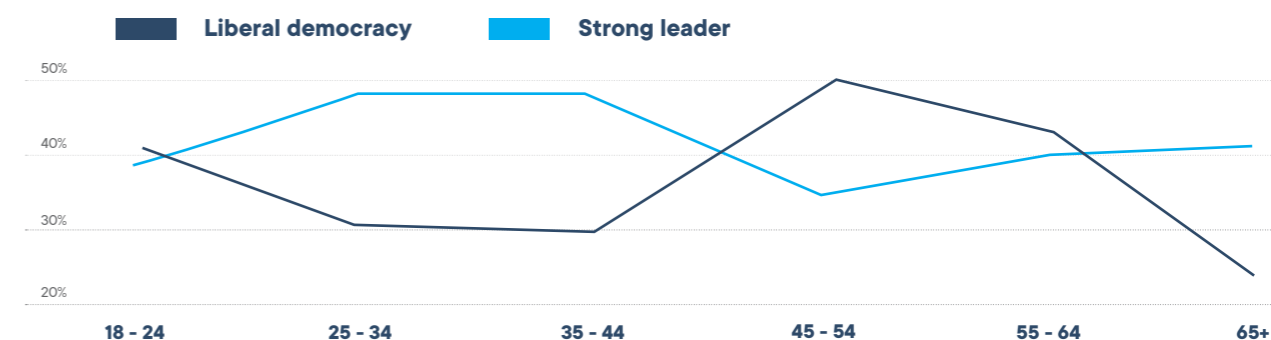
# Authoritarianism on the rise

The disenchantment with how politics and the media work in Bulgaria is accompanied by a **preference for an authoritarian as opposed to a democratic system**. Some 45% of the Bulgarians agree with the statement that having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections is a better option of governance, in contrast to 35% who think that having liberal democracy with regular elections and multiparty system is preferable.

The stratification of these public opinion results by gender, age, level of education and region of residence shows the presence of nuances in the predisposition to authoritarian vs. democratic form of governance among the different groups in society. Roughly the same proportion of men and women (46% and 44%, respectively) prefer a strong leader. Yet, a 10-percentage point difference divides the polled male and female population on the expressed preference for liberal democracy as 41% of men as against 31% of

women state that preference. As regards the attitudes of the various age groups, the majority of respondents from the 45–54 year-olds demonstrate an inclination towards liberal democracy in contrast to all other age groups, where the majority support an autocratic option. Surprisingly and worryingly, **younger generations** represented by the 25–34 and 35–44 year-olds on average **express a stronger preference for authoritarian governance** than a liberal democratic system.

## Which of the following forms of government is better for Bulgaria?



At the same time, respondents with tertiary education show a much higher predisposition towards liberal democracy in distinction to those with elementary and secondary education. Some 54% of the polled Bulgarians with a university degree prefer a liberal democratic form of governance. This is a reversed mirror image of the respondents with a secondary school diploma as 53% of them lean towards authoritarian rule. Also, it is only the inhabitants of the south-west region of Bulgaria, which has the highest level of socio-economic development, that record a greater preference for liberal democracy over authoritarian leadership (43% vs. 39%). In terms of breakdown by political party adherences, the supporters of nationalist-populist parties demonstrate the strongest orientation towards authoritarian practices. In the case of supporters of VMRO (Bulgarian National Movement) and NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria) a staggering 91% stand for a one-man rule.

It is instructive to tally the results on Bulgarian public opinion regarding the most favored system of governance, which

were recorded before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, with the development of societal dispositions over the course of the **COVID-19 crisis**. There have been contradictory tendencies in this respect. The crisis seems to have led initially to a rallying behind the political authorities, which was later supplanted by budding protest activity calling for political transparency and taking a stand against corruption and state capture, as the pandemic subsided during the summer.<sup>9</sup> Although these social developments are subject to further evolution, it can be argued that a **consolidated polarization** between adherents of democracy as against proponents of a strong-man model of leadership can be expected to continue. As much can be inferred from the comparison of potential voting patterns measured in March 2020 and September/October 2020, since survey results on party preferences for the upcoming parliamentary elections gauged at the beginning of the year do not differ by a wide, qualitatively distinctive margin from opinion polls currently being conducted in the midst of ongoing protests.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the maturation of democratic consciousness

is likely to require a longer period of time marked by building horizontal links and associations among the citizenry for the continuous assertion of rights and freedoms. In this respect the role of the EU and the spending of its recovery and investment funds in the country could have a significant impact on increasing trust in democracy in Bulgaria.

<sup>9</sup> Rumena Filipova, "The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic and State of Emergency" (Center for the Study of Democracy/ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Media Programme South East Europe, 2020), 14–15.

<sup>10</sup> The GLOBSEC survey carried out in March 2020 indicates that the parties with the largest following remain GERB and the BSP (with 19.4% and 15%, respectively). The oppositional Democratic Bulgaria garners 3.6% of the projected vote, while showman Slavi Trifonov's party is predicted to appear and make an impact on the political scene with support of around 10%. The opinion polls that Bulgarian sociological agencies Alpha Research and Market Links conducted in September and October 2020 show that GERB's lead over BSP is narrowing to a less than one percentage point, support for Democratic Bulgaria is swelling by about 4 to 5 percentage points (to roughly 9.4/9.6%), while Slavi Trifonov's party can get an additional 4 to 5 percent reaching 14.9%. Alpha Research, "Продължаваща подкрепа за протестите и неясен изход от политическата криза (Continuing Support for the Protests and an Unclear Exit from the Political Crisis)," 2020. Market Links, "Отново с поглед към Европа (Looking towards Europe Again)," 2020.

# History, tradition and the present

Overall, of all the Central and Eastern European countries in which the GLOBSEC poll was conducted, it is only in Bulgaria where strong leadership is favored over the democratic rotation of power. Interestingly, this result stands in stark contrast to the situation in Hungary, where only 12% of the polled endorse authoritarian leadership. This might have to do with the perceptions and the level of support for the current respective governments of the two countries, but could also be the consequence of **historically ingrained attitudes**. Hungary was the first country to rebel against the Soviet dictatorship in the country back in 1956 whereas Bulgaria never really had its internally-driven 'spring' moment. In addition, the government of Prime Minister Orban enjoys a much higher approval rating than that of his fellow Bulgarian PM Borissov. Hungary's belonging to the Central European region, as distinguished from the Balkans, has deeper rooted liberal democratic traditions (whereby the rule of law, political liberty and efficient bureaucracy were established and entrenched for a longer period of time).<sup>11</sup> This can account for the greater durability of pro-democracy public attitudes, despite the characteristics of its current political regime.

The possibility of changing Bulgarian political attitudes in a more liberal direction looks constrained by the fact that a majority of 54% of the respondents are **comfortable with exchanging their rights and freedoms for a preservation of traditional national values**. Women maintain a narrow lead over men in definitely or tentatively agreeing with such a trade-off (52% and 55%, respectively), with male respondents being more likely than their female counterparts to categorically decline the trade-off (19% of the polled men as against 14% of polled women). Some 68% of the 18-24-year-olds definitely or tentatively oppose the exchange of rights and freedoms for traditional values, which result significantly outstrips the percentages for the other age groups. Particularly notable is the sharp decline in the opposition to such an exchange among the 25-34 and 35-44-year-olds, whose opposition to trading freedoms for traditional values stands at only 36% and 33%.

Those who would trade some of their rights and freedoms (for example freedom to travel, to associate or free speech) for:



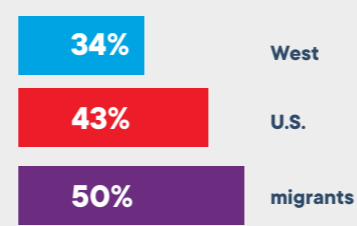
Despite the nuances among the different layers of society, the cumulative proportion of the polled Bulgarian population – who in the majority are ready to leave aside rights and freedoms in the name of traditional values is comparable to the percentage of Slovaks (58%), Czechs (52%) and Romanians (46%) who are willing to do the same. Yet, the Bulgarian score represents a wider margin in contrast to 37% of the Poles, 36% of Latvians and 29% of Lithuanians, who are ready to trade their freedoms for the preservation of traditional values.

The readiness to trade democratic rights in Bulgaria goes in parallel to an assessment shared by 34% of the Bulgarians that **the West poses a threat to national identity**, with 43% and 50% respectively believing that the U.S. and migrants represent a particular danger. Moreover, a total of 21% of the polled think that the U.S. has the strongest influence over Bulgarian media, while only 8% consider that Russia exercises such an influence. This shows that more people in the country share

the propagandistically promoted view of the ostensibly pernicious American sway over the national press as opposed to those who are able to discern the widespread Russian media impact in Bulgaria, as confirmed by independent research.<sup>12</sup> It can thus be concluded that for a significant, yet not predominant portion of the Bulgarians the traditional national identity tends to be perceived in juxtaposition to the Western civilizational model, one of whose key principles is linked to liberal democracy. Such negative attitudes towards the West leave **wide opening to Russia and other malign actors to exploit them, including through the deep media channels these actors have in CEE**.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gerard Delanty, "The Historical Regions of Europe: Civilizational Backgrounds and Multiple Routes to Modernity," in *Formations of European Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).  
<sup>12</sup> Filipova and Galev, "Bulgaria."  
<sup>13</sup> Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov, "Politics and Sharp Power," in *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe. Economic Influence and Sharp Power*, 2020, 71–87.

Those who said they personally think the following groups or countries threaten their identity and values:



# The state of Bulgarian society and future directions

The trends marking a dissatisfaction with democracy, a feeling of injustice coupled with a degree of cultural defensiveness provide a fertile ground for the **dissemination of conspiracies** in Bulgaria. A distrust in elites facilitates conspiratorial thinking that looks for answers which are not sanctioned by the 'mainstream' media and those in power, while a feeling of disempowerment and perceived deficiencies in 'reality' can make people find refuge in shared mythical narratives. Some notable nuances in opinion are observed in relation to societal categories defined by gender and age. Women on the whole appear to hold slightly more authoritarian and conservative views than men, being somewhat less critically oriented as for example the men who think that the media in Bulgaria are not free outnumber the women who think the same by 20%. The 45-54 year-olds turn out to be most supportive of democratic arrangements as well as critical and distrustful of ongoing political-economic developments, which stands in contrast to the 25-34 and 35-44 year-olds. Despite an expectation that representatives of the latter two age groups are most democratically-minded as they are too young to have been the subject of the ideological priming of the communist regime, a lack of interest in the changes taking place since 1989 and/or general disenfranchisement with the economic development and international status of the country may have thwarted some of the benefits of growing up in a free system. Instead, the 45-54 year-olds may have been somewhat more critically engaged

witnesses of the post-1989 changes. The 18-24 age group takes some of the most liberal-progressive positions, yet the potential for a minority of them to be incited for the conduct of, for instance, **homophobic violence** through social media should not be underestimated.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, the Bulgarian attitudinal landscape suggests that the country and its leaders need to put special efforts in a number of areas to shore off polarization and authoritarian tendencies and nurture democratic traditions. A good starting point would be to **address the findings of the first EU Rule of Law report**<sup>15</sup> released in September 2020 on the judiciary, media and democratic checks and balances. Bulgaria needs to direct a dedicated portion of the EU recovery and investment funds to upholding democratic institutions, civil society and media freedom. The EU on its part, needs to also pay more dedicated attention to such like Bulgaria who demonstrate autocratic tendencies. In this respect, initiatives like the EU prosecution and the rule of law instrument need to be further strengthened and instrumentalized to **ensure member-states' compliance** with European core values.

<sup>14</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, "Prevention of Radicalisation through Strategic Communication: What the Experts Say," Blog Post, 2020.  
<sup>15</sup> European Commission, "2020 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the Rule of Law Situation in Bulgaria," *Commission Staff Working Document*, 2020.

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## Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2020 on a representative sample of the population in ten EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1,000 to 1,047 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) or computerassisted telephone interviewing (CATI). In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement.

For the purpose of graphical data visualization, the results were rounded to full numbers. To improve the readers' experience, the responses in closed questions with a scale were generalised. For example, a question with options definitely agree/ rather agree/ /rather disagree /definitely disagree, was merged to agree / disagree.

More about the methodology can be found in the comparative report *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe*.

Collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

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