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## Article

# The Ongoing Democratic Revolution in Bulgaria: Failure of a Change Model Under an External Scenario

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the dramatic vicissitudes of the political change in Bulgaria over the last three years. On July 9 2020 the President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev, with a raised fist and the slogan “Mutri (Mafia) out!” led a democratic revolution against the 10-year rule of Boyko Borissov. Mass protests began, which in the elections of April 4<sup>th</sup> 2021 for the first time took away the majority of his party. We were faced up with an incredible paradox: the process of change started as a people’s protest against corrupt governance and led to three years of sleeping of the political system, powerlessness and even more corrupt governance by a populist group tied to oligarchs and a financial pyramid. The US ambassador coordinated all attempts to resolve the crisis. The Party of the Change came to power with a shady financial and political support, and made a successful quadruple coalition at the end of 2021. It deepened the crisis with a chaotic six-month rule.*

*The conducted analysis is based on the application of the concept of disease to the explanation of political crisis in Bulgaria. It is expressed in the subor-*

*ditionation of institutions and parties to the interests of financial oligarchs and in the failure to resolve the problems of the citizens. The paper argues that the model of political change in the interests of democracy and citizens based on an outside scenario is predestined to failure if there are no mature democratic institutions and the parties serve only the financial oligarchy. The analysis is carried out from the point of view of J. Buchanan’s project of constitutional political economy in order*

*to make sense of the present-day political and social crisis in our country.*

**Keywords:** *democratic institutions; disease of the political system; external scenario; political change*

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## 1. Introduction. The disease of the political system in Bulgaria

In this article, I will try to develop in a theoretical aspect, with the means of the philosophy of politics, the idea of applying the concept

of disease to the explanation of the longest political crisis in the recent history of Bulgaria. It has been going on for almost three years now and started immediately after the pandemic. Extraordinary elections were held five times in Bulgaria and a regular government was not formed for a long time. The democratic revolution began as a war against corruption and led to heavy accusations of corruption and lobbying for some of the forces that organized the protests. Our country is about to become an example of how the conditions for corruption can be increased through a democratic revolution against corruption. The largest right-wing political coalitions do not understand each other, are mired in personality conflicts and rely on external management of their potential coalition.

Seeking external medical help is a tradition in Bulgarian political history. In recent years, all parties have been looking for help from outside, and none of them has offered a model for the new construction of democracy in our country – such that could solve the most important social problems.

This notion of illness has entered our lives quite aggressively with the global pandemic and the decree-based rule initiated by global factors. It would be interesting to answer the question whether in this ridiculous situation we cannot find a symptom of an overall disease of modern politics and law. In its Constitution dated 04/07/1948, the World Health Organization defines only the concept of health as a state of “complete physical, spiritual and social well-being” (WHO 1948); it is related to the presence or absence of disease. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines disease as “a harmful deviation from the normal structural and functional state of the organism, usually associated with signs and symptoms and distinguished by the nature of the physical consequences” (Encyclopedia, 2023). Having experienced in the last two and a half years the submission of societies in almost all countries to severe restrictions motivated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, we cannot but ask ourselves the logical question whether the concept of disease is applicable not only to individuals but also to some of the most important human activities such as law and politics? They were subordinated to the pandemic announced by the WHO and somewhat meekly began to retreat from age-old values on which the modern world is built, such as freedom and human rights, solidarity and social communication.

Politics is a social activity that finds expression in the making of collective decisions, considered good, or good, by the parties participating in them. Politics is an activity in which people agree on joint actions with a view to achieving a certain goal or imposing a certain common will as authoritative through relevant socially recognized mechanisms – elections or by authoritarian means.

In democratic countries, politicians are elected by the citizens and must serve the interests of society. One of the oldest problems of political thought is how to get the state bureaucracy to do what it was elected to do and not succumb to corruption. In the following lines, we will critically discuss one of the popular solutions – that of the constitutional political economy. In much of the following analysis, I refer to the example of our country’s political system, which is experiencing a serious illness.

In the long-term political crisis in our country, all the characteristics of a chronic disease have manifested themselves. A symptom of this is the search for external scenarios and external support for the treatment – found in the face of foreign embassies and European politicians.

Politics suffers when private or corporate interests are disguised as common, and this turns out to be a major obstacle to the effective solution of citizens’ problems. In today’s collective West, such a process is developing everywhere – from Washington to Brussels and other Eu-

ropean capitals. The closure of the political elite and the confiscation of the decisions of the institutions is a negative process. The transformation of politics into a business where some individuals seeking to enter the political elite seek a return on their investment is a symptom of a long-standing disease. This leads to a decreasing economy of the policies, associated with the diversion of public funds, and also to zero efficiency, i.e. success in achieving the set goals for serving public interests.

The next wave of corruption came with carbon trading and the “Green Deal”. Once again, some corporations expect to gain a lot from the reorientation of the economy to renewables, but for many reasons this project has become a collapsing utopia.

The lack of justice and the prospect of its realization in the present-day society is also indicative of the sickness of today’s politics. The degeneration of the liberal society into neoliberal elitist is at the heart of this process, and it can only be countered by the collective protest actions of citizens.

## 2. The people vs. the corrupted system of government

In an attempt to find a theoretical explanation of the crisis in this chapter I analyse the dramatic vicissitudes of political change in Bulgaria over the last three years. In our country, once again after 1997 and 2013, protests were held, caused by dissatisfaction from different groups and strata and the rooted utopia of changing the system: even “protest” parties were formed. Outraged citizens in the big cities demonstrated for hundreds of days, built tents in the centre of Sofia and demanded quick reforms, justice for everyone and the resignation of the chief prosecutor. The debates caused by the critical events did not seem to lead to a substantial opposition to programs and concepts for the future of Bulgaria and to solving the problems of our society, but only to the accumulation of the protest “energy” in several political subjects, three successive elections of MPs resulting in an inoperable parliament, without the opportunity and desire to reach an agreement on common principles and values. Now another election is underway, and according to an external scenario, a political project charged in a strange way is expected to fix things. And at the same time we have a deepening economic and social crisis. The short-sighted policy of the EU led to an unprecedented rise in electricity prices and the crisis became an energy crisis. The situation seems to have never been more hopeless to find a meaningful alternative, and the majority of people are rushing from one escape route to another.

On 9<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev with a raised fist and the slogan “Mutri (Mafia) out!” led a democratic revolution against the 10-year rule of Boyko Borissov. Mass protests began, which in the elections of 4<sup>th</sup> April 2021 for the first time took away the majority of his party. We were faced up with an incredible paradox: the process of change started as a people’s protest against corrupt governance and led to three years of sleeping of the political system, powerlessness and even more corrupt governance by a populist group tied to oligarchs and a financial pyramid. They built a political structure with a ridiculous name *We Continue the Change!* President Biden presented the name of the future Prime Minister, Kiril Petkov, on a piece of paper, and the US ambassador coordinated all attempts to resolve the crisis. The party of the change came to power with shady financial and political support, and made a successful quadruple coalition at the end 2021.

How can this outburst of discontent be explained? We can start the explanation further – from the wrong transition according to a neoliberal scenario. The reasons are cumulative in the

three decades of transition to a capitalist market economy. The countries in transition in Eastern Europe were forcibly blocked on their way to pluralist democracy and market economy in favour of an undeveloped capitalist development model. For our country, it was a huge historical failure in the economic and human development. Bulgaria fell more than 20 places down in the ranking of the human development index. Our economy has become 70% private and much weaker, and privatization has not brought in revenue.

Today, more than three decades after the beginning of the transition, Bulgarians live in a society with huge social disparities, unknown in our history, an irresponsible and externally controlled elite and no prospect of living at the level of the other EU countries. Today, we are facing energy, economic and political crises at the same time. The social, health and education systems have fallen into a permanent crisis. About 1/5 of the population have looked for work and a better life abroad.

### **3. Paths of political change according to an external scenario**

Since the beginning of the political crisis, changes in our country have developed according to external scenarios. The US and EU allies are interested in secure governance in Bulgaria. Bulgaria was forced with American influence to freeze the project for a nuclear power plant in Belene. Thus, we will not be able to replace coal-fired power plants with anything in 10-15 years. Due to unscrupulous pressure from Brussels and the betrayal of the new Bulgarian politicians, we have to give up the coal plants within three years, which will lead to the release of 100,000 workers. The sale of carbon allowances and the free trade of electricity have skyrocketed prices and threatened business with disaster. Borissov completed TurkStream in one year, while there was a power struggle in the United States, and Hungary, Serbia and he personally won the new pipeline. The corrupted government of GERB did not offer any prospects for solving the problems. It worked with several financial oligarchs and rigged public procurements. Data on corruption and money under the table were in all spheres.

Crucial to the success of the protests was the support of the United States and its embassy. They backed the rebellion of the President Radev, who is a former NATO aviation general and most active in the Three Seas initiative.

Borissov's regime destroyed democracy as a government of institutions and turned the Parliament into a mailbox and a servant of the government. The opposition and the media were deprived of power as part of a corrupt environment. The media served the government as a letter box almost as it did in the socialist era. Politicians from the People's Party in Europe defended Borissov. In the April 4<sup>th</sup> 2021 election, Borissov lost his party's majority for the first time and was ousted. The protest parties did not reach a consensus for a government and new elections were carried out on July 11<sup>th</sup> 2021. The result was the same.

The old "urban" right of the Democratic Bulgaria party wanted to rule on its own. The position of the party of the TV showman Slavi Trifonov and his screenwriters from a private television was similar. The latter had the most votes on July 11<sup>th</sup>: many young people and Bulgarians from abroad supported them in order to destroy the status quo. Protest parties hit a dead end in trying to create an alternative government. The next three choices cemented the stalemate.

The result of this impasse is four non-functioning parliaments, blocking the work of the government and the impossibility to make a good Recovery and Development Plan. Funding

for this plan has been delayed for two years, and now everything is about to fail. At the same time, the energy crisis began, which hit business and prices went up.

Miners began protests against the closure of coal-fired power plants. Road builders were forced by Borissov to demand unpaid funds. In this situation, the foreign mentors of the protests sought an unusual solution. In July 2021, Biden congratulated Kiril Petkov, a Bulgarian businessman who had emigrated to Canada, for his work as presidential minister against corruption. It turned out that he was appointed contrary to the Constitution, which prohibits ministers from being citizens of other countries.

The two presidential ministers Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev started a political project promising right-wing politics and left-wing measures. The main promise is to fight corruption, imprison thieves and reform the judiciary. Their name was populist: *We Continue the Change!*, and the campaign was carried out by an Israeli PR company. Fictitious Facebook groups were created demanding that Petkov be prime minister. The management of *We Continue the Change* was a sad comedy of lies, mistakes, ill-considered actions. In the conditions of a food and energy crisis, our country was brought to economic collapse.

The next three elections cemented the stalemate. The inexperience and incompetence of the parties of change are very close to leading to the complete rehabilitation of Borisov, who is counting on forming his own coalition with the party of the Turkish minority and governing through proxies.

The lack of justice and the prospect of its realization in modern society is also indicative of the sickness of today's politics. The degeneration of liberal society into neoliberal elitist authoritarianism is at the heart of this process, and it can only be countered by the collective protest actions of citizens.

Even more alarming symptoms of the disease of today's politics are the declining quality of the representatives of the political elite, as this applies not only to Bulgaria, and the associated with this process the increasing representativeness of the democratic institutions. This finds expression in the ever smaller percentage of those willing to participate in the elections and the miserable results of the parties that claim to represent some public interests. Can they transcend their role as corporate coterie serving the interests of select oligarchs? The emergence of parties with real representation of public interests is practically blocked by the unfree media environment, the limited opportunities for effective political communication and discussion and the weak will of Bulgarian politicians, who always look to external forces.

In the following lines, I will try to analyse whether the change is possible according to internal scenarios and motives, as the citizens are stimulated to review the hitherto unsuccessful constitutive rules of the Bulgarian democracy. I will use the theoretical toolkit of constitutional political economy created by James Buchanan and his school.

#### **4. Constitutional reform and the principle of the common good**

The neoliberal transition in our country in three decades has led to an economy with almost 70% private ownership, huge and deepening economic and social inequalities, weak statehood and ties of politicians to a few oligarchs, who stole the lion's share of state contracts and through their media and connections directed public awareness and expectations in a desired direction. Democratic-minded people have been asking themselves for three decades, can we start over? Why do all the rulers and state bureaucrats look to arrange themselves first and

foremost? What is the point of fighting corruption if it is an inevitable part of the existence of civil servants and the functioning of our capitalism? How to organize our country according to rational principles that guarantee justice and development? We need to rethink the prospects for social and political change using other, less well-worn explanatory concepts.

The rationality of politics is centred around collective decisions. In this article, I would like to draw attention to an authoritative and quite innovative liberal philosophical-political project that comes from the theories of social choice and could serve us to find heuristic guidelines for a way out of the current deepening crisis. It is about the constitutional political economy of the American political scientists J. Buchanan and G. Tullock, who believe that the elector can bet on a choice according to the maximization of the social utility function by obeying the rational rules of the political system built by all and understand that this choice brings them a greater value of the benefit of individual maximization (Buchanan and Tullock, 1999). These political thinkers seek an answer to the question of how to constitute the joint activity of people on the basis of rules, so that the bureaucracy is made to work for the interests of society and everyone can exchange the products of their activity in mutual interest. Buchanan and Tullock (1999) try to solve the classic question of combining the economic interest of the market with moral principles and values, selfishness with altruism. Utilitarianism overcomes it only partially by calculating individual utility functions and postulating the morality of the choice that maximizes happiness for the greatest number of people (Mill, 1863).

Buchanan and Tullock (1999) try to revive in a new shell the theories of the social contract and make sense of the subordination of selfish interests to the construction of constitutive rules that build on new foundations the common life of people. These theories have always been criticized for trying to explain how a society of egoists is created.

However, there is sufficient reason to argue that it is a utopian project, a project to explain politics and political behaviour, which unsuccessfully tries to overcome the shortcomings and extremes of neoliberalism by infusing it with a little conservative spirit. If neoliberalism substantiates an individualistic understanding of society as a conflict and coordination of selfish strategies, the followers of constitutional political economy try to explain social choice as a decision to play for the interest of the collective, i.e. of society, understood as a collection of selfish individuals, in the name of personal gain and well-constructed structural (constitutive) rules. From a philosophical point of view, there is no fundamental difference between the two models – they are based on nominalist premises with a rejection of the existence of common entities such as “society”, “community”, “people” and the legitimacy of a similar type of interest. Unfortunately, however, the motivation behind our protests to “change the system” is far more utopian because it assumes that this is possible by replacing some bureaucrats (“corrupt”) with others (“honest”). And the strangest thing is that the Bulgarian does not learn from failures at all and continues to willingly submit to manipulations, does not try to see through a world of lies. It is a sad fact that the belief in an external saviour is something from which a Bulgarian can hardly be cured – whether it is a former king, young Bulgarians with prestigious diplomas or representatives of the global elite with questionable financial means.

It cannot be denied that the innovative neoliberal perspective discussed here provides a good opportunity to consider the possibilities for change before our “protest” movements. Can the system be changed, without changing the social order, the forms of property and in a bloodless way? What do two American theorists suggest?

The fact that the constitutional political economy, unlike neoliberalism, does not throw itself into the absolutization of the free market as a regulator and its blind combination of interests can be particularly positively evaluated. They do not assume that agents are omniscient entities who make decisions about the current market situation or the balances in it. Everything related to the political market is considered within the concept of a rule-defined institution. This line brings the solution of these authors closer to conservatism, for whom democracy is the governance of institutions.

In the analysis of public choice, constitutional political economy emphasizes the choice among constraints, rather than the choice within certain constraints, which is characteristic of the approach of traditional economic theory (Buchanan, 2008: 281-284).

So, for example, if someone enters a hypermarket, they take into account their financial means, look for goods that they need and orient themselves by the prices. As for the Bulgarians, they fight against the rise in prices by following promotions and do very limited shopping. So this cannot serve as a model of political choice. Constitutional political economy is not interested in the economy, but in politics, so it is not individual choices in the private sphere, but collective public decisions that are essential for it. Constitutional political choice refers to choosing the rules for the collective life of a certain politically formed community, although the mechanism for making such decisions is similar to that in the economic sphere. Joint activity and cooperation between individuals takes place thanks to economic calculations of gains and losses, i.e., thinking in terms of profit derived from the exchange of certain political goods. Individuals comply with the constraint on their behaviour by relying on the fact that the behaviour of others is also subject to similar constraints.

It can immediately be objected that our market in Bulgaria for political goods is substantially devalued. Parties try to keep some face in their propaganda only in an effort to find an easier way to power and participation at the table paid for with public funds. The limitations of political choice are also supplemented by the fact that our political structures are substantively deprived of sovereignty and most often work according to already written scenarios – in the USA, in Brussels or in the castle of some oligarch.

## **5. Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the project of constitutional political economy tries to take a step forward compared to other liberal and neoliberal schools in explaining the political, but to a very large extent it remains close to classical liberalism and modern libertarianism. A contribution to this tradition is the effort to redefine competition and the social contract on the scale of the broadly understood notion of social constraints defined by constitutive rules. It remains to conclude that we need a general revision of the constitutive rules of our today's "transitional" democracy, and above all that this must be done as a result of a general agreement between all those involved in political and institutional life.

Public choice theorists believe that in the 20th century, faith in the good-producing invisible hand of the market collapsed. It has been replaced by a belief in the mission of the state as an all-powerful institution concerned with the welfare of its citizens. Etatism is especially strong in our country too, although it merges with expectations that someone will save us. Liberals insist that experience teaches that by restricting the freedom of individuals, the state fails to ensure the well-being of society. Increasing government intervention in economic and indi-



vidual market activities leads to growth in bureaucracy, inefficient management and waste of natural resources. Therefore, the limits of government intervention must be established in the social contract and fixed in the constitution. “The problem is to build an apparatus,” concludes Tullok, “that leads bureaucrats through their self-interest to serve the interests of others, in the same way that the baker is led by his self-interest to satisfy the needs of the tailor” (Tullok, 2000: 53). One cannot fail to recognize the originality of this approach – it does not rely on the blind regulation of the market, but on its natural regulation through policies that realize the bureaucrats’ own interest in working for the common good. It cannot but be pointed out here that it is about searching for a way out of the dead end of neoliberal models.

That is what the constitutional rules are for – to limit the extraordinary expansion of powers and claims of power to limit the freedom of economic activity. A specifically interpreted liberal methodological individualism leads to the definition of constitutional political economy as a science of limitations. By emphasizing self-constraints, its representatives overcome the approach of traditional economists who analyse individual choices only in the context of external constraints. If we choose apples instead of pears in the store, it means that we limit ourselves to the use of pears at the expense of apples.

Liberalism tries to reconcile the freedom of the individual with the existence of the state within an individualistic concept that states that the individual makes his own free choice by voluntarily imposing limitations on his actions in collective decisions. These constraints take the form of rules or institutions that rely on coercion.

The elections that take place after the adoption of the initial constitutional rules cannot be realized on the basis of impartiality, as in Rawls, because they are related to open conflicts of individuals and groups fighting for profits. Constitutionally elected government is conceived by public choice theorists as a group of individuals who seek to make the most of their positions for personal gain, even though the scope of their recognized authority may be limited. At the same time, politics, according to Buchanan and Tullock, can be seen as “a complex multi-person system of contract exchange”. “The rules of political order can also establish the limits within which political structures can operate and, indeed, the most explicit discussions of constitutional change involve questions of defining the limits of political, not so much personal, power” (Buchanan and Tullok, 2000: 30-31).

One cannot but define as utopian the concept that the original rules constituting the political order are accepted by all by common consent, impartially and without thought of private interest, while the latter reappears in the confrontation of pressure groups in current politics. of Classical contract theory, has always struggled to explain the consent to submit competing individual interests to the control of an external institution. The connection with tradition seems more than obvious. Both start from the unrealistic premises of individualism and nominalism.

But there is also something very endearing about the revived liberal faith in free choice. The greatest freedom of the individual is to choose the democratic structure of the society in which they live. This is one of the deepest values in which public choice theorists believe. However, they plead for a liberalism enhanced by conservative innovation, which itself can be treated as an innovative and heuristic core in the project. These conservative undertones rest on the rule-based construction of the state and institutions, on tying the possibilities of government intervention to a shared common norm from which the public interest is derived. The most important tasks before the development of our country, related to finding ways to make the bureaucracy work for the interests of the citizens, and our country to protect its sovereignty can

be solved in this way. However, this goes before the agreement of the political forces not only on priorities over economic and social development, but also on new rules of the “game” by changing the constitution. Law and constitutional procedures alone cannot restore trampled justice; the path to this requires civil pressure on politicians for social and political change.

The general conclusion is that the model of political change in Bulgaria in the interests of democracy and citizens based on an outside scenario is predestined to failure if there are no mature democratic institutions and the parties serve only the financial oligarchy.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## About the author

Pepa Bouzova is Assistant Professor, doctor in Philosophy of Law and Politics, born 1982. She has a master’s degree in Law and Economics. Since 2021, she has been a full-time lecturer at the Department of Philosophical Sciences of the Faculty of Philosophy of Veliko Tarnovo University. She teaches logic, philosophy of law and philosophy of economics. Pepa Bouzova has 13 published papers in Bulgaria, Poland and Romania.

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