



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Elite Transformation in the Bulgarian Transition

- **Topic of research**

The topic of research is the change of the Bulgarian political elite due to the transition from communist to post-communist society. I examine the patterns and mechanisms of elite change from 1989 (before the collapse of communism) to 1998 (the 4th post-communist democratic parliamentary elections).

- **Relevance and contribution to the field; scholarly impact and policy significance of the research**

In the first place, this research fills a gap in the literature as no comprehensive study of Bulgarian elites exists. There are numerous studies of Polish, Hungarian or Soviet elites, but studies of Bulgarian elites are limited to remote chapters in several edited collections. A couple of Bulgarian authors have focused exclusively on the topic of elites. Their studies, however, represent analysis and conclusions not based on original empirical data. My research is the first to focus exclusively on the Bulgarian political elite during the period of transition and to rely on large empirical data. By filling this gap in the literature, a study of Bulgarian elites also contributes to comparative elite studies, East European studies and, more generally, to literature on democratization.

A main component of this study is the collection and creation of a large database, namely the elite rosters. The elite rosters include, among other variables, the name, position, party affiliation, place and date of birth of each individual occupying an elite position for the entire period between 1989 and 1998, all of which obtained from publicly available sources. It allows

tracing the career of each individual, all individuals occupying a particular elite position, and changes in the overall number and character of elite positions. The database is extremely valuable as it renders empirical grounding to my study, allowing me to address my research questions and generate new hypothesis using sound scientific methods. Presently, no such database is available to researchers. There was one unsuccessful attempt to collect similar data in 1993, which unfortunately was abandoned. Hence once created, such database is a great asset to future research in the field.

Furthermore, the present study criticizes the dominant theoretical framework of East European elite studies, which categorizes elite change as either circulation or reproduction. Instead, it offers a more complex model and a “new” approach to studying elite transformation based on classical elite theory. Although, formulated in the early 20th century, classical elite theory has surprisingly not been applied to the context of East European transitions. Such scientific exercise would only be of benefit to the field.

Last but not least, the very topic of elites expands the implications of this study beyond the field of academics, offering valuable data and analysis to policy makers and experts on the region.

- **Summary of the approach and research methodology including a list of research sites**

To examine the patterns and mechanisms of elite transformation, I use a combination of data gathering techniques- creating and comparing rosters of the political elite for the period 1989-1998; interviewing former and present members of the political elite and other individuals who may provide relevant information (journalists, dissidents, intellectuals); and analyzing party and government archival documents and media sources. The elite rosters intend to examine whether members of the old communist elite are present in the post-communist political and economic elite, and what is the nature of the changes on individual and structural level in terms of elite positions. This picture is supplemented with content analysis of newspapers, archival documents and interviews, the aim of which is to analyze the nature of the elite transition and its accompanying challenges and conflicts.

My goal during the grant period was to conduct the interviews, comprise the elite rosters using party and government archives, gather additional relevant information from those archives, and study literature from Bulgarian scholars unavailable in the US. I had already gathered the media source data during my research at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in the summer of 2006. The data gathered in the field is to be analyzed in the coming 2007-2008 academic year.

Throughout my field research in Bulgaria, I have conducted 30 in-depth interviews with present and former members of Parliament, former prime ministers and presidents, judges of the constitutional and supreme courts, former directors of large state enterprises, party functionaries, diplomats, journalists, experts and scholars. Due to the limited and restricted access to potential informants, I used a snowball sample, relying on personal contacts to schedule an interview and further expanding the network of contacts by asking the informants to connect me to other potential interviewees. The interviews provided a rich narrative of the transition from various perspectives- people who were and are still active in politics, people who retired or were ousted from politics, and people who became active in politics at a later point in the transition- as well as a collection of personal life histories that delineate patterns and mechanisms of the elite transformation.

I further examined the archives of the Bulgarian Communist Party for 1988 and 1989, located at the Department of State Archives. The purpose of this examination was to detect any intra-elite

conflicts and indications of dissident activities before the collapse of communism in November 1989, as well as to obtain lists of high-ranking party functionaries.

At the National Library, I examined the archives of “Durzhaven Vestnik”, the official state publication, for 1988-1998. This newspaper publishes new laws, changes to existing laws, structural and personnel changes of all government institutions in all branches of government.

I also examined the archives of the Library of Parliament, from where I obtained lists and biographies of members of Parliament for the period 1990-1997. I used the data gathered from “Durzhaven vestnik”, the Library of Parliament and official government websites, to comprise the elite roasters. I comprised such roasters for the starting year, 1989, and the years in which there were Parliamentary elections- 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997.

Finally, I collected and read large volumes of literature on the Bulgarian transition by Bulgarian scholars and political figures. The literature ranges from historical accounts of the transition, memoirs of politicians from the entire political spectrum, scholarly research by political scientists, sociologists, economists and anthropologists, and statistical analysis. Some of these books I received as presents from people I met, others I obtained at university bookstores, several social science bookstores in Sofia, and the National Library. At the Central Technical Library, I was able to find all dissertations and publications in Bulgarian academic journals on the topic of elites and other related topics. This literature gave me a unique local perspective on the transition in general and more specifically on elite change, processes of democratization, economic reform, public policy and foreign policy reorientation, as well as a detailed account of the events of the 1989-1998 period.

- **Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions**

My research examines the transformation of the Bulgarian political elite in the period of transition. I focus on the communist elite and analyze its transformation during the transition period. The questions I ask are: What happened to the communist elite in the period of transition? Did it manage to preserve its power (and how)? Was it challenged by an organized counter-elite? Where did the challenge to the old elite come from? Who were the challengers?

I argue against the dominant theoretical framework which characterizes elite change in Eastern Europe as either reproduction or circulation- reproduction suggesting the old communist elite managed to survive at the top of the class structure, and circulation implying elite turnover. Such conceptualization oversimplifies the process of elite transformation in Eastern Europe and misinterprets the terms “circulation” and “reproduction”. Drawing on classical elite theory of Mosca and Pareto, I argue that circulation and reproduction are not self-excluding processes but mechanisms of elite renewal which can occur simultaneously. The elite at any point in time is subject to both change and continuity, it is almost never completely replaced by a counter-elite, but neither is it ever static. Furthermore, circulation *per se* does not indicate the presence of an organized counter-elite. Elite change occurs even when there is no counter-elite. Circulation is often an auto-transformative mechanism adopted by the ruling elite in order to recruit new members into the elite, outside of the usual pool of recruitment and with qualities appealing to the masses. Reproduction, in turn, does not necessarily mean that the same people remained in power, but rather that the new members recruited into the elite have the same background and qualities as members of the ruling elite (subscribe to the same value system, loyal to the same party, etc.). Another factor not to be ignored in the process of elite transformation is the nature and intensity of intra-elite conflict. Such conflict could be just as powerful agent of change as challenges from a counter-elite. Intra-elite conflict is particularly important in the context of one-party systems where the only legitimate contestation of power could come from within the party.

I argue that two factors determine the nature of elite transformation- the presence of a counter-elite (or contestation) and the degree to which this elite is organized, and the stability of the auto-transformative mechanisms of the ruling elite (i.e. intra-elite conflict and modes of recruitment).

To study elite transformation in Bulgaria, then, I need to determine whether there was intra-elite conflict within the ruling communist elite; what was the nature and intensity of that conflict; was there an organized counter-elite; where did the counter-elite come from and how did it organize itself; to what extent was the counter-elite able to challenge the power of the communist ruling elite; what is the difference in the composition of the communist and post-communist elite; did the mechanisms of elite recruitment change, and how.

I begin my inquiry at the starting point, i.e. with the communist elite intact, rather than working back from the post-communist elite. In that way I do not assume elite turnover (a fallacy of more than one elite study), I am able to trace the fate of the communist elite and identify new spheres of power to where that elite might have transferred (e.g. private banking sector, foreign aid agencies, NGOs). Moreover, I am able to examine the process of elite transformation following its natural occurrence.

I now proceed to address the research questions. The data gathered during the grant period is yet to be processed and analyzed. The findings and conclusions I present here, therefore, are only preliminary and do not claim to prove or disprove existing theories or hypothesis.

The Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) has been subject to internal conflict since the early years of its existence, the most obvious example being the split in 1903 into social democrats and narrow socialists (later communists). Establishing a totalitarian, one-party regime did not purge the party from such conflict. Although conflicts within the party always manifested themselves along ideological lines, the source of such conflict in the 1980s was largely economic. The early 80s were characterized by a deepening economic crisis and an exponential increase of the foreign debt. Despite structuring and restructuring of the economy, all attempts to heal and patch the planned economy model failed. In 1987, the party-state was forced to pass legislation allowing self-government of state enterprises and small-scale entrepreneurship. It was this legislation that defined the split within the party between reformers and hardliners. Reformers advocated a model of democratic socialism with no change to the political system but with the introduction of market mechanisms to the economy. Hardliners, on the other hand, insisted on preserving the command economy at all cost. With Gorbachev's reforms of "glasnost" and "perestroika" ongoing in the USSR, it was the reformers who had Moscow's sympathies and, therefore, the upper hand in the conflict. The rapidly evolving domino effect of democratization in Central Europe urged the reformers to take preemptive action. Not without Moscow's blessing, the 35-year party and state leader, Todor Zhivkov, was removed from power at a party plenary meeting on November 10th, 1989, a day after the fall of the Berlin wall. In very rough and simplified terms, we can conclude that it was the reformers who prevailed in this intra-elite conflict and proceeded to reform and lead the party into the Bulgarian transition.

Having established the nature and intensity of the intra-elite conflict, let us now see what happened to the old communist elite after 1989. Politburo members, members of the Secretariat of BCP and Zhivkov's most trusted allies left the political arena. Due to the overall old age of the members of the top party leadership, many are today deceased. Several of them, including Zhivkov, were tried and imprisoned for misuse of power and for causing "political and economic deformations" to the country. The high-ranking officials who "survived" the transition and preserved their political status were mainly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Ministry of Economy and Planning. Or in other words, people

who had access and control over well-established international and domestic networks. The ranks of the party and the first two socialist¹ governments were filled with less publicly known functionaries and cohorts of the communist youth organization “The Comsomol”, all of which loyal to the party. Despite the split of a couple of factions from the party into new independent parties (the Euroleft, the Party of Alternative Socialism), the new faces in the now Socialist Party cemented their influence and positions. Many of the socialist members of Parliament in 1990 could be found in sequent Parliaments all through 1998 and even today.

One interpretation of the Bulgarian transition is that the old communist elite transformed its political power into economic. In the party archives I found evidence of several instances of high-ranking party officials exporting government money in 1987-1988 in the form of capital for joint ventures between the Bulgarian state and western companies, which they presumably took possession of with the collapse of the system. What is known is that those funds were never accounted for but there is no further evidence. There are members of the old communist elite who left politics and moved to the economic sphere, i.e. the newly shaped private sector, and who, undoubtedly, made use of their political connections. It is hard to estimate the extent of such occurrence, as the publicly available information on private firms is much more limited. My preliminary conclusions therefore, neither prove nor disprove this hypotheses.

One of the main factors in elite change, as I mentioned above, is the presence of a counter-elite and the degree to which this elite is organized. Unlike, Poland or Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria witnessed no dissident movements until 1988. Dissident activities until then were limited to isolated acts by individual dissidents such as books and other forms of artistic expression explicitly or implicitly criticizing the party-state, and publications or statements in Western media, especially Radio Free Europe. Organized dissident movements did not appear until 1987, but they really started gaining momentum in late 1988. Such movements organized around ecological and human rights issues, such as air pollution in Ruse, one of the Danube cities, and the renaming and expulsion of the ethnic Turkish population. The latter issue caused fierce international critique and was even the subject of a special UN session. Another major dissident initiative was the founding of the Club in Support of Glasnost and Perestroika. Many of the participants and especially the leaders of the club were party members, a strategy used to prevent repression from the security services. Membership in these organizations was overlapping and the total number of people involved did not exceed 150.

The opposition organized in December 1989 under the name United Democratic Forces (UDF). The Communist Party and UDF started round table discussions in January with the goal of agreeing on the terms of the transition and the first democratic elections. The UDF represented a loosely connected group of people sharing the same political ideas rather than an organized movement. It initially organized around known dissidents and it quickly included over 15 organizations- pre 1944-parties which were now revived, newly found professional unions, and a myriad of movements and associations. The UDF had no structure and no resources, no regional organizations, no statutes, no platform, no building or even a printer. Its membership was quickly growing, being open to anyone, with many former communist party members joining the union. However, there was no particular mode of recruiting or training cadres, no experience of its leadership and no trust among it. The task facing the UDF was insurmountable- building organizational structure, finding leadership, mobilizing the electorate, and the hardest of all, facing the communist party. The loss of the first democratic elections did not help and resulted in a lot of chaos and regrouping. It was not until 1997 that the UDF managed to organize, firmly take power and govern for a full term.

One of the myths of the Bulgarian transition is that the Communist party and the state security services infiltrated the UDF with the purpose of sabotaging its activities. An even bolder version

¹ The Bulgarian Communist Party renamed itself to the Bulgarian Socialist Party in early 1990.

of this myth as that BCP intended to fabricate its own opposition in the face of UDF, thus preserving power and establishing a façade democracy. The Commission for Opening of the Secret Files of the State Security Services indeed did confirm that several of the prominent UDF leaders in the 90s were informants, agents or in some way involved with the services. Many of the UDF leaders I interviewed confirmed this statement and said they were expecting the Secret Service to attempt to infiltrate the organization. There is debate, however, as to the effects of such action. On the one hand, there is no indication in the files whether these people collaborated of their own will or were forced to do so. On the other hand, it is hard to assign the failures and obstacles facing the UDF in that period to the presence of informants alone. My research indicates that there is some truth to the infiltration hypothesis and it should not be disregarded as a conspiracy theory. However, the myth of a fabricated opposition, in my opinion, is exactly this- a myth.

In summary, my findings indicate the presence of an intra-elite conflict in the Communist party which intensified after 1987, and no presence of an organized counter-elite before December 1989. The mode of recruitment in the Communist, later Socialist party did not significantly change after 1989. Cadres were drawn from its youth and regional organizations, based primarily on loyalty. Recruitment to the UDF, on the other hand, remained extremely chaotic and indiscriminate, which resulted in both lack of expertise and trust within the union. The counter-elite (UDF) did not pose a serious challenge to the old communist elite until 1991 when it won the elections with a close margin but did not manage to govern for a full term. We notice a lot of continuity in the Socialist party elite from 1990 to 1998. In the UDF, in contrast, we observe continuous grouping and regrouping which remains the norm until today. In addressing the research questions, I conclude that a large part of the old communist elite managed to preserve its position of power. The part which persevered was the younger and market-oriented functionaries who had access to international and domestic financial and economic networks. In terms of elite transformation, therefore, there is significant difference between Bulgaria and the post-communist countries in Central Europe. Hence, the elite variable can explain part of the variance in the transition paths of the post-communist countries, and the relatively slower pace of the transition processes in Bulgaria.

- **Suggestions for future research**

An important aspect to be examined in the study of the Bulgarian elite is the connection between the political and economic elite. This connection is by no means unidimensional, i.e. from the political to the economic sphere. There are very few studies of Bulgarian economic elites and, to my knowledge, none exploring the political-economic link. Such study would not be an easy task, as one needs to be very creative in finding the appropriate research methods. It is hard to collect data on the economic elite and I expect that it would be even harder to find evidence of the link between political and economic elites. However, such inquiry would be extremely valuable to the study of East European transitions, as one of the defining characteristics of those transitions is the concurring and complete transformation of the political and economic systems.

In the field of comparative studies, I think it would be a valuable endeavor to further examine the elite variable in transitioning countries and in democratization processes. There is prolonged debate on how important is political leadership in transitions to democracy, especially among transitologists. Post-communist countries offer a unique opportunity for comparison not only within the group but also with other examples of democratization beyond the much explored Latin American comparison.

- **Recommendations for the US policy community**

First and foremost, I would caution against the assumption that a change of the system results in a change of the elite. As the Bulgarian case demonstrates, there are more than one branches of government where very little has changed in terms of mode of operation and people in power. An example which comes to mind is the Bulgarian judicial system, which has been the slowest and most difficult to reform. Furthermore the role of informal networks is still very present in Bulgaria. Such networks were quite necessary and efficient in the context of an economy of shortage. With the collapse of communism, however, these networks were not dissolved, but instead transferred their activities to other aspects of government and the economy.

Second, I would like to direct attention to the “ATAKA” phenomenon- a nationalistic party, which organized in very short time and managed to pass the Parliament threshold and send 3 members to the European Parliament. The emergence of a nationalistic party is not unusual in a post-communist country, as such tendencies for long did not have freedom of expression. What is interesting in the Bulgarian case is ATAKA’s flirtation with the Orthodox Church, producing a sort of Slavic nationalism. It is this particular link that I find concerning.