How do you analyze the present situation of Bulgarian politics?

In October 2014, snap parliamentary elections were held in Bulgaria for the second time within a period of one and a half years. From the beginning of 2013 until to now, the country has been governed by five cabinets—three ordinary ones (with the support of a parliament) and two caretaker ones (appointed by the president after dissolving the parliament). A prediction about the development of the political situation can be made on the basis of distinguishing between the different dimensions of political instability in Bulgarian context and tracing their shaping and layering over time, as well as identifying the main determinants of instability.

From the beginning of the transition to democracy up to the present, two principal dimensions of political instability can be identified in Bulgaria: instability related to the quick changing of parliaments and governments and instability related to the excessive fragmentation of the party system and the unsustainable nature of Bulgarian parties. Initially, during the years of the Bulgarian transition, these two dimensions have manifested themselves in sequence, but nowadays they build upon one another and induce themselves mutually, which portends long-term instability of the political system. In Bulgaria's development from 1989 till the beginning of 2013, two periods as regards political instability can be clearly discerned. In the first period (1989—2001), instability is connected to the non-durability of parliaments and governments, whereas in the second period (2001—2013) this dimension of instability disappears and a process of corrosion of the party system sets in.

From 1989 until 1997, no government or parliament has completed its full mandate. During this period, many governments resigned and many parliaments were dissolved as a result of mass street protests caused by the serious social and economic disturbances in the course of the change from a planned to a market economy and the political reorientation of the country. Nevertheless, the party system remained relatively stable between 1989 and 2001, comprising two major parties—the center-left BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party), which was the actual successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party under a new name, and the center-right SDS (Union of Democratic Forces), which incorporated all dissentient movements—as well as a (back then) relatively small party with a stable voting body rooted in the Turkish ethnic minority group, DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), which played a balancing role between the two major parties.
During this period also a few other small parties had certain influence, managing, mostly through coalitions with the bigger parties, to take some seats in parliamentary elections. With or without the support of DPS, the two major parties took turns at governing the country, which led many Bulgarian political analysts to labeling this model as a "bipolar" model.

Between 1997 and 2013, three consecutive parliaments and governments succeeded in fulfilling their full mandate. During this period Bulgarian economy was restructured and the country became member of NATO and the EU. Paradoxically at first glance, it was precisely in this period of stabilization of the country's government, when the party system began to corrode—a corrosion that initially did not seem to be dramatic at all. In 2001, a party created just a few months before the elections—NDSV (National Movement Simeon II), the party of the former monarch who had returned from exile—won half of the seats in the parliament (120). The success of the new party was widely evaluated by the media as a positive turn in Bulgarian politics and was touted as the "end of the bipolar model", "the end of political confrontation" and even in some analyses as "the end of the transition to democracy". After a short period of wavering, followed by accepting a refusal to join the family of the European People's Party (EPP), NDSV declared itself as a liberal party and formed a government together with another party recognized as liberal, DPS. After participating in two successive governments, the former monarch's party practically disappeared from the political scene. However, the example it had set soon proved to be very functional: numerous other quickly formed parties began to appear, winning seats in the parliament and virtually vanishing from the political scene after the end of the mandate.

The paradox of a dissolving party system in times of stable parliament and government can be explained by the new political style, introduced into Bulgarian politics by the former monarch after his return as a prime minister—a style that continues to be more or less viable up to now due to the fact that it suits the interests of powerful (relative to the size of the country) economic circles. This new style includes forming coalition governments without signing coalition agreements and publically declaring the responsibilities of the participating parties; receiving partial support for certain initiatives in the parliament from parties or fractions that do not explain the reasons for this support at all, or what is worse, fabricate absurd justifications; avoiding political debate or turning it into a show. From behind the dissolving party system, a grim picture of economically involved groups bargaining about important political topics began to gradually emerge, never becoming entirely visible to the public eye. Bulgarian political experts often describe this situation as an oligarchic government hidden behind a façade democracy.

The phenomenon of a new party receiving enough votes to form an single-party government reoccurred in 2009: Boyko Borisov, former bodyguard of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, after first holding a high office in the Ministry of Interior (2001—2005) and then serving as Mayor of Sofia (2005—2009), almost won half of the seats in the
and then serving as Mayor of Sofia (2007–2009), almost won half of the seats in the parliament with his party GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), established a year before the elections and accepted as a member party of the EPP despite its populist nature. Since then GERB has won all National Parliament and European Parliament elections as well as the municipal elections in many big cities, including the capital Sofia. Despite being a winner in all the parliamentary elections from 2009 until now, GERB has always fallen short of having majorities in the parliament: after 2009 elections GERB governed a minority government; after 2013 elections it remained in opposition; after 2014 elections it is participating in a coalition government.

In the meantime, the old center-right party SDS fell apart. Up to 2013, two of the small parties that were formed as a result of this disintegration process were managing—individually or in coalition—to gather the minimum of 4% of the national vote necessary for having members in the parliament. After a failure in the 2013 elections, these parties formed a union with other small parties and as an alliance called the Reformist Bloc (RB) achieved a moderate success in the 2014 European Parliament and National Parliament elections.

In 2005, the nationalist party "Attack" was created, which since then has always had representatives in the Bulgarian Parliament and even in the European Parliament in spite of also facing disintegration. In the period after 2001, many exotic parties having an unclear political profile and sending demagogue messages to the public have made their appearance and gathered the votes of disappointed and disoriented voters. The creation of these parties has by no means been a spontaneous process. They are rather the result of "engineering projects" and generous funding by economic circles with an influence on the media and ambitions to influence political decision-making. The picture of this fragmented party system also includes the emergence of a number of local parties, particularly in municipalities on the Black Sea coast, where interests related to the tourism sector are concentrated. Some of these parties managed to win mayor elections and are currently participating in local governments.

Until the last parliamentary elections (2014), BSP kept its relatively stable position on the political scene. However, its influence is constantly decreasing, firstly, because of the age structure of its voting body (a naturally decreasing number of people over the age of 60 with a nostalgic disposition towards the communist regime) and secondly, because of the ill success of governments in which this party participated. During the 90s, every government of BSP ended up causing economic disasters in the country and resigning ahead of term. During the two government periods in which BSP had leading part from 2001 until now, the EU funding for projects in Bulgaria was suspended due to corruption schemes.

The only party which exists since the beginning of the transition and has managed to increase its influence after 2001 is DPS. From this point on, it has been an integral part...
of the country's government without interruption. The reasons for the "DPS phenomenon" can be traced back to several facts and circumstances. The party has succeeded to place its functionaries on key positions in the country's government and to keep them on those positions. It has created an absolute monopoly in the regions with Turkish ethnic population and is continuing to have great influence in regions with mixed population. With the power resources it possesses, as well as with its "circles of companies", DPS "is distributing all the portions in the state", as the party's honorary chairman Ahmed Dogan has put it. This is the reason why political analyst Ognyan Minchev, chairman of the board of Transparency International Bulgaria, is considering DPS to be not so much a political party as a corporation. DPS's electorate is extremely consolidated and disciplined because it is held in a nearly feudal dependency by the party's structures. The majority of the Bulgarian Turks, particularly those in the villages, do not speak Bulgarian. They live in poor regions of the country, where the governing party at the local level is DPS and where people are dependent on the party in many aspects of their everyday live. Each time DPS faces the danger of losing its power positions, it falls back on suggesting to its voters that this would threaten the ethnic peace in the country and would again bring about the traumatic past of the Bulgarian Turks, whose civil and religious liberties had been brutally violated by the communist regime (an example of which is the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria being forced to change their traditional names to Bulgarian names). Moreover, throughout the years DPS has succeeded in developing effective techniques for buying votes, especially in neighborhoods with Roma inhabitants. In the last elections (2014), 44% of the Roma population voted for this party. The fact that hundreds of thousands of Bulgarian Turks living in Turkey and having dual nationality possess also the right to vote in Bulgarian elections (at over 100 polling stations), has no less contributed to the good performance of DPS. At the polling stations in Turkey DPS usually gets around 80% of the votes.

In conclusion, one may say that from the beginning of the new millennium until 2013, a stability of parliaments and governments can be observed in Bulgaria in spite of the corrosion of the party system. However, this stability is based not on a stabilization of Bulgarian democracy, but on a working agreement between politically involved economic circles—an agreement often detrimental to the public interest. In this period, Bulgaria has become the poorest country of the EU. The lack of serious disturbance is to a great extent due to the relatively calm political situation as regards foreign policy after Bulgaria became a member of the EU and NATO and before Russia, which traditionally has been a significant factor in Bulgarian politics, began making straightforward attempts at restoring its influence in Eastern Europe.

After February 2013, the instability resulting from the fragmentation of the party system continues to exist, while an instability of parliaments and governments, which had been characteristic for the beginning of the transition, is added to it. GERB’s center-right minority government (formed in 2009) resigned in February 2013 (six months before the regular parliamentary elections) as a result of a few days of street protests caused by the high fuel price and the devaluation of the leva. Bulgaria found itself in the midst of a political crisis...
the high electricity and heating tariffs. Showing a purely demagogue sensitivity towards the public discontent, this move was in fact motivated by the party’s desire to receive more support on the upcoming elections. The events of February 2013 can be regarded as the beginning of a new period of political instability in terms of government, since the configurations of the next parliament elected in May 2013 and even of the parliament elected in the snap elections in October 2014, do not allow forming a stable majority and consequently a stable government.

In the 2013 elections, GERB received the most votes (30.5 % of the votes, equal to 94 parliament seats) but chose to remain in opposition within a parliament having representatives of four parties. A “technocratic government” was formed under Plamen Oresharski as a prime minister with the support of BSP and DPS, which taken together had 120 seats in a parliament with a total of 240. The additional support needed to reach majority was provided by the “Attack” party, which did not officially take part in the government. The cooperation between ideologically and politically incompatible parties such as the radical nationalists from “Attack” and the party of the Bulgarian Turks, as well as a number of ill-founded political decisions and scandalous nominations led many analysts and also the majority of citizens to the belief that this governments is serving “back-door players”. Less than a month after the government was formed, thousands of people began to protest against this “back-door government” on the streets of the capital and other big cities. Although dying away over time, the protests continued on an everyday basis for more than 365 days. The building of the Sofia University was occupied for a few weeks by students demanding the government’s resignation. In the course of all these days until the dissolution of the parliament, the building of the National Assembly in Sofia was fenced with steel panels and guarded by gendarmerie. Even so, the destiny of Oresharski’s government was decided not by the protesting citizens, but by DPS withdrawing its support for the government after the European Parliament elections, without declaring the reasons for this action publically. As the government was forced to work in a situation of “siege” and a constant pressure from powerful economic circles, it was not able to solve any of the serious problems the country was facing: the threat of a financial collapse in the energy sector, in the health insurance fund and in the pension field; the lack of any perceptible economic growth; the high levels of unemployment; the obstructions to the reception of EU funding etc. Many of these problems are continuing to intensify over time.

_in your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

_The political configuration in the new parliament after the snap elections on 05.10.2014 does not provide reasons to predict stabilization. The Parliament was elected with an extremely low turnout of 48.66 % of the citizens entitled to vote. The Parliament consists of eight groups, (a record number of represented parties in a Bulgarian Parliament): GERB (84 seats), BSP—Left Bulgaria (39 seats), DPS (38 seats), Reformist Bloc (23 seats), Patriotic Front /PF/ (19 seats), Bulgaria without Censorship (15 seats), Attack (11 seats), ABV /Alternative for Bulgarian Revival/ (11 seats)._
Solely the number of groups in the Parliament, eight, already foreshadows difficulties in forming the majority necessary for the election of a government as well as for making legislative decisions. Additional obstructions result from the large number of parties participating in the coalitions, although in all coalitions except the Reformist Bloc a spirit of harmony and understanding seems to prevail. Nevertheless, after a few weeks of tiresome negotiations a government was formed under the following conditions: a coalition agreement between GERB and RB with ministers appointed by the two parties; Boyko Borisov as a prime minister; a declared support for the government’s program by the PF; ABV supporting the government and participating with one minister. As a result, the government has—at least at the beginning of its mandate—the support of 137 members of the Parliament.

The main problem for maintaining this majority springs from the multifaceted incompatibility of the positions of the supporting parties. The coalition between the two center-right parties GERB and RB, which is regarded as a fairly natural coalition, has the support of only 107 members of the Parliament. In addition, there are considerable differences between the two parties with respect to fundamental political issues. The Reformist Bloc received the votes of citizens who protested more than a year against the oligarchic government model and who expect adopting measures to eradicate this model, such as reforms in the judiciary that should lead to strengthening law and order and fighting corruption. GERB are expressing certain hesitations about the need of such reforms. Their previous government had lead for more than three years a relatively trouble-free co-existence with the model of back-door bargaining between oligarchic circles. GERB’s demagogue style does not arouse hopes that the necessary but painful reforms in the energy sector, in the healthcare and pension systems, in education (reforms so important for the RB and without which those systems are threatened to collapse) are going to be made. The differences between GERB and RB concern also the Russian energy projects in Bulgaria and the relations with Russia in general. The Reformist Bloc has a much more uncompromising attitude towards defending Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic orientation than GERB.

To all these factors implying government instability, the internal instability of the Reformist Bloc (consisting of 5 parties) is added. Within RB, the parties with a more hesitant and unsteady electorate are ready to keep their positions in the government at any cost, whereas others with a more stable electorate will likely try to impose their priorities in order to avoid losing their voters. Therefore, a disintegration of RB is possible, which would perhaps lead to some of the members of this formation withdrawing their support for the government.
The political and ideological difference as regards priorities is even greater between the center-right parties GERB and RB, on the one hand, and the two other parties supporting the government on the other hand: PF (a moderately nationalist formation) and ABV (a center-left party created by former president Georgi Parvanov as an alternative to BSP). The durability of this configuration of support will likely require significant compromises on behalf of all participants, especially in difficult times for the economy and all other systems of society. Under these circumstances, calculation of the damage, which the parties will have to take as a result of making the necessary reforms, will go hand in hand with the temptation of leaving the government in a difficult moment in order to achieve a better placement in subsequent elections. In the next two years, in Bulgaria municipal and presidential elections have to be held, which means that temptations of such kind will be of great significance for the nearest future.

A certain stability of the parliamentary support for the government could be achieved by constructing situational majorities with respect to particular topics, even if some of the smaller partners in the coalition (ABV, PF or RB) oppose a specific decision. A possible means for creating a situational majority is attracting the votes of members of DPS or of “Bulgaria without Censorship”, a new party without a clear political identity and with almost no chances to survive on the political scene in subsequent elections. A strategy of this type would possibly bring about the survival of the government for longer, even maybe for the period of the full mandate, but in the long term would have a negative influence on the citizens’ trust in the political parties and the democratic mechanisms of government formation and consequently on the stability of the political system in general.

It is hard to predict how the agreements between the economic circles are likely to evolve. Naturally, the back-door players will not remain passive to any attempts at changing the current model of bargaining outside the scope of the public spectrum and will oppose any reforms by all available means. Given the financial resources of these circles, their perfected corruption schemes and their influence on media, ignoring those circles entirely would constitute a serious risk for the stability of the government. However, subduing all decision making to their interests would be equally disastrous, since the citizens have developed an increased sensitivity towards this particular topic after a more than a year of protests.

As the parties of the majority differ and show incompatibilities between one another, so much the more do the remaining parties in the parliament. Therefore it cannot be expected from them to form a strong and consolidated opposition offering an alternative to the government within the limits of this parliament. Due precisely to its cooperation with DPS, a party considered as a stronghold of oligarchic government, did BSP suffer its landslide defeat in the 2014 elections. DPS’s public image together with Attack’s nationalist profile (including appeals to quit the EU and cooperate with Russia more closely) make the cooperation with those parties entirely undesirable both to the parties
in the majority and to BSP as the opposition.

As regards the party system, there are no perspectives for it to stabilize in the near future either. If new snap elections are called before a solution to the problems in the energy, healthcare and pension field is found, the electoral support for GERB (around 30 % of votes) and RB (around 8 % of votes) will most likely melt down. But even if the necessary reforms are conducted, probably the same course of events would take place because of the fact that in the short term the reforms would lead to increase in consumer tariffs (e.g. energy tariffs) and in healthcare and pension contributions, as well as to serious government expenditure cuts in order to keep the government budget deficit under 3 %.

The two parties in the left part of the political spectrum—BSP and ABV—do not appear to be stable, independently or taken together, as well. BSP is pressured by internal conflicts after its long-time leader and president of the Party of European Socialists Sergei Stanishev chose to be a member of the European Parliament and to withdraw from the Bulgarian political scene. BSP’s greatest electoral defeat for the last 25 years contributed to the internal crisis. BSP won only 15 % of the votes in the October 2014 elections—almost the same as the result of the third party, DPS. The relationship between BSP and the other center-left party, ABV, is going to be a difficult one because ABV has been created and is currently being led by politicians who quit BSP, and because the two parties are contending for the trust of the same diminishing electorate.

DPS’s main power—its capability to maintain the same stable and consolidated electorate and to place its functionaries on key positions in Bulgarian government—is beginning to turn into a serious disadvantage, since no other party in the parliament is willing to cooperate with it. DPS being detached from its status of an “unavoidable factor” in Bulgarian politics will significantly narrow down the possibilities of using the same methods to ensure the loyalty of its voters. If this really happens, one could expect its influence to drop in the next few years.

The nationalist formations Attack and PF, independently or in combination, also do not show a potential for growth due to their relying on the same electorate. Interaction between those parties seems even less likely than interaction in the center-left spectrum because PF consists partly of former Attack members who quit Attack with a series of quarrels which continue to live on. A number of Bulgarian political experts believe that DPS and the nationalists depend on one another: DPS becoming stronger leads to the nationalists (who were rather marginal in Bulgarian political life by the year 2005) becoming stronger and conversely—DPS narrowing its influence leads to a weakening nationalism.

In conclusion, it may be said that the parties’ diminishing influence together with the process of disintegration in traditional parties opens vast spaces for the appearance of all possible kinds of exotic and ephemeral parties competing in their demagogy. On the one
What are the structural long-term perspectives?

In the context of the Bulgarian model of parliamentary republic, the instability of the party system turns out to have by far more negative consequences for democracy than the parliament and government instability characteristic of the beginning of the transition. The sudden appearing of new political parties, some of which manage to participate in the parliament or even form a majority when competing in elections for the first time, and these parties vanishing from the political scene afterwards does not allow the country to form a relatively stable political elite which to build up government experience.

The lack of a long-term perspective of having a political carrier within a single party is the reason for many politicians to change their parties or even create their own ones and situationally enter into coalitions with other similar parties depending on the chances to get to positions in the government. This tendency ruins the parties and repels the voters, who become less and less capable of keeping track of the complex manoeuvres of specific leaders and parties. In this context, ideological doctrines and platforms appear to be always inauthentic and matter less and less to the real political actions. This particular fact contributes to the general disappointment and confusion of the voters, who for the most part have come to the well-founded conclusion that politics of this kind has nothing to do with public cases and interests. In this way, apathy towards politics is becoming stronger in Bulgarian society.

The fragmentation of the party system makes it easier for politically involved economic circles to exert their illegitimate influence on decision making because of the fact that they can easily buy parties or create configurations to their own interest, when stable and responsible parties are absent.

Perspectives to get over this situation cannot be discerned in the near future. The systemic failures in certain sectors and the discontent with the oligarchic government model have caused since February 2013 mass citizen protests, unprecedented in terms of durability. However, these protests remained in an unorganized state and could not produce political formations and claim representation in the parliament. Their claims have been directed towards “those in power” and formulated in a negative manner (e.g. a decision should be called off, a certain official or the government as a whole should resign),
without alternatives being explicitly proposed. The ideology behind those protest movements—an ideology artfully spread and maintained by the media—is essentially an anarchist one. In the eyes of the protesting citizens, the civil is contrary to the political and is entirely unsusceptible of any form of political leadership and organisation. Hence, even if they achieve partial success in terms of concessions with respect to certain issues, the protest movements (those from February and June 2013 as well as all other movements of this kind that might appear in the future) remain isolated from the political system and from any opportunity to channel civil energy into a direction of positive problem solving through the construction of authentic parties.

In spite of the presence of active minorities ready to react to political events, the general interest for politics in Bulgarian society is constantly dropping. Reasons for this process can be found not only in the low quality level of Bulgarian politics, but also in the demographic conditions in the country. The number of young people and people in an active age who would think of their future as connected to the country’s future is decreasing. Many of those people, especially the well-educated ones, migrate to other EU countries or the USA. In Bulgaria, no civil or political education exists in a reasonable shape, as a result of which the majority of people, even those with university education, have a very elementary understanding of politics and democracy, which in turn does not allow them to participate adequately in the political processes even as mere voters.

The situation with the media also does not provide sufficient grounds for optimism with regard to the stabilization of the party system and the political system as a whole. In the 2014 ranking of Reporters without boarders’ press freedom index (comprising 180 of the world’s countries), Bulgaria is ranked under number 100. Only within a year, Bulgaria has dropped by 13 positions (from position 87) and is currently the last EU country in the ranking. The tendency is disturbing because in 2006, a year before the accession to the EU, Bulgaria was ranked under position 35 and for a period of only seven years has dropped by 65 positions. The majority of the media and journalists do not think of themselves as mediators, but rather as immediate participants in the political processes. Some of the parties currently represented in the Bulgarian parliament are directly connected with TV channels and two of them—Attack and Bulgaria without Censorship—are created in relation to particular programme productions, with the talk-show hosts becoming their leaders.

Last but not least, Russia’s ambitions to regain its influence over the countries of Eastern Europe also should be qualified as a long-term factor for political instability in Bulgaria. Bulgaria offers a fertile ground for the development of those ambitions also for reasons other than history. Certain parts of Bulgarian society, not excluding the political elites, are prone to admire “the strong grip” of Russian government and to propagandise its model as opposed to the “chaotic” (especially in their Bulgarian version) practices of liberal representative democracy. The large-scale energy projects which Russia is attempting to implement in Bulgaria (the Bulgarian electricity grid and the...
which Russia is eager to implement in Bulgaria (the Belene nuclear power plant and the South Stream) are extremely tempting for economically involved circles in the country with powerful financial, media and political resources. A politically unstable Bulgaria would easily turn into “Russia’s Trojan horse” in the EU.

All those facts and circumstances considered by themselves or in combination would continue to lead Bulgaria in a direction of political instability. The possibilities to neutralize them or limit their impact could be subject of another analysis.

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