

CHAPTER VI

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN BULGARIA'S TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY FROM 1990 TO 2007

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Intruduction

Following the cessation of the Second World War, the Kingdom of Bulgaria became a constituent state of the Eastern Bloc under the Soviet Union's dominion. Consequently, a communist system was established within the country. The Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) assumed a structural equilibrium with the state, thereby establishing itself as the sole power of the country for a considerable duration. During the period of the BKP administration, political opposition was systematically suppressed, resulting in its complete exclusion from decision-making processes. The oppressive communist regime in Bulgaria, which endured for nearly half a century, ultimately collapsed in a relatively brief period in 1989, a consequence of the dynamic shifts that occurred on the global stage. Despite the long-term oppression of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, the country experienced a successful and bloodless revolution when compared to other Central and Eastern European¹ countries.

1 Some countries have experienced significant challenges and civil wars characterised by violence during the transition from communist and socialist regimes to democracy. Examples include Romania's transition to democracy and the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia following a series of civil wars.

The transition of the Bulgarian state to a democratic system of governance was facilitated by the rapid implementation of reforms by the Bulgarian Communist Party, which subsequently evolved into the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Concurrently, the Bulgarian Socialist Party's acquiescence to the transition from the former communist system to democratic rule, the apparent absence of resistance, the peaceful acceptance of elections and the advent of a multi-party era in the country are worthy of citation as exemplary.

A further reason why Bulgaria's transition to democracy was peaceful is that the anti-communist opposition in the country united under one roof (United Democratic Forces Party) and managed this process by acting in a planned and programmed manner. The UDF united the disparate opposition factions, eschewed the use of force, and managed the democratization process in accordance with the rule of law. It also played a balancing role against the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) during this period.

The third role in the successful democratization process in Bulgaria was played by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party. For decades, ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, most notably Turks, endured significant oppression, and consequently, they endeavored to secure their rights through diverse means in the period preceding the dissolution of the communist regime. However, with the sudden collapse of the communist system in 1989, legal channels were established through which minority groups could seek redress. The establishment of the MRF served to appease ethnic groups and provide them with a formal voice in parliament. This played a pivotal role in the democratization process in Bulgaria, which was bloodless, and subsequently led to the country's accession to the Euro-Atlantic organizations, namely the EU and NATO.

The principal objective of the study is to examine the formation and internal transformation of political parties in Bulgaria following the country's transition to democracy in the 1990s. In order to achieve this, the following research questions were considered:

1. What was the internal transformation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and its role in the democratisation process?
2. What was the role of the Union of the Democratic Forces party in the democratisation process by uniting the opposition under one roof?
3. How did the Rights and Freedoms Party become the voice of the Turkish community in the Parliament and contribute to Bulgaria's peaceful transition to democracy?

A substantial body of literature has been produced examining the broader issues surrounding the transition to democracy in Bulgaria. However, the present study focuses on the formation of political parties in Bulgaria's transition to democracy and the specific relationships these parties played in this process. This study makes a further contribution through its analysis and consideration of how political parties managed this process despite the fact that Bulgaria was on the brink of ethnic conflict and struggling with political and economic crises. In addition to the analysis presented here, the study has also made use of the findings of other researchers published in books, journals and newspapers. The temporal scope of this research project covers the period from Bulgaria's transition to democracy in the 1990s to its EU membership in 2007.

The period between 1990 and 2007 constituted the most critical phase in Bulgaria's recent history. The process was impeded by the crises that accompanied the establishment of the democratic system. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the significant measures implemented by the political parties, this process was ultimately successful. This section will provide a broad analysis of the main parties that played a vital internal factor role in the democratization process of Bulgaria.

Re-formation of parties in Bulgaria

Political parties played a significant role in the democratization process of Bulgaria (Карасимеонов, 2006: 10). One of the most significant indications of the democratisation process and the cessation of the communist regime in Bulgaria was the transition to a multi-party system and the emergence of new political parties and organisations (Карасимеонов, 2006: 26).

Table 5. *Participation and Number of Political Parties in Bulgaria According to Parliamentary Election Years*

Party System Indicators in Bulgaria						
Indicator	1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005
Number of participating parties	42	38	49	41	56	22
Number of effective parties in the system	2,75	4,197	3,88	2,89	4,54	5,8
Number of parties in parliament	6	3	5	5	4	8
The number of effective parties in the parliament	2,42	2,41	2,73	2,53	2,92	4,8

Source: (Mandaci, 2020: 112).

Note: In this table, the number and achievements of the parties established with the transition to the multi-party system in the 1990s are summarized. This political participation also appears as an indicator of the development of democracy in Bulgaria.

A country can be considered democratic if parties with different ideological views participate in competitive elections and accept the results. The conviction of people, as members of certain parties, that political, social, and economic problems in a country can only be solved by democratically elected parties indicates the strengthening of democracy in that country.

This section will provide a broad analysis of the main parties that played a vital internal factor role in the democratization process of Bulgaria as an internal factor.

Under the half-century rule of the BCP, other political parties and formations were prohibited² from participating in political processes in the country. Bulgaria took part in the democratization process that followed the global collapse of the communist system. With the transition to a multi-party political system, the previously banned parties were re-formed. The opposition, which played a role in the collapse of the communist system in Bulgaria, seized the opportunity to transform into political parties and implement their thoughts and ideas in political life.

The main parties that played a significant role in the democratization process of Bulgaria are the following:

- The “Bulgarian Socialist Party”, which was an extension of the Bulgarian Communist Party
- The “Union of Democratic Forces” formed by the democratic opposition
- The “Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party”, which generally represented the Turkish minority

The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union BANU generally represented the peasantry and those engaged in agriculture. The party existed during the old communist regime and re-established itself, taking on important roles in the first years of the democratization process. However, it lost power in the following years. The following sections analyse the three main parties in the democratization period.

2 During the communist era, The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union BANU, an established political party representing peasants, participated in general elections, but the Bulgarian Communist Party consistently emerged victorious. BANU’s involvement in the elections was an attempt to demonstrate that the country was not under a repressive regime.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

During the 1980s, significant global changes occurred. The socialist bloc faced political, economic, and social crises and stalemates, while the Cold War dominated the agenda and course of the period. Consequently, the communist system in Bulgaria experienced a major crisis. However, what distinguishes Bulgaria from other CEE countries experiencing regime changes is the significant weight and influence of the Bulgarian Communist Party³ in both the changes and the protection of the authoritarian regime (ИВАНОВ, 2019: 266).

To gain a better understanding of the democratization process, it is necessary to analyse the Bulgarian Communist Party. In the mid-1980s, party members with pro-democracy views emerged and participated in the democratic opposition that arose between 1988 and 1989. Despite the appearance of a unified communist party, it is evident that three distinct factions formed within its internal structures.

- The first group within the communist party was guided by Aleksander Lilov⁴ and pursued a left reformist policy as a target tried to act in the direction of maintaining the socialist system and democratizing that system (ИВАНОВ, 2019: 267). But the “democratic socialism” led by Alexander Lilov failed because the pro-democracy opposition reacted sharply to this political view and acted to establish a pure democratic system. At the same time, the existence of factions within the Bulgarian Socialist Party caused this idea not to be realized.
- The second group clustered around Georgi Atanasov⁵ and generally favoured the continuation of the old system without any reforms and represented the conservative wing of the party (ИВАНОВ, 2019: 267). However, the events took place around the world and the political conjuncture disproved this idea from the very beginning and did not allow it to be implemented.

3 At that time, the number of members of the BCP comprised 10 % of the society and represented considerable power. Although the democratic opposition dominated the streets, a rapid transition to democracy was not experienced since the rural bureaucracy, important administrative staff of the state and rural areas were in the hands of the communist party. A certain amount of time and pro-democracy leaders were needed to resist such a power, but since there were groups with different ideas within the democratic opposition, it was not easy to stand against the communists in the first stage. This factor also prolonged the transition to democracy, which caused the communists to gain time.

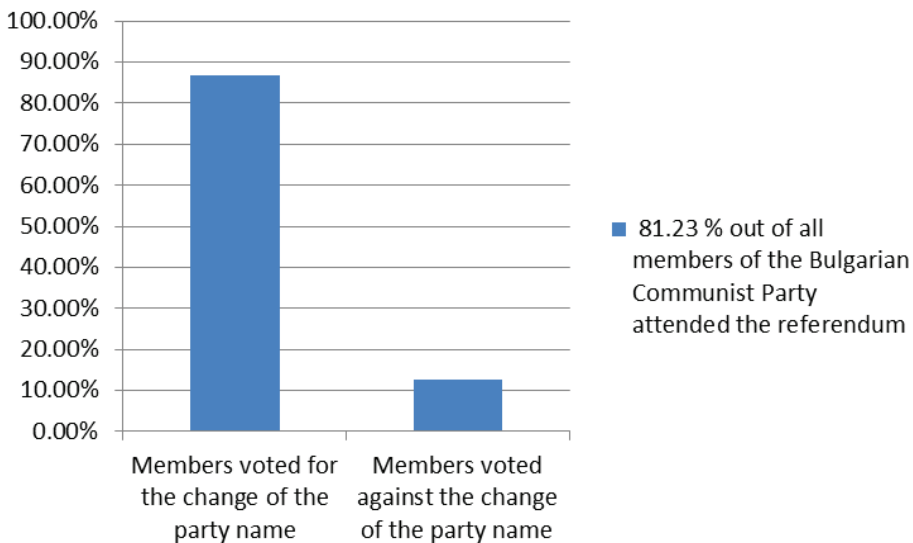
4 Aleksander Lilov graduated from Bulgarian Philology and assumed the post of chairman of the first-term Bulgarian Socialist Party. He was involved in politics for a long time in the communist era and also served in important state positions.

5 Georgi Atanasov, who is a historian, has been involved in politics for a long time in the communist era between 1981 and 1989, pioneered the assimilation policies against the Turks in Bulgaria, and supported the removal of Todor Zhivkov from power (ИВАНОВ, 2019: 267).

- The third group was guided by Andrey Lukanov⁶ and supported the reform of the socialist system and the transition to a capitalist economy, but it was in favour of keeping the power in the hands of the communist political elite at that time (Иванов, 2019: 267).

In an intra-party referendum held at the beginning of 1990, it was decided to change the name of the Bulgarian Communist Party to the Bulgarian Socialist⁷ Party. The main reason name change decision was to expand the intra-Bulgarian and international connections (Първанов, 2021: 23).

Graph 1. *Results of the Referendum for Rename the BCP to the BSP*



Source: The graph is prepared by the researcher. The source of information is: (Първанов, 2021: 24).

In this referendum 726 000⁸ people took part, which is 81.23 % of all members, 629 552 people voted for the new name, that is, 86.71 % of the participants and 91

6 Andrey Lukanov finished international relations in Moscow and was appointed as the minister of foreign relations and foreign trade in the 1960s during the communist regime in Bulgaria.

7 The communists adopted a strategy of changing the name of their party, making it easier to integrate into the new political system. During the communist era, societal and minority oppression was primarily associated with Todor Zivkov, and secondarily with the BCP. The transformation of the BCP into the BSP was a strategy to distance themselves from their past.

8 On January 1, 1990, the number of members of the BCP was 983 899 people. This figure reveals how much stronger was the communist party in early Bulgaria's democratization process than the Communist Parties in other CE countries. That's why the BSP won the first democratic elections and extended its stability to one year more.

973 people voted against, that is, 12.66 % of all participants (Първанов, 2021: 24). Upon examining the aforementioned figures, it becomes apparent that the Bulgarian Socialist Party holds significant influence, which explains its prolonged tenure in power. The BSP's fixed electoral cadre, mostly composed of elders and peasants, has also contributed to its survivability (Daskalov, 2018: 12).

The BSP is characterised by a well-organised and disciplined bureaucracy, both domestically and internationally, during Bulgaria's democratisation process (Daskalov, 2018: 13). The BSP officially came to power at the very beginning of the democratization process in the country and won the government in 1990-1991 and 1994-1997. Additionally, Bulgarian Socialist Party was the largest supporter of the interim government from 1991-1994 (Dolenec, 2016: 137). Socialists took part in different administrative positions in the country, both locally and nationally units, until 1997 (Dolenec, 2016: 137).

As for the basic policies of the BSP, it has been redefined as "Democratic Socialism" and "socially-oriented market economy" and these decisions were taken especially at the extraordinary congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Ekinci, 2018: 56). From the establishment of the BSP to the EU membership between 1990 and 2007, four leaders have changed. The table below shows the party leaders and the time they remained in the administration:

Table 6. *The leadership of the BCP from its founding in 1990 until it accedes to the European Union in 2007*

Name of the Politician	Length of stay at the Administration
Aleksandar Lilov	1990 – 1991
Zhan Videnov	1991 - 1996
Georgi Parvanov	1996- 2001
Sergey Stanishev	2001- 2014

Source: The table is prepared by the researcher. The source of information is: (24chasa, 2022)

Note: In this table, the heads of the BSP and the years of their presidency are indicated. BSP presidents were generally educated at universities in Russia and were generally pro-Russian foreign policy supporters.

One of the major successes of the BSP after winning the first democratic elections⁹ for the GNA was the 1994 general elections. Even though the 1994 general

⁹ The election of the Grand National Assembly has been thoroughly examined in the preceding sections.

elections had a very low turnout, the BSP won the majority. BSP had a high share of votes in the elections and deserved 125 seats in the parliament. In January 1995, Zhan Videnov¹⁰ was tasked with forming the cabinet by President Zhelyu Zhelev (Mandaci, 2020: 78). In the table below, the course of the general elections held in 1994 and the gains of the parties are presented:

Table 7. *Results of the Bulgarian National Elections on 18 December 1994*

Party	Votes	% votes	Seats	% seats
The coalition of the Democratic Left	2,258,249	43.42	125	52.08
UDF	1,260,374	24.23	69	28.75
Popular Union	338,478	6.51	18	7.50
MRF	283,094	5.44	15	6.25
Bulgarian Business Bloc	244,695	4.70	13	5.42
Parties Below the 4 % National Threshold				
Democratic Alternative for The Republic	196,807	3.78		
Bulgarian Communist Party	78,370	1.51		
“New Choice”	77,641	1.49		
Coalition - Patriotic Alliance	74,350	1.42		
Coalition “Kingdom of Bulgaria”	73,096	1.41		
Others	316,228	6.09		
Total	5,201,382	100.00	240	100.00

Source: (Bell, 1997: 390).

Note: The BSP won the elections in 1994 and formed its own government. The society was not satisfied with the short-term governments established by the democratic opposition UDF and again supported the socialists. Although this seemed like a victory for the socialists, it later turned into a major defeat. During the Videnov government, the economic crisis deepened even more and became inextricable. However, early elections were held after the resignation of Prime Minister Zhan Videnov at the end of 1996, before the socialist government could complete its term of office.

10 After Alexander Lilov, Zhan Videnov was the chairman of the BSP from 1991 to 1996. As one of the youngest politicians of the period, he assumed the duty of the Bulgarian prime minister. He was more in favour of reforming the old communist system and improving relations with Russia.

After the elections, the communists came to power under Zhan Videnov's Prime Ministership. Since Zhan Videnov¹¹ was a follower of Alexander Lilov, he advocated more democratic socialism and was in favour of improving relations with Russia (Тодоров, 2019: 101). The Bulgarian Socialist Party pursued a policy of improving relations with Russia by opposing privatization and expressing hostility towards Bulgaria's membership in NATO.

Concerning the role played by the BSP in Bulgaria's transition to democracy, it is evident that the party played a significant role in this process.

- Following the renaming of the BCP as the BSP, the party played a pivotal role in Bulgaria's transition to democracy by abstaining from advocating for the immediate reform of the communist regime during the roundtable discussions.
- This concession, which effectively negated the previous party's stance, not only secured the party's place in the nascent democratic system but also represented a significant gain for the party.
- Furthermore, the BCP's abandonment of the pursuit of reforming the existing regime and its endorsement of the transition to democracy had a pivotal influence on Bulgaria's seamless transition.

Under the leadership of Georgi Parvanov (1996–2001) and especially Sergei Stanishev¹² (2001–14), the BSP began to move toward West European social democracy (Ganev, 2018: 95). During the presidency of Georgi Prvanov¹³, major changes were observed in the policy of the BSP. Bulgaria became a full member of NATO in 2004 and joined the EU on 1 January 2007, during the prime ministerial term of Stanishev, following the policy of intensified membership of the EU and NATO.

11 Zhan Videnov was compelled to resign due to mounting public pressure, largely as a result of his inability to effectively address the economic crisis that Bulgaria faced during the winter of 1996. The government established by the Democrats, who succeeded him, completed its term for the first time, marking a positive shift in Bulgaria's democratic trajectory.

12 He was the 48th Prime Minister of Bulgaria and the General Chairman of the BSP after Georgi Prvanov.

13 Георги Седефчов Първанов (Georgi Prvanov) was born on June 28, 1957, graduated from Sofia University, department of history and completed his doctorate in the same field. In 1996, he was elected as the general chairman of the BSP. He won both the presidential elections held at the end of 2001 and the elections in 2006, and he was the president of Bulgaria until 2012 (Omda. bg, 2018).

The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)

Following significant political changes in Bulgaria in 1989, the communist system began to collapse. The climax of the transition period towards party pluralism in Bulgaria was the establishment of the Union of Democratic Forces as a coalition of different factions struggling for a democratic system (Карасимеонов, 2006: 27). Although the Bulgarian Communist Party still maintained its position, the anti-communist opposition that started to emerge led the big street demonstrations in the country and began to be effective in accelerating the changes. Since the opposition was gathered under different dissident organizations and acted dispersedly during that period, its effect was limited. Short-term meetings were held between the leaders of different opposition and dissident groups to unite and stand up against the communist regime, along with the final decision was taken to be established one democratic front (Желев, 2010: 259). With the gathering of different pro-democracy opposition groups under one roof, the first organized democratic opposition on 7 December 1989 “The Union of Democratic Forces” was formed (Желев, 2010: 239).

Under the umbrella of the UDF that emerged after Todor Zhivkov’s overthrow on 10 November 1989, many unofficial associations and re-formed traditional parties gathered and united around the keyword “democracy” (Иванов, 2019: 275). The main goal of the opposition was to dismantle the totalitarian communist regime and replace it with a new state system that complies with the principles of democracy. Owing to that the opposition did not support the reformist approaches of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Иванов, 2019: 275).

With the start of the democratization process in Bulgaria, the most outstanding party has been the UDF. According to Fish and Brooks the UDF: “was not only the strongest party in Bulgaria; but it was arguably the mightiest right-centre party in post-communist Europe” (Fish & Brooks, 2000: 64).

Since the UDF was a combination of many different factions, there have been conflicts between the leaders in many political decisions. Although these leaders struggled for democracy, some of them continued their left-oriented views and thoughts, and some of them displayed as a careerist and opportunists. For that reason, splits took place within the democratic coalition (Daskalov, 2018: 14-15). During the elections, UDF voters had different reasons for supporting the party. Some were pro-democracy, while others were anti-communist. During the vote for the new constitution¹⁴, 39 deputies left the parliament, leaving the UDF in

14 The inaugural elections for the Bulgarian Constituent Assembly were held, with the communist party emerging as the victor. Given the dominance of communists in the constitution-making process, some politicians from the UDF opposed the outcome. As the process of constitution-making

a difficult situation due to their lack of control over their members (Daskalov, 2018: 15). The situation caused the party to weaken against the ex-communists.

The UDF was led by a National Coordination Council under the leadership of Zhelyu Zhelev, and its members were leaders of the reconstituted old parties and some democratic opposition activists (Желев, 2010: 369).

Table 8. *Associations, civil society groups and parties united under the umbrella of the UDF*

№	Party and Associations established UDF
1.	the Club for Support of Publicity and Reconstruction
2.	the Independent Association “Ecoglasnost”
3.	the Confederation of Labor “Support”
4.	the Independent Society for the Protection of Human Rights
5.	the Committee for the Protection of Religious Rights
6.	Freedom of Conscience and Spiritual Values
7.	Club of the Illegally Repressed after 1945
8.	Independent Student Association
9.	Civic Initiative Movement
10.	Bulgarian Social Democratic Party
11.	Agrarian Union - Nikola Petkov
12.	the Radical Democratic Party
13.	the Green Party joined the union
14.	Democratic Party
15.	New Social Democratic Party
16.	United Democratic Center
17.	Democratic Front

Source: The table is prepared by the researcher. The source of information is: Omda. bg (2018). The Union of the Democratic Forces (Съюз на демократичните сили /СДС/). Retrieved 8 March, 2022, from <http://www.omda.bg/public/bulg/news/party/sds.htm> (Omda. bg, 2018).

Note: The anti-communist opposition in Bulgaria started to form two years before the beginning of the transitional period. The opposition was made up of very different factions and different groups and united under the name of the UDF. The fact that the opposition was composed of such different groups affected the next political steps, and there was no consensus within the group, and over time,

splits emerged from the party. Despite this, the contribution of UDF in the democratization process of Bulgaria should not be ignored. If there was a bloodless transition in Bulgaria, the balanced steps of UDF in the turbulent period can be counted as one of the reasons for that.

The UDF lost the first democratic elections for GNA, and in the process of making a democratic constitution, conflicts occurred within the coalition. Between 1991 and 1996, various groups and parties left the UDF coalition to form new parties.

In mid-1996 Bulgaria faced a major economic and financial crisis and Zhan Videnov, the Prime minister from BSP of the time, resigned on 21 December (Kormusheva, 2003: 436). The Bulgarian Socialist Party has decided to establish a single-party government again. Meanwhile, the UDF have united all opposition towards the BSP and have joined the protests alongside other labour unions and student marches (Kormusheva, 2003: 436). After a month of marches and protests, the government was dissolved and it was scheduled to hold early general elections.

On April 19, 1997, the fourth parliamentary election took place after the collapse of the Bulgarian totalitarian system (Crampton, 1997: 560). Before elections on January 19, 1997, Petar Stojanov¹⁵ from UDF was elected as the second president of Bulgaria in the democratization period, replacing Zhelyu Zhelev (Otfinoski, 2004: 37).

Table 9. *Results of the Bulgarian National Assembly Elections on April 19, 1997*

Party Name	Distribution of Votes	Seats
the UDF (ODS)	52.3	137
The Democratic Left (DL)	22.1	58
The Union for National Salvation (ONS)	7.6	19
The Euro-Left Coalition (KE)	5.5	14
The Bulgarian Business Bloc (BBB)	4.9	12
Parties Below the 4 % National Threshold	7,6	
The BCP (BKP)		
The Union for the Monarchy (OTs)		
The Liberal Forum (F)		
Total	100	240

Source: (Crampton, 1997: 562).

15 Petar Stefanov Stoyanov served as the President of Bulgaria from 1997 to 2002. He succeeded Zhelyu Zhelevin and became the second democratically elected president of Bulgaria.

Note: The 1997 parliamentary elections went down in history as one of the turning points for Bulgaria in terms of the democratization process. For the first time, a strong democratic opposition government was established in Bulgaria, which had been struggling with political and economic turmoil for a long time. Under Ivan Kostov's prime ministership, this government accomplished great things and played an important role in the opening of Bulgaria's path to NATO and European Union membership. During this period of UDF, steps were taken toward political and economic stability inside the country.

Before the 1997 elections, major changes were made in the UDF under the management of Ivan Kostov¹⁶. In order to get the votes of young people, studies have been started for them and clubs have been established in different fields (Fish & Brooks, 2000: 64). With the intention to unite the opponents of the BSP, the United Democratic Forces coalition (ODS) was formed as an ancestor of the UDF.

The United Democratic Forces (ODS) won the 1997 parliamentary elections. 2 223 714 people voted for UDF, which corresponds to a rate of 52.26 per cent (Спасов, 2004: 245). The UDF won 137 seats in the parliament and increased its votes to 963 340 people after the 1994 elections (Спасов, 2004: 245). As for the communists, they suffered a great defeat and lost 1 323 635 votes compared to the 1994 elections. The BSP won only 58 seats in parliament in these elections.

One of the most significant challenges that Bulgaria faced in the transition from a totalitarian regime to a democratic system was the privatization process. This process started when the UDF passed the restitution law in 1991 in the parliament, and the restitution process continued from 1992 to 1997 (Houbenova-Delissivkova, 1998: 73). The restitution process included the return of the lands taken from the people during the communist era to their real owners. In 1991, related to the privatization program, the Land Act was passed in the parliament. The Land Act was tried to be banned by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which came to power in 1994, for the sake of establishing agricultural cooperation as a target, but they could not succeed (Houbenova-Delissivkova, 1998: 74).

The Ivan Kostov government, formed by the UDF that came to power in 1997, accelerated the privatization process and a successful way was covered in that government period. The privatization process has been a significant for the democratization process in Bulgaria for leaving the central planning economic system and integrating into the open market economy. However, the communists' staying in power for a long time interrupted the privatization process at certain

16 During Bulgaria's transition to democracy, Ivan Kostov joined the UDF. He served as the 47th Prime Minister of Bulgaria from 1997 to 2001.

intervals. Nevertheless, when the UDF government consolidated its power in 1997, success was achieved in the privatization.

Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

With the transition of Bulgaria to the democracy, the previously banned parties came to life again, and new parties began to be formed. The democratic constitution, which was established following the abolition of the communist one, prohibits the formation of political parties based on ethnicity, religion, or minority status.

“The Constitution stipulates that there shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor shall there be any parties which seek the violent seizure of state power. This is set out in Article 11 (4).” (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 11 and 44, Stefanova, 2012: 772).

Despite the article in the constitution, parties were formed whose leaders were predominantly Turks and whose electors were from the Turkish minority group. Some of these parties were in existence for a relatively brief period, while others have continued to operate since their inception. The party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is one of them and has been in existence since democratic transition.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms is a party founded on January 4, 1990, a few months after the removal of Todor Zhivkov from power. The establishment of the MRF straightaway in short time has been an indication that the Turks in Bulgaria organized quickly and entered politics successfully.

During a meeting of the BCP in 1989, Andrey Lukanov discussed the pros and cons of creating a political party¹⁷ to represent the Turkish minority group in Bulgaria. He emphasized that the democratic West had such a will; otherwise, Bulgaria would not be able to be recognized by the West (Япов, 2009: 124). Subsequently, the communists decided to allow the Turks to establish a political party. This would enable the Turks to obtain their rights through peaceful means, represented by leaders in parliament, rather than resorting to violence and demanding autonomy.

17 The reason for the discussion within the BCP was considered preferable for the Turks to pursue legal avenues, namely through the party in parliament, rather than resorting to force to reclaim the rights they had lost as a consequence of the assimilation process implemented by the Communist system.

After the establishment of the MRF, they applied for registration as a political party. This move received a strong reaction from both nationalists and communists in parliament, who attempted to deny the party's legitimacy by accusing it of being an ethnic and religious organisation (Eminov, 1999: 6). On October 8, 1991, 93 members of the Bulgarian GNA (almost all belonged to the BCP), asked the newly formed Constitutional Court to declare unconstitutionally the MRF because according to them the party was an ethnically Turkish party (Ganev, 2004: 66). However, the desired decision was not accepted.

The MRF played an important role in the democratization process by participating in the elections for the Grand National Assembly and other parliamentary elections. Ahmed Doğan¹⁸ has been appointed as the leader of the party. As MRF represented the Turks in Bulgaria during the first post-communist era, it generally had fixed and stable voters, which secured its place in parliament in the long term (Daskalov, 1999: 205).

The involvement of ethnic groups and minorities in politics has been a significant achievement for Bulgaria in terms of strengthening democracy and meeting European Union standards (Stefanova, 2012: 767). Since its establishment in 1990, the "MRF has served as a crucial element in structuring the factors that make ethnic peace possible in Bulgaria" (Ganev, 2018: 94).

In the transition period, the MRF took part in different government coalitions and became a balancing element between the communists and the democratic opposition (Stefanova, 2012: 768). In the first democratic election on 10 and 17 June 1990, two-round elections for the GNA, the MRF gained 23 deputies in the parliament. During the formation of the first democratic constitution, the MRF emphasised their commitment to politics based on liberal norms such as equality and tolerance, rather than ethnicity or religion (Ekinci, 2018: 82).

In the general parliamentary elections in 1991, MRF received 7.6 % of the votes and was able to get 24 deputies. In 1992, the MRF, which was a partner in the government, withdrew its support and in this way, the first democratic government in the post-communist era collapsed. Subsequently, neither the UDF nor the BSP could form a government, this time the MRF again nominated a candidate and a new government was established by Lyuben Berov¹⁹ (Eminov, 1999: 7).

18 Born on May 29, 1954, Ahmet Doğan graduated from Sofia University, Department of Philosophy. Doğan, who was imprisoned before "the Democratic Revolution" in Bulgaria, played a role in the organization of the Turks who were fighting for their rights. At the beginning of 1990, he founded the MRF Party and was elected as the general president (Omda. bg, 2018).

19 Lyuben Berov was born on October 6, 1925, in Sofia. He graduated from the department of econo-

In the 1997 general elections, the MRF formed the “Alliance for National Salvation” coalition with the monarchist parties and some groups that left the Union of Democratic Forces and was able to exceed the 4 per cent threshold (Daskalov, 2018, 16). “Since its inception in 1990, the MRF has consistently fulfilled the role of a coalition mediator and behind-the-scenes operator” (Dedominicis, 2011: 448).

With the beginning of the democratization process, only the MRF survived as a representative of the minorities and continued to play a key role in Bulgaria’s political life, and the role was seen clearly in the period of Bulgaria’s NATO membership and integration into the European Union.

With the establishment of the MRF, the Turkish minority group in Bulgaria got successfully involved in politics, which prevented future ethnic conflicts and Turks tended to obtain their political rights in the parliament. At the same time, an ethnic conflict was prevented in Bulgaria and the country managed an efficacious democratization process. The establishment of MRF and its auspicious management of the process appear as an important internal factor in the democratization process of Bulgaria.

The establishment of political parties, such as the MRF, has facilitated the integration of Turkish society into politics. The party’s participation in various governments has also allowed for the integration of ethnic groups, particularly the Turks, in the democratization process. Considering the Balkan countries, the absence of such an internal factor in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, in particular, caused ethnic and civil wars to arise, and war crimes were committed, including genocide. In this regard, it was observed that Bulgaria followed a successful soft transition to democracy after the end of the old communist regime.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the present article was to undertake a thorough examination of the role played by political parties (BSP, UDF, and MRF) in the transition from the communist system to a democratic regime in Bulgaria.

The democratization process in Bulgaria between 1990 and 2007 was complex and multifaceted, and the political development of existing and re-established parties in the country also impacted it. In the aftermath of the collapse of the

mics at Sofia University and became a professor in 1971. Berov was the economic advisor to Zheleu Zhelevin, the first democratic president of Bulgaria. He served as the prime minister between 1992 and 1994 (Omda. bg, 2018).

communist system in 1989, the Republic of Bulgaria confronted two significant challenges. The initial challenge pertained to the establishment of new democratic institutions, while the second challenge entailed the resolution of the economic and social problems that had persisted from the previous regime. Certain prominent political parties have exerted pivotal influence in the democratization process and in resolving the political, social, and economic challenges that have arisen.

Despite the fact that the political landscape was initially shaped by the Bulgarian Socialist Party in the early 1990s, a competitive political situation emerged in the country with the United Democratic Forces' electoral success. The advent of this competitive environment also had an impact on the progress of democracy. In the 2000s, the electoral gains of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, coupled with its dexterous balancing act between competing political parties, paved the way for Bulgaria's accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions such as the EU and NATO.

In conclusion, political parties have played a critical role in Bulgaria's transition from a one-party system to a functional democracy. The role of these parties has been instrumental in successfully governing the country during turbulent political, social and economic changes, as well as in preventing and resolving major problems.

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