

How to cite this paper:

Georgiev, V. (2023). Delegitimation of the Bulgarian Parliamentary System. A Local Political Crisis in Times When the World is changing its Economic Paradigm. *Perspective Politice*. Special Issue. 179-184[17].

<https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/23.16.0.17>

Received: April 2023

Accepted: May 2023

Published: June 2023

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Article

Delegitimation of the Bulgarian Parliamentary System. A Local Political Crisis in Times When the World is changing its Economic Paradigm

Abstract: *The impossibility of forming a stable parliamentary majority in the last two years in Bulgaria adds additional weight to the arguments of various organizations supporting the idea of changing the form of government to a presidential republic. While the quality of the debate in the parliamentary process tends to follow a downward gradation, the presidential institution maintains a consistently high public approval. Meanwhile the official governments issued by the Presidential institution are characterized by a fundamentally different public communication from the traditionally accepted one. All this has one effect – it makes Bulgarian Parliamentary system seem not valid and not acceptable. The participation of the presidential institution in stimulating this process is indisputable. In the present paper will be analysed the process and reasons for the delegitimation of the Bulgarian parliamentary system in the light of the current political crisis and the beginning of changing the main political and economic paradigm in the world.*

Keywords: *constitution; neoliberalism; parliamentary system; productivism*

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis and the subsequent conflict between Russia and Ukraine caused significant changes in a number of aspects of public life. The slowdown and cessation of goods deliveries that started with the pandemic led to an acceleration of inflation and a financial crisis. On a regional scale, these consequences were further fuelled by the conflict in Ukraine, which led to the cessation of supplies of essential raw materials and energy sources to the region. All this inevitably affected both the system of international relations and the world economy, and additionally brought arguments in favour of the critics of neoliberalism as an economic paradigm. These upheavals brought initially political and now economic instability in Bulgaria. Political instability has been on the rise since the term of the country's 96th government ended in

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early 2021, after which the country spiralled into regular early parliamentary elections. This looping, on the one hand, further fuelled negativity and further undermined voters' distrust of parliament as an institution. On the other hand, the executive power came fully under the control of the presidential institution, which began to dictate the agenda in the country's governance, through the caretaker governments it appointed and by encouraging the creation of new political projects.

Along with all the problems caused by the over-empowerment of caretaker governments, it also caused another side effect that directly or indirectly increased the sense of internal resistance of the voters and further stimulated the delegitimization of the parliamentary system in the country. It is expressed in the voter's reaction, caused by a rebellion against the authority, embedded in the Bulgarian folk psychology. This Balkan variety of libertarianism, even as in the classical understanding of the term, is characterized by opposition to encroachment on personal rights and the right to private property. And since the state is the only entity that legally possesses the right to confiscate and impose sanctions on private property, the state's aggression is seen as more dangerous than the aggression of any individual. Unlike countries like the USA, the rule of law in Bulgaria has not yet reached the necessary height. The strict US Constitution and its uncompromising enforcement largely protect citizens from uncontrolled state action. In Bulgaria, however, the basic law of the state is very often interpreted and imposed in questionable ways, to say the least. As long as power is concentrated in one centre, interpretations of the Constitution and legislation are generally used both in favour of the power and against limitations on that same power. A suitable example of this is the case of the appointment by presidential decree of the person Kiril Petkov as caretaker Minister of the Economy in the official cabinet with Prime Minister Stefan Yanev. A case was opened in the Constitutional Court, which with 11 votes "FOR" and one dissenting opinion categorically declared the presidential decree appointing Kiril Petkov as caretaker Minister of Economy in the 97th Cabinet of the Republic of Bulgaria unconstitutional. The reason for this is that the person had dual citizenship at the time of his appointment as caretaker minister, and the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria expressly prohibits the president, vice president, deputies and ministers from having dual citizenship (Case 18/2021 of the Constitutional Court).

Loose interpretations of the constitution and the use of legislation against the restrictions on the single centre of power established over the past two years have made it increasingly difficult for mainstream political parties to win sufficient support to form a working regular government. Despite clear external assistance to some of the political parties, none of them has been able to win enough seats to form a functioning regular cabinet in the long term. On the other hand, anti-system political entities preaching more extreme political views are on the rise in this situation. On the current Bulgarian political scene, they are trying to use the methods of direct democracy to attract larger masses of citizens with voting rights, with the aim of including them to their political ideas. Instinctively or deliberately, the ultimate political subjects take advantage of legal restrictions at the national and supranational level to achieve their goals. By rebelling against legislative restrictions, they identify themselves as advocates for the rights and freedoms of the people, as defenders of the state and the sovereign, protecting them from "evil" politicians and corporations. This low opinion of politics and its processes is further fuelled by the extremely low level of political debate, especially in terms of rhetoric in the Bulgarian parliamentary process and practice. The obscene gestures in the meeting hall of the National Assembly and the clear disrespect of the authorities from the highest tribune in the state, hidden behind a youthful rebellious spirit, are the result of wild populism and a thirst

for media attention. However, the effect of these actions is multi-layered. One of the layers is expressed precisely in the collapse of trust in the highest legislative body in the country and the questioning of its effectiveness, abilities, capacity and meaning. Another political entity that also uses the methods of direct democracy to gather electoral support is the party of showman Slavi Trifonov – “There is such a people”. In 2016, the showman and his team successfully provoked a national referendum as a form of protest against the systemic political parties. The referendum concerned issues related to changing the electoral system by which the members of the parliament are elected, the introduction of compulsory voting, as well as the minimum amount of the subsidy for the parties represented in the parliament. Now his party is collecting signatures to trigger a national referendum with the following question: “Do you support the holding of elections for a Grand National Assembly to decide the issues of changes in the form of government from a parliamentary republic to a presidential republic?”. The issue can again be considered as a form of protest against the mainstream parties, but the very fact that the initiator is a political party, and one that was represented in parliament, raises doubts about the altruism and selflessness of the initiative. Undoubtedly these actions actively contributed to reducing trust in the parliament and strengthening the delegitimization of the parliamentary system in Bulgaria.

The de facto ability of the state to function without the presence of a constituted parliament also raises doubts among some groups of society about the need to form one. However, such a hypothesis contradicts the basic precepts of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. The collision is not only with the provisions of Art. 1, which states that “Bulgaria shall be a republic with a parliamentary form of government” (Constitution of Bulgaria). The controversy also arises regarding the spirit of the caretaker governments, whose first and main task, according to the Constitution, is to organize the next parliamentary elections in a transparent and fair manner. However, this is not how the circumstances develop in practice. For example, Bulgaria’s 100th government operates from August 2, 2022 to February 3, 2023, when it is formally dissolved by the President and appointed for the next term on the same day. Even the composition of the cabinet is almost completely preserved. The only change from the 21 members of the team is regarding the Minister of Culture. In a similar way, the situation is with the official offices with Prime Minister Stefan Yanev in 2021, with the first caretaker government with Prime Minister Yanev setting an absolute record for duration in Bulgarian history. On the face of it, this does not appear to be a significant problem and is conveniently presented as a coincidence and the result of the inability of the political parties to do their job. However, the procedural gripes of handing over the investigative mandates and their unjustified prolongation bring to the fore the real motivations for these actions, namely to continue and consolidate the presidential institution as the sole and infallible centre of power.

2. The delegitimization of the parliament – part of the process of weakening the traditional left and building a new political project

The increasingly tangible entry of new technologies and their products – social networks, social media, and the means of instant communication in the field of politics – radically change the ideas about the structure of political entities. Cases of forming political parties as a result of online activities and user-voter profiling are becoming more frequent. “Political architects”

skilfully use the services provided by social networks to discover “niches” in which to place their political products. Not a small part of the newly emerged political entities do not have any structures in the populated areas at all and apparently do not make efforts to form such. Instead, their efforts are mainly focused on PR campaigns on the most visited social networks and media, as well as on the largest video sharing platforms. The ideological determination of those subjects is an extremely difficult task. The policies they propose (and sometimes implement) are characteristic of different parts of the traditional left-right political spectrum. It is as if we are witnessing the beginning of the end of classical ideological distinctions. If something is coming to an end in Bulgarian political life, it is the systemic left party, which for more than 100 years has been actively involved in setting the agenda in Bulgarian politics – the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Over the past few years, voter support for the party has been on a downward trend. From the second political force, which won 1/3 of the mandates in the National Assembly in 2017, in 2022 the party achieved only fifth place in terms of support. The factors for this decline are many, but undoubtedly one of them is the inability of the aging mass of their supporters to vote through the new electronic means of voting. The breakaway and incorporation of important working structures from the party to other political entities also contributes to the weakening of the BSP. It seems that the latter is a process managed by the presidential institution. Politicians who are part of the internal opposition in the Bulgarian Socialist Party appear in the last two offices. Some of them are publicly known to be trailing whole factions of the party. The results by municipalities of the parliamentary elections held in November 2021 clearly showed a spillover of votes from BSP mayors in the new political project “Continuing the change” supported by the president at the time. From the actions taken in recent months, there is a doubt that the circles around the presidential institution at this stage are working to create a new political project. The vacuum that, under their pressure, is formed in the left part of the political spectrum in Bulgaria definitely creates a favourable environment for the birth of a new left or centre-left project. Given the fact that President Rumen Radev was nominated for his first term by the BSP, logic confirms that if he decides to finish what he started and form a real political project, he should be ideologically located on the left side of the spectrum. The other possible development is, at a later stage, to work towards the removal of the current chairman of the party – Kornelia Ninova and control of the organization, after which to undertake its gradual reformation and updating according to modern trends.

However, to what extent would a new project based on traditional socialism or social democracy be adequate in modern conditions? Capitalism is characterized by being “flexible and susceptible to change” Sartori (1992: 222). In contrast, socialism and social democracy are not very capable of adapting and renewing. They are based on a more mechanical model of social life that does not work in globalized societies. Namely, this is the effect of the rapid entry of social networks into the lives of ordinary people – it allows the social, political, economic, technical and cultural interconnections and relations between individual countries, organizations and peoples to grow at an amazingly fast pace. This catalytic effect leads to the rapid intensification of the process of globalization, which is why the model of social life under classical left politics is not adequate in the modern conditions of “reflexive modernization” Giddens (1994). A workable alternative in this case could be a policy that gives freedom to individuals to set the direction of the development of things themselves, limited, however, by some regulated frameworks. Freedom in its many dimensions is elevated as a fundamental value for modern globalized societies. And it is precisely this that must be taken into account when creating the new political projects, even if they tend to the traditional left. Dialogicity as an instrument

of democracy is increasingly entering all levels of life in modern democratic globalized societies, as a result of which we are witnessing a process of overcoming the traditional left-right division. Accordingly, these prerequisites lead us to the idea that a project categorized as a radical centre would be adequate for the modern conditions in Bulgaria. One that brings together ideas from philosophical conservatism while retaining some of the core values usually associated with socialism – still firmly connected to much of the country’s electorate. The free movement of people and goods since the country became a member of the European Union has led to increased calls for statism. A large part of able-bodied Bulgarians became convinced of the need for such measures after they took positions in the German labour market and saw for themselves the success and high efficiency of the German social market economy.

Taking into account all these circumstances, one possible scenario for a logical development in political and economic aspects, both at the global and local level, we find in productivism. According to international political economy researcher Dani Rodrik, productivism has the full potential to become the new economic paradigm. He believes that signs of a fundamental reorientation towards delineating a framework for economic policy are increasingly being reported. “Modern forms of productivism believe less in markets, are suspicious of large corporations, emphasize production and investment over finance, and revitalization of local communities over globalization” (Rodrik, 2022). It can be likened to a modern form of *realpolitik* that foregrounds the national and emphasizes strengthening the local economy at the expense of limiting the impact of globalization on it (incomplete sentence). However, productivism seems quite adequate against the background of the process of overcoming the traditional left-right divide, as it has the potential to become a new political model that uses different parts of the entire political spectrum.

According to critics of neoliberalism, after the rise and fall of the Keynesian welfare state, it is time to part with neoliberalism as well. If today we are in fact in the midst of a transition from neoliberalism to another economic paradigm, it is not yet entirely clear what it is. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but if there’s one thing history teaches us, it’s that nature doesn’t tolerate vacuums. Something will occupy the weakening positions of neoliberalism, and if the classical left-right political division rejects this possibility, then the new realities arising as a result of the politics formed in social networks seem fully compatible with the ideas of productivism. According to some researchers, the political polarization covering the world pre-determines the impossibility of unification under the common umbrella of one ideology. But it is the universal ideological approach that is capable of uniting different views. The increasingly available means of instant communication have brought governments and civil society to the fore, giving them a significant role in spreading productive economic opportunities to all regions and segments of the workforce. According to Danny Rodrik: “Productivism... departs from the Keynesian welfare state, focusing less on redistribution, social transfers and macroeconomic management and more on supply-side measures to create good jobs for all. Productivism departs from both of its predecessors, reflecting a greater skepticism of technocrats and a less knee-jerk hostility to economic populism” (Rodrik, 2022).

In a national aspect, many of the countries show the first signs of these policies, in which the spirit of productivism is also reflected. Some of them were dictated by the pandemic and the subsequent financial and economic crisis. Such policies are most widely observed in the adoption of measures to facilitate the ecological transition of industry. Another measure of this kind was the restoration of domestic supply chains, which was carried out at the expense of

transnational corporations, thereby stimulating the creation of jobs in the national economy. The war in Ukraine also contributed to the continuation of the policies of productivism, especially in Europe, the USA and a part of the countries in Asia. The resulting delay and interruption of supplies for many of the raw materials naturally strengthened the processes of rebuilding domestic supply chains and encouraged policies to invest in local communities as much as possible in the face of inflation. Financed capitalism in the region surrounding the conflict, in particular in Bulgaria, seems increasingly less adequate to the new economic realities. If the rise in inflation continues at this rate, at some point pragmatism may prevail over political contradictions and this may be the tipping point where both the promotion of local manufacturing capacity and job creation will stand out as a top priority, uniting the political elite despite all ideological differences. Paradoxically, at this stage, it seems that the challenge to the imposition of productivism, both in Bulgaria and on a global scale, will be precisely in its perception by convinced socialists and social democrats, who recognize it as a weakness of left-wing policies. Mouffe (2005: 108). Whatever direction the new political philosophy and economic paradigm takes, it must inevitably depart from the political rationalism and rationalist premises of established leftist ideologies, as they are highly incompatible with the new Internet society. The same applies with full force to the possible new political project in Bulgaria, for which the first signs of construction are already being reported. The necessary cessation of labour conflicts and the creation of a community spirit to strengthen the dialogue between all groups in society can be achieved through the policies of productivism and this must inevitably be taken into account. But the return of the state to stability necessarily requires political stability. And it in itself is not compatible with a delegitimized parliamentary system.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author

Ventsislav Georgiev was born in 1990 in the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He has a bachelor's degree in Political Science, a master's degree in International Relations and master's degree in Diplomacy and National Security. In 2020 he successfully defends his PhD thesis in political sciences. Ventsislav Georgiev is employed in the University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. His main interests and works are in the field of Political philosophy and the impact of internet society over the political process.

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