

THE ROMANIAN AND BULGARIAN POLITICAL SCENE AFTER 1989

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Abstract

Although Romania and Bulgaria emerged from communism and in the first decade of their independence their political scenes were very similar, in the next years they went into different directions. While in Romania we observe stable parties led by experienced politicians with clear background (Ponta, although young, is a well-known figure of PSD and has strong family connections there), in Bulgaria new parties emerged “from scratch” and took the power. Despite this difference, all the governments in both countries in the last decade led a similar policy, aiming for the EU integration as their highest priority.

Keywords: Romania, Bulgaria, political development, economical growth, the post 1989 period.

It is more than twenty years after the events of 1989 and regimes have changed in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. When we look at the pictures from that time, we see a world that is totally different to the world that we live in nowadays. The buildings are grey and dirty, people wear old-fashioned and ugly clothes, streets are full of cars that nobody uses now and everybody in every photo, also those taken indoor, is smoking a cigarette or a pipe (this, in particular, is something that has almost vanished during all these years). We see there a different era. We live now in the future that they dreamt of.

These more than twenty years are long enough to be described as a detached period. The pre-Second World War period was even shorter (1918-1939) and nobody disagrees with the opinion that it was an epoch that should be described separately to the years before and after it. The period from 1989 to nowadays could also be described as a detached one, completely different to what was before (even though – as we will see – there are many similar traces). As we can not anticipate the future, we could not say exactly when this period is going to end (in contrary to what some people have claimed, or rather hoped, that the EU accession of the countries in Eastern and Central Europe was not a beginning of a

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new era). Nevertheless, we could speak about the time after 1989 as about one, homogenous period.

After the fall of communism, Romania and Bulgaria were often, if not always, placed together in the geopolitical game. The reforms applied in both countries were to some extent similar and the way and rhythm of the NATO and the EU accession was identical in both cases. Even now Bucharest and Sofia are still together; the events in the Summer of 2012, the attempt to dismiss President Băsescu, proved it. The European Commission made pressure on Romania and used Bulgaria as a tool – when President Barroso visited Sofia in the last day of August, he stressed that Bulgaria is ready to join the Schengen zone, while he said completely nothing about the Schengen aspirations of Romania. Both countries share to some extent the same fate. That is why it is important to compare them. This article is an attempt to compare the political scenes of both states, to show what has been similar and what has been different and how this influenced the progress of each country.

Communists in Romania and Bulgaria were among the hard-liners of the Soviet camp in Europe. The regime in both countries was a Stalinist one, with only minor changes afterwards (the most significant one was probably the withdrawal of the mass repression system). In both countries the population's life standard in the eighties fell down to the minimum and the system became even more oppressive than in was before. The leaders of communist Romania and Bulgaria – Ceaușescu and Zhivkov -, were both old, “conservative” and hostile to the Perestroika that emerged in Moscow after 1985. Ceaușescu chose the open confrontation with Kremlin over the issue, while Zhivkov tried to mislead the USSR and mocked the reforms, probably in hope that the Gorbachev team would be soon overthrown and everything would return to “normality”. This never happened and the pressure from the Soviet Union (as well as from other countries) grew significantly in late 1989, when the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe began to fall.

The reactions of Ceaușescu and Zhivkov were poles apart and so were the events afterwards. The Romanian dictator was overthrown by a mixture of revolution, popular revolt and inner-party coup d'état. After violent events, huge bloodshed and a *de facto* (but not *de iure*) instant dissolution of the institutions of the communist state, the power was gained by the group of former communists and army officers gathered around Ion Iliescu, who just a couple of days before was a typical party apparatchik. The Southern colleague of the Romanian dictator, Todor Zhivkov, also tried to defend himself, but in a more, we could say, sophisticated way. He attempted to manoeuvre the pro-Gorbachev lobby, but finally failed to do so and was overthrown during the Politburo meeting. His successor, Petar Mladenov, launched a completely new policy, that in a short time led to the formation of new political parties.

The starting point of a new political life was the same for both countries – it was the winter of 1989/1990. While in Romania it is easy to estimate when the new era has started – it was December 22nd – in Bulgaria it is very hard and there is still a discussion going on about this issue. Generally in the Bulgarian case we could consider many possible dates of the regime change. The official celebration is taking place on November 10th, the anniversary of the Zhivkov overthrow in the Central Committee meeting. But from our perspective this date is almost out of significance. In that very day everything seemed just as a standard replacement of the first secretary of the communist party. The real changes occurred later. For the analysis of the shaping up of the post-communist Bulgarian political scene, the most significant date is December 7th, when the first opposition party, the Union of Democratic Forces (Съюз на демократичните сили – SDS) was formed.

In both countries the first free elections were held in the late Spring of 1990 and the first months of that year were crucial for the construction of the political scene. What happened then determined further developments for many years to come. Politicians that launched their careers then were active in politics for decades and many of them still play important roles in their countries (like Ion Iliescu and Traian Băsescu). This was also the period in which the political scene was defined in the sense of finding the topics that were the issues of political conflict.

In this short, but very important period we see similarities between Romania and Bulgaria in the left side of the political scene, and differences on the right side of it. One thing was common from the very beginning – the line of the political division was between the forces of the *ancien regime* and the opposition to it. The post-communists in both countries turned into social-democrats. It was a more general trend in Eastern and Central Europe – the communist parties from Poland and Hungary took the same route even before. But in the neighbouring Serbia communists turned into nationalists and the opposition (also post-communist by the way) was closer to social-democracy. The formation of post-communist parties in Romania and Bulgaria was different. In Romania the communist party just disappeared on the same day when Ceaușescu was overthrown. The new structure emerged in the evening of this day – it was the National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale – FSN), which theoretically was a platform to unite all anticommunist forces, but which in fact incorporated from the very beginning the cadres of the former party. In Bulgaria it was definitely more simple – on April 3rd the name of the communist party was changed into the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Българска социалистическа партия – BSP).

The right side of the political scene was different. In Romania it was immediately occupied by the traditional parties, that re-emerged after the fall of Ceaușescu. This was the case of the National Peasant's Party led by Corneliu Coposu, which was registered as a Christian Democrat Party (Partidul Național

Țărănesc Creștin Democrat – PNȚCD), the National Liberal Party led by Radu Câmpeanu (Partidul Național Liberal – PNL) and the Romanian Social-Democrat Party led by Sergiu Cunescu (Partidul Social Democrat Român – PSDR). The last one is a good example of the tendency that is to be observed in that time. Since the left side of the political scene was dominated by post-communists, all the opposition parties were somehow forced to pose as right-wing, even though they were socialist, as was the case of Cunescu's party. Its doctrine was social-democracy (in fact, it was more social-democrat than the post-communists' party), but its political surrounding was right-wing only, so it was seen, at least for a decade, as a centre-right party. Although these three opposition parties cooperated to some extent in the first half of 1990, they did not managed to prepare one election list or to name one candidate for the presidential elections and this was one of the reasons of the huge victory of FSN in the voting.

The situation in Bulgaria was different. As we know, the SDS emerged in early December and from the very beginning it was quite a strong party (at least in comparison with the Romanian opposition from the first half of 1990). It was not a continuation of some pre-war political movements, as it was the case of Romanian parties, but a new one, created in some part by the people who took part in movements that opposed communism in the late eighties. The nucleus of SDS was formed by the people who created the Perestroika Club, a kind of discussion club that had proposed the reformation of the communist system. The head of both was Zhelyu Zhelev and in a very short time he became one of the key players on the Bulgarian political scene. Some circles connected to the pre-war peasants' party tried to re-establish the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (Български земеделски народен съюз – BZNS), and this party won some support, but in fact it was never very successful and it loosed step by step its initial popularity. As in Romania, SDS and BZNS, although theoretically were very far from being conservative, occupied the right wing of the political scene.

The main difference between the Romanian and Bulgarian right-wing parties from the early 1990 was that the Romanian parties were re-established parties and they were divided, while in Bulgaria there was a brand new SDS, relatively strong and united. The elections held in both countries revealed that the tactic of the Bulgarian right was better than the one chosen by its Romanian counterpart. While on the Northern shore of the Danube Ion Iliescu and FSN obtained respectively 85,07% and 67,53% of the votes, on the Southern shore of the river BSP obtained a percentage of only 47,2%. The President was elected then by the National Assembly and Zhelev was the first non-communist president of Bulgaria.

In both countries in the late 1989 there emerged also parties that united strong national minorities – Hungarians in Romania and Turks in Bulgaria. The Hungarians, among them many former communists, created the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (Romanian: Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România

– UDMR, Hungarian: Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség – RMDSz; for the purpose of this article we will use the Romanian abbreviation), that theoretically was not a party, but a kind of national congress, which in practice functioned as a standard political party. In Bulgaria the Turks established a party that was formally registered in first days of January 1990. It was called the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Bulgarian: Движение за права и свободи – DPS, Turkish: Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi – HÖH; for the purpose of this article we will use the Bulgarian abbreviation) and the head of the party was from the very beginning Ahmed Dogan.

During all these years UDMR and DPS had similar strategies. Both parties were good coalition partners to any possible political option (except for nationalists) and tried to avoid open conflict. The only exception has been the Borisov government in Bulgaria – the GERB party is not extreme nationalist, but it attacked DPS because of political calculations and that is why the Turkish minority party did not enter the government then. This never happened with UDMR, which took part in many governments of almost all possible colours.

In Romania the post-communists ruled until 1996, when the centre-right coalition won the elections. In Bulgaria it was different. Andrey Lukanov, the BSP prime-minister, was forced to resign in December 1990. The next head of government was Dimitar Iliev Popov, formally non-aligned. The peak of the SDS power was observed after the elections in October 1991, won with a narrow margin by SDS, and during the mandate of Philip Dimitrov (November 1991 – December 1992), who tried to introduce reforms and lustration, but failed and was overthrown by Zhelev's people. His successor, Lyuben Berov, was non-aligned and the cabinet tried to pose as an "expert" one, but in fact was created by the coalition of BSP, DPS and president Zhelev. Although its policy was close to what Romanian post-communists were doing at the same time, this government can not be treated as a BSP one, although the socialists had some influence over it. The same goes with Reneta Indzhova's cabinet, the successor of the Berov cabinet. BSP took the formal hold on the government after the elections in December 1994, decisively won by this party. A month later Zhan Videnov, head of BSP, became prime-minister and formed his cabinet. During these years there was a small change in the role of the president. In 1992, after the introduction of a new Constitution, the president was no longer elected by the National Assembly, but by the society in direct elections. These were held in January 1992.

In these years the political situation in Romania was different. All the cabinets that ruled before 1996 were created by post-communists. The less post-communist was the government of Theodor Stolojan, which was formed after the fall of Petre Roman's cabinet in September 1991. Stolojan had some connections with PNL and a bunch of politicians from that party were included in the cabinet that he led. Nevertheless, this small detail did not change the general pattern – we should treat Stolojan's cabinet as a post-communist one. In Romania, like in

Bulgaria, there were also elections after the introduction of the new Constitution, but contrary to the South of the Danube, on the North post-communists won both the presidential and the parliamentary elections, Iliescu being elected once again. During his second term in office the opposition consolidated itself and created the Romanian Democratic Convention (Convenția Democrată Română – CDR), a coalition of smaller groups and civic organizations formed around PNȚCD.

The years from 1996 to 1999 are probably the period when the political situation in both countries was closest to each other on the whole. The policy led by Romanian and Bulgarian post-communists led to economic failure and generated pro-opposition feelings in both countries. The situation was harsher in Bulgaria, where the people went to protest in the streets, which led to the fall of Videnov and to new elections. In Romania the tension was lesser, but Iliescu and his party were visibly loosing ground. The outcome of elections in both countries was the same – the right-wing parties won– but in Bulgaria the victory was larger than in Romania and the governance of SDS (which obtained the majority of seats in the parliament) seemed to be more comfortable than the one of CDR (which was forced to create a broader coalition).

Right-wing parties tried to introduce broad program of reforms and to accelerate the European integration. Their programs were almost identical, although in Bulgaria it was easier to implement them, because the government was more stable. Ivan Kostov resisted as a prime-minister the whole term 1997-2001, while successively having as a Romanian colleague four people: Victor Ciorbea (1996-1998), Radu Vasile (1998-1999), Mugur Isărescu (1999-2000) and Adrian Năstase (2000-2004).

The turning point for both countries was the NATO operation in Kosovo in the spring of 1999. Romania and Bulgaria fully supported this initiative, which on the one hand weakened the popularity of the governments in the society (especially in Romania), and on the other hand – paved the road to the NATO and EU accession for both countries.

While the Bulgarian government of that time did much better than the series of Romanian cabinets, at the end of the term SDS was still very popular, while CDR was almost disintegrated. This was the moment when the two countries took different paths in the further development of their political scene. In Romania Iliescu's post-communists, under the name of the Social Democrat Party (Partidul Social Democrat – PSD), easily won both elections, parliamentary and presidential, and ruled without any interruption for four years in the duo: Ion Iliescu – president, Adrian Năstase – prime minister.

In Bulgaria the SDS was very close to win the elections, but out of the sudden a new party was created, immediately becoming the main political force and finally winning. This was the movement created around the figure of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (in Bulgarian: Симеон Сакскобургготски), the former Tsar

of Bulgaria, who had formally never abdicated. While he was almost banned from entering the country in the nineties, he was suddenly allowed to go to Bulgaria and to gather support. His party, the National Movement Simeon II (Национално движение Симеон Втори – NDSV), won the elections in 2001, obtained 120 seats in the parliament, exactly 50%, and created the government.

This was the beginning of the decline and disintegration of the right side of the political scene in Bulgaria. SDS never recovered from the strike represented by the loss of the 2001 elections. During the next years it fell into stagnation and split into two separate groupings, which generated a loss of support. At the same time NDSV set the trend which became dominant in Bulgaria, i.e. that parties created ad hoc, with many members being newcomers in politics, could gain support and even win the elections in a very short time. This never happened in Romania, where the political scene is dominated by experienced veterans and stable parties.

The formation of a new party around the charismatic and, for many at that time, the mysterious figure of the former tsar was the answer to the very popular expectation of finding a “saviour” that would make an impact on Bulgaria and would solve the country’s problems, such as poverty, corruption, organized crime. This of course never happened and the government of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha led a policy very similar to its Romanian counterpart from PSD. Thus the political line of the former tsar and the outcome of his rule were not a “revelation” and this caused the huge wave of disappointment which finally led to NDSV losing the 2005 parliamentary elections and then to the disintegration of the party.

After the experience with Saxe-Coburg-Gotha it seemed that the Bulgarian society will not be so enthusiastic about the new parties created, but after a few years a new political grouping was formed around another strong leader, Boyko Borisov. He was a professional bodyguard and entered into the political life together with the former tsar; he became Chief Secretary of the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior in 2001, in the NDSV government. In 2005 he was elected to the parliament, but declined and remained in the ministry. Then he was elected to the position of mayor of Sofia and in 2006 formed his party, called Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB, which also means in Bulgarian “coat of arms”). The party gained huge popular support, won the 2009 elections and took the power. The policy led by GERB and by prime minister Borisov did not radically differ from the policy of former governments and can be described as a “standard” one for Bulgaria, except for some minor issues.

In Romania the situation was different. In 2000 PSD and Iliescu returned to power and CDR disappeared after losing the elections. If centre-right parties wanted to accede to power in the future, they had to cooperate. That is why a strategic alliance between PNL (which absorbed some anti-communists circles from the former CDR) and PD was formed in 2003. Next year the coalition was

very close to winning the parliamentary elections and its candidate, the well-known mayor of Bucharest, Traian Băsescu, succeeded in winning the presidential elections. Theoretically the government should have been formed by the victorious PSD, but Năstase failed in his negotiations and finally the cabinet was constructed by a coalition of PNL, PD, UDMR and the small post-communist Romanian Humanist Party (Partidul Umanist Român – PUR; in 2005 this grouping changed its name into the Conservative Party, Partidul Conservator – PC). The well-known politician and businessman Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu of PNL became prime-minister. His cabinet led liberal and pro-European policy.

The first year of Tăriceanu's government was rather peaceful, but later on conflicts emerged between PNL and PD and between the prime minister and the president. Politicians that in the near past had been coalition partners, started to fight vehemently. Because both sides agreed that the EU integration of Romania was the highest priority possible, they postponed the break-up of the coalition until January 1st 2007, when the country entered the European Union. Just a few months later PD members left the government. Until the elections in the Autumn of 2008 Romania experienced a very hard cohabitation between Tăriceanu and president Băsescu. In 2008 Băsescu's party (which, becoming PD-L) won the elections and formed a government together with PSD, with Emil Boc as prime minister. His cabinet adopted strong anti-crisis economical measures, which were very well received in the international institutions, but finally led to the huge wave of popular protests in the Winter of 2011/2012.

In May 2012 the coalition between PSD and PNL won the majority in the parliament and introduced Victor Ponta, the young (born 1972) head of PSD, as a prime minister. Immediately after taking the power, Ponta launched a campaign against president Băsescu, which led to his suspension in early July 2012. Later that month a referendum was organized. The majority of voters were in favour of dismissing the president, but the turnout did not meet the needed 50%, so Băsescu returned to his place. Although Ponta was in conflict with PD-L, he did not change much its policy, except from softening the economical program and introducing new taxes. The most important change could be the introduction of the first-past-the-post voting.

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Concluding: Although both countries emerged from communism and in the first decade of their independence their political scenes were very similar, in the next years they went into different directions. While in Romania we observe stable parties led by experienced politicians with clear background (Ponta, although young, is a well-known figure of PSD and has strong family connections there), in Bulgaria new parties emerged “from scratch” and took the power. Despite this difference, all the governments in both countries in the last decade led a similar policy, aiming for the EU integration as their highest priority.