

# **Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria 2021 - 2024. In Search of a Way Out of the Crisis of Confidence**

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The internal political tradition in Bulgaria is characterized by a certain instability, which has a significant impact on the features of its modern electoral practice. Foreign policy factors also play an important role in the formation of its political system (including the electoral and party system). During the period 1990–2024, 38 national elections of different types were held in Bulgaria: 17 parliamentary, 7 presidential, 9 elections for mayors and municipal councilors and 5 for Bulgarian representatives in the European Parliament. Only from April 2021 to October 2024, 7 elections for the National Assembly were held. The analysis of the election results shows a preserved electoral territorial structure of the vote, but with a significant contraction of the votes cast for the political parties. The loss of trust in traditional political parties led to a series of political and parliamentary crises in Bulgarian society, as well as a drastic decrease in voter turnout. Combined with the frequent holding of elections, in which there are more and more new formations emerging around individual political leaders without a distinct political concept, it led to voters' lack of interest in participating in the electoral process. Traditional divisions (cleavage) of society are also a factor, which after 2022 were strengthened by external military-political events. Still, there remains the strong negative about the lack of a motivated policy regarding the internal development of the country. In conditions of deepening depopulation and economic backwardness of a number of provincial areas compared to the capital and big cities, the question of changing the electoral system and electoral zoning remains essential.

Key words: parliamentary elections, cleavage, political tradition

## **Introduction**

The social and historical development of Bulgaria is characterized by two main features. First, the relatively late achievement of national sovereignty compared to most European countries, which delayed the adoption and establishment of modern forms of political governance. The second feature is the repeated interruption of the trend towards democratization and liberalization of socio-economic processes in the country. This is particularly true of the totalitarian rule between 1944 and 1989.

## **Legislative foundations of electoral processes until 1989**

The first electoral law in Bulgaria was adopted in 1880. According to it, the right to vote is possessed by male persons over the age of 21, who possess civil rights and are registered in the electoral rolls, i.e. only about 25% of the country's population has the right to participate in the elections.

In accordance with world practice, the first elections in our country were held on a majority principle. In general, it is characteristic of most of our post Liberation political history. Discussions about improving the electoral mechanism accompanied Bulgarian society throughout the entire period of parliamentary democracy.

With the development of the party system and the creation of numerous political parties, the view that a fundamental change in the electoral system is necessary is increasingly prevailing. From the end of the 19th century, the propaganda of a proportional electoral system began, which would allow parties to gain access to parliament according to the share of votes cast for them.

The proportional system turned out to be necessary for political parties, since at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century a practice was finally imposed, which was rightly criticized by all losing political forces. Traditionally, the party that holds the mechanisms of the executive power in its hands usually manages to secure a majority in the National Assembly. The main mechanism for achieving such narrow-party goals is the frequent conjuncture change in the scope and boundaries of electoral districts, as usual territories and, accordingly, voters of neighboring rural municipalities are added to urban electoral sections as needed.

Almost every National Assembly, every party during its rule introduces additions and amendments to the electoral law, according to its interests. Usually, a party that has surrendered power for one reason or another barely manages to place one or two representatives in the next National Assembly (Palangurski, 1995).

Until 1912, elections in our country were held under a majoritarian electoral system. In January 1912, the 15th National Assembly introduced the proportional system, which was maintained until the end of World War I.

After 1919, during the government of the Bulgarian Agricultural People's Union the majority system was restored. In practice, it was the basis of all elections held in the country until 1986, with the exception of the elections in 1931 and the first transitional elections in the already socialist Bulgaria during the period 1945 - 1953.

In 1937, a new electoral law was adopted for the election of national representatives, according to which their number was reduced from 274 to 160. All women, as well as students, received voting rights. Each candidate registered individually and in only one electoral college. Electoral colleges were purposefully formed from 20 to 40 thousand voters, thus, to facilitate the election of government candidates.

After the 1971 Constitution, a new electoral law (1973) was adopted, according to which elections were held until the end of the socialist period. An important nuance in this regard is the attempt of the National Assembly in 1987 to introduce a competitive principle in the conduct of elections. Thus, in single-mandate electoral districts it would be possible to nominate and register an unlimited number of candidates.

The lack of democratic tradition and the sharp transition to civil liberties led to elections in the first years after the Liberation being held with minimal voter turnout. Only at the beginning of the 20th century did it exceed the 50% mark. During political, social and military upheavals, a certain activation of voters was observed, but after the normalization of the situation, participation in the elections stabilized at around 55-60%. For obvious reasons, almost 99 percent voter turnout was recorded during the socialist period.

### **Modern electoral system and electoral zoning.**

A major feature of the spatial representativeness of electoral districts in Bulgaria after 1989 is the relative stability of their borders. On the other hand, there is a certain instability in the representativeness of some of them, due to the periodic reduction of the initial number of mandates depending on the number of their voters. This leads to changes in their relative electoral weight.

Another factor compensating for the consequences of unfavorable demographic trends in depopulated districts and municipalities is the strong desire to preserve their territorial electoral representativeness, which, according to Boyadzhiev (2002), affects the important issues of geographical justice and extreme deputy regionalism.

In Bulgaria, a proportional electoral system is used in elections for the National Assembly and municipal councilors. A majoritarian one is used in presidential and mayoral elections. A mixed electoral system has so far been used only in the elections to the Grand National Assembly in 1990 and the parliamentary elections in 2009.

After 1990, elections have been held under a proportional system, with the D'Ondt (until 2009) and Hare-Niemeyer division methods being successively applied. A 4 percent threshold for entering parliament has been introduced, which ensures relatively good political stability. The country is divided into 31 multi-mandate electoral constituency, the borders of which coincide with the borders of the districts in the country. Only Sofia City is divided into 3 electoral constituents, and the city of Plovdiv is separated from Plovdiv District. The number of mandates assigned to constituency is proportional to their population size under a single representation norm, in which the largest remainder method is used.

According to Dimitrov (1997), the practice of calculating election results in our country is unique and can be defined as a proportional system with multi-mandate electoral constituency. In the classical application of this variant, the distribution of mandates is first carried out in the electoral constituency. The current system in our country starts from the result with which the classical schemes end, i.e. from the total distribution of all mandates by parties depending on their result in the country as a whole. Subsequently, the mandates are “personified” through the regional lists. The huge advantage of this non-classical variant, according to him, is the high resistance of the total distribution of mandates to vote shifts. As a rule, in order to receive one more mandate, a given party must acquire its price, equal to one two hundred and fortieth of the

number of actual votes for parties that have passed the 4 percent barrier. In this sense, according to him, the system is as proportional as it could possibly be.

The existing electoral system in Bulgaria is criticized by Bachvarov (1991, 1992), Boyadzhiev (1991, 2002) and Slaveykov (1994, 2002) and others, placing the main emphasis on territorial representation, the degree of personification of the vote and the significance of the electoral threshold, etc.

A major problem of the proportional electoral system applied in Bulgaria is the personalization of the mandates won by the parties that passed the 4% barrier from regional lists in multi-mandate electoral districts (table 1). The different sizes of these districts, which emit between 4 and 19 mandates, make achieving proportionality almost impossible. In the 17 elections for the Ordinary National Assembly held in the period 1991-2024, a frequently observed phenomenon was the public discussion about the large differences in the so-called "price of the mandate". A number of researchers have focused attention on this problem as a major shortcoming of the system applied in Bulgaria. In order to achieve perfect proportionality between votes cast and mandates awarded, a necessary condition would be to use party lists on a national scale. This would preserve the main advantage of the proportional system for fair parliamentary representation.

**Table 1. Mandates cast by multi-mandate electoral districts in the elections for the 51st National Assembly (October 2024)**

multi-seat constituencies	Seats
23 Sofia	19
3 Varna	16
2 Burgas, 25 Sofia	14
24 Sofia	13
16 Plovdiv-city	12
1 Blagoevgrad, 17 Plovdiv-district, 27 Stara Zagora	11
4 Veliko Tarnovo, 13 Pazardzik, 15 Pleven, 26 Sofia-province, 29 Haskovo	8
19 Ruse	7
6 Vratza, 21 Sliven, 30 Shumen	6
8 Dobrich, 9 Kardzali	5
5 Vidin, 7 Gabrovo, 10 Kjustendil, 11 Lovech, 12 Montana, 14 Pernik, 18 Razgrad, 20 Silistra, 22 Smolyan, 28 Targovishte, 31 Yambol	4

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

The main disadvantages of the proportional system according to Tsenova (2004) are as follows: the party list system distances the voter from the elected; creates a tendency to increase fragmentation in the political spectrum; whatever method is chosen for the distribution of mandates, there are always "leftovers" of votes that are not utilized.

In this context, the 2021 elections particularly highlighted the problem of fragmentation of party representation, which resulted in the need to hold three elections in one year (Table 2).

According to the classical classification of party systems by Sartori (1990) by the number of parties in parliament, the optimal variant of a multi-party competitive system is that of class 5 – Limited pluralism, because only in this case is there a limitation of the number of parties at the expense of strengthening the stability of the system and expanding the channels for political

participation of citizens. The most inefficient is the party system of class 7 – Atomized, where none of the political parties is able to influence the other parties in the country. A typical example of which is Bulgaria and the parliamentary crises in recent years.

**Table 2. Number of political parties in parliament 1991-2024.**

National Assembly	Number of parties in NA
36 NA – 1991	3
37 NA – 1994	5
38 NA – 1997	5
39 NA – 2001	4
40 NA – 2005	7
41 NA – 2009	6
42 NA – 2013	4
43 NA – 2014	8
44 NA – 2017	5
45 NA – 2021 (April)	6
46 NA – 2021 (June)	6
47 NA – 2021 (November)	7
48 NA – October 2022	7
49 NA – April 2023	6
50 NA – June 2024	7
51 NA – October 2024	9

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

In this case, the process of political fragmentation (fragmentation) leads to a state of political segmentation (i.e., to the separation of the constituent elements) with political polarization and/or ideological distance.

In Bulgaria, this ideological opposition is more a legacy of the socialist period than a result of the excessive fragmentation of the political space. Strong ideological biases in a part of the population oppose people with more liberal and Western-oriented views. Over time, this opposition does not diminish, despite the decrease in the relative share of support for the former communist party, now the Bulgarian Socialist Party. New, firm political preferences emerge, and they are often incompatible with those of their opponents.

This distance is also expressed in a strengthening of the traditional cleavage in the country between Russophiles/Russophobes or pro-European/anti-European parties.

The country's upcoming entry into the eurozone on January 1, 2026, was met with protests by pro-Russian parties. As an example, the President tried to initiate a referendum on entering the eurozone - rejected by the Parliament and the Constitutional Court.

Another problem resulting from political fragmentation is the increasing disproportions between the "prices" of mandates at the regional level (Tables 3 - 5).

Over the past three decades, a number of changes have been made to improve the electoral procedures applied in Bulgaria, for example, replacing the D'Ondt method with the Hare-Niemeyer method, implementing a mixed system in 2009, introducing machine voting, and prosecuting vote buying and selling.

Criticism of the electoral system applied in Bulgaria is quite strong among researchers on the subject and among the public, even reaching the point of discussion of its categorical rejection and replacement with a majoritarian system. At the same time, the use of the administrative-territorial structure as a basis for determining multi-seat constituency (MSC) districts is generally not subject to any discussion, despite the obvious differences in scale. Four out of a total of 28 administrative districts provide 2/5 of the number of deputies, and the smallest 11 districts only 1/5. Another example of disproportion for the so-called electoral-geographic "injustice" is the fact that the "price" of the mandate for some deputies is under 1,000 votes, while for others it is over 10,000. This distinguishes Bulgaria from many European countries with a proportional system. This is the result of using the opposite approach - a sequence from national to regional distribution is used, and not the other way around. With a difference of nearly five times between the largest MSC 23 Sofia distributing 19 mandates and the smallest MSCs, in conditions of high party fragmentation, achieving proportionality, albeit within conditional limits, becomes impossible.

**Table 3. MSC Kardzhali – elections for the 51st National Assembly - October 2024 (Hare quota – 14,800.8)**

Parties and coalitions	Number votes	Share of votes in %	Seats in NA
MRF- New beginning	30 877	41,272 %	2
Rights and Freedom Alliance	28 859	38,575 %	2
Greatness	409	0,547 %	1
CEDB-UDF	5 561	7,433 %	-
Continue the Changes – Democratic Bulgaria	2 464	3,294 %	-
Revival	2 302	3,077 %	-
BSP	1 698	2,270 %	-
Morality Unity Honor	616	0,823 %	-

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

**Table 4. Smolyan MSC – elections for the 51st National Assembly - October 2024 (Hare quota – 9,574.5)**

Parties and coalitions	Number votes	Share of votes in %	Seats in NA
CEDB-UDF	12 222	31,226 %	1
Rights and Freedom Alliance	8 860	22,637%	1
MRF- New beginning	4 198	10,726%	1
Greatness	880	2,248%	1
Continue the Changes – Democratic Bulgaria	4 018	10,266 %	-
Revival	3 049	7,790 %	-
BSP	2 386	6,096 %	-
There Is Such a Nation	1 635	4,177 %	-
Morality Unity Honor	1 050	2,683 %	-

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

**Table 5. Vidin MSC – elections for the 51st National Assembly - October 2024 (Hare quota – 7,039)**

Parties and coalitions	Number votes	Share of votes in %	Seats in NA
CEDB-UDF	8 338	28,555 %	1
MRF- New beginning	6 253	21,414 %	1
Continue the Changes – Democratic Bulgaria	3 992	13,671 %	1
Rights and Freedom Alliance	209	0,716 %	1
Revival	3 592	12,301 %	-
BSP	2 468	8,452 %	-
There Is Such a Nation	1587	5,435 %	-
Morality Unity Honor	1085	3,716 %	-
Greatness	632	2,164 %	-

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

### **Formation of systemic parties in post-communist Bulgaria**

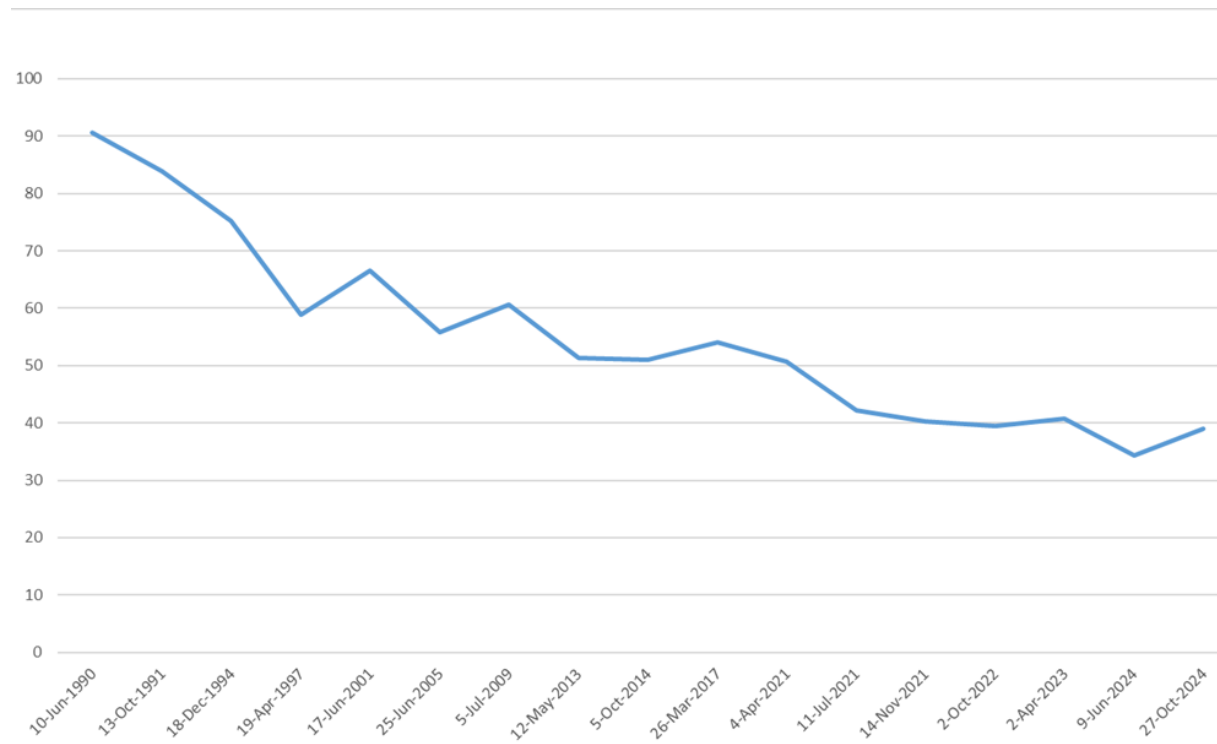
As a result of the initial political euphoria and the significance of the future new constitution, the elections for the VII Grand National Assembly in 1990 were distinguished by the highest turnout of Bulgarian citizens – 90.6% (Figure 1.). The lowest results in this regard were observed in elections for Bulgarian representatives in the EP (28.6% in 2007) and in presidential elections (34.84% in 2021 in the second round).

The main trends in voter turnout in the democratic elections held so far in the country have a chronological and motivational determination, directly related to the gradual consolidation of civil society and the political space, the increasingly frequent manifestations of negative aspects of the party-political and electoral system in the country. The deepening political pluralism becomes the basis for the weakening of the two initial political poles – the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Union of Democratic Forces, the emergence of new centrist political formations and party swarming on a subjective leadership principle. All this leads to a decreasing polarization in electoral behavior, a scattering of votes due to the growing role of the “4 percent threshold”, and the increasingly frequent creation of unprincipled multi-party pre-election and post-election coalitions between formations differing in ideological platforms and leadership preferences. As a result, the apathy typical of consolidated democracies and a decreasing motivation to participate in the electoral process are increasingly evident.

The first elections after 1990 led to a radical social change by establishing a new political configuration. A typical bipolar model (BSP, UDF) was formed, represented by imperfect bipartism with a strong influence of a third political force (DPS). This created the prerequisites for highly confrontational relations between them, which reflected on the overall political process in the country. Nevertheless, the parties played a major role in consolidating the democratic political system (Karasimeonov, 2019).

Initially, the majority of the political spectrum was occupied by several systemic parties. Then, there was a gradual transition to a model characterized by a high level of party fragmentation. This necessitated a public discussion on changes to the electoral mechanisms.

**Figure 1. Electoral activity in Bulgaria during parliamentary elections 1990 – 2024.**



Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

### **From bipartisanship to multipartyism <sup>1</sup>**

As a result of the dynamic socio-economic and political changes during the transition period, several main parties emerged as leading political forces in the country, which traditionally have the greatest public influence.

The leading political party in the left space is the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party. The right-wing political space was initially occupied by the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), later displaced by Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB). The most important of the centrist parties are the National Movement of Simeon II (NMSII) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).

<sup>1</sup> **bipartisanship** - two parties periodically changing power; imperfect bipartisanship – two dominant parties that cannot win an absolute majority without the support of a third party; multipartyism – many parties with none receiving more than a third of the votes (Tsenova, 2001).



Since the MRF is associated with ethnic Turks in the public consciousness, this stimulated the formation of nationalist and/or patriotic parties such as Attack, Revival, Patriotic Front, VMRO and others. Externally, the political orientation of these parties is based on the opposition between pro-Western and anti-Western orientations. This is based on a significant cultural and political tradition, historically determined by the strong Russian influence in the country.

The main dividing line in the foreign policy orientation of the leading parties is the attitude towards the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country, in contrast to this are the ideological concepts of the pro-Russian parties.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) is a center-left, social democratic party. It was formed after a general party referendum on April 3, 1990, and is the direct successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party, established in 1919 and ruling Bulgaria for 45 years (1945-1989). From a reformed totalitarian party, it gradually supported Bulgaria's European and Euro-Atlantic path, but after 2015 it transformed into a party with a moderate anti-European and anti-NATO orientation with a clear pro-Kremlin bias. The BSP was the leading political force in the Bulgarian Parliament in 1990, 1994 and 2005.

It formed two independent governments in 1990 and three coalition governments in 1995, 2005 and 2013. The party's electoral support registered its highest result in the elections for the Grand National Assembly (1990) – 2,886,363 votes and in 1994 – 2,262,943 votes. Over the following decades, support for the party gradually shrank to 225,914 votes and was only the fifth political force in April 2023.

The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was established on 7 December 1989 by a group of non-governmental organizations and restored old parties with the aim of rejecting the communist totalitarian system and establishing democracy in Bulgaria.

Gradually, the union underwent several splits into separate political parties, which greatly reduced its electoral influence and was replaced in the right-wing political space by the CEDB party. The best electoral result was achieved by the UDF (in the coalition United Democratic Forces) in 1997 with 2,223,714 votes, but in the next elections in 2001 they registered only 830,338 votes.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is a centrist political party in Bulgaria, enjoying mainly the support of ethnic Turks and The Romani people minority. Electoral support for the MRF is characterized by complete reproducibility and stable regional distribution.

After 2001, only the MRF remained with relatively unchanged electoral influence, while the BSP retained its leading role in the left-wing political sector, but lost significant electoral positions. At the same time, the UDF was gradually displaced from the right-wing space, with CEDB emerging as its leading successor.

CEDB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) is a center-right, populist (Cristova, 2010: 227), conservative, pro-European political party in Bulgaria. It was founded in late 2006 by the then mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov.

The party won the 2009 parliamentary elections with 40% of the vote, with a 60% voter turnout, and 117 seats out of 240. This marked the beginning of a long period in government and consolidated its position as a leading party in the country. Boyko Borisov is the longest-serving Prime Minister of Bulgaria since the end of communism, having led three governments – 2009–2013, 2014–2017 (coalition with the Reformist Bloc) and 2017–2021 (coalition with the United Patriots). The party's electoral support in the following years shrank by over 1 million votes (from 1,678,641 in 2009 to 669,361 in 2023), but despite this, the party remains the leading political force in the country (Table 6).

According to Karasimeonov (2019), “in a number of post-communist democracies, including Bulgaria, after the initial period of establishing democratic institutions and civic upsurge, symptoms of political regression or de-democratization appear. Therefore, political parties in Bulgaria bear the mark of semi-consolidated democracy. The party system as part of the democratic political system is characterized by great instability due to the emergence and demise of numerous political parties.”

**Table 6. Election results (in %) of the leading political parties in Bulgaria in the 2021–2024 parliamentary elections.**

	IV.2021	VII.2021	IX.2021	X.2022	IV.2023	VI.2024	X.2024
CEDB	<b>26,18</b>	23,51	22,74	<b>25,33</b>	<b>26,49</b>	<b>24,71</b>	<b>26,389</b>
CC-DB <sup>2</sup>	-	-	-	-	24,56	14,33	14,214
Revival	(2,45) <sup>3</sup>	(3,01)	4,86	10,18	14,16	13,78	13,363
MRF	10,51	10,71	13,00	13,75	13,75	17,06	- <sup>4</sup>
BSP	15,01	13,39	10,21	9,30	8,93	7,06	7,572
There is such a nation	17,66	<b>24,08</b>	9,52	-	4,11	5,96	6,785
CC	-	-	<b>25,67</b>	20,20	-	-	-
DB	9,45	12,64	6,37	7,45	-	-	-
MRF New Beginning	-	-	-	-	-	-	11,510
AIIC	-	-	-	-	-	-	7,485
Greatness	-	-	-	-	-	4,65	4,004
MUH	-	-	-	-	-	-	4,600
Bulgarian Rise	-	-	-	4,63	-	-	-
Standup! Mob Out!	4,72	5,01	-	-	-	-	-

<sup>2</sup> Continue the Changes – Democratic Bulgaria enter in coalition 2023 – 2024 r.

<sup>3</sup> Revival doesn't pass the 4 % barrier April and July 2021 r.

<sup>4</sup> MRF splits in two formations – MRF New beginnings and Alliance for Rights and Freedom

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Central Election Commission data.

### **Regional aspects of electoral stereotypes in Bulgaria after 1989**

Under the influence of specific socio-economic and cultural-political factors in the country, geographically distinct regions with stable electoral attitudes are formed (Russev, Vladimirova, 2010: 199).

Electoral districts with predominant left-wing political preferences.

The most characteristic of this type are 6 administrative districts, which are distinguished by an average of about 39% support for the BSP and its coalition partners in parliamentary elections during the period 1991-2005: Vidin (43%), Vratsa (42%), Montana (40%), Yambol (38%), Pleven (36%) and Kyustendil (35%). Their total relative share in the country, in terms of territory, population and GDP indicators, is 19.2%, 14.4% and 11.4%, respectively, which is a sign of low values of demographic density, economic density and income of the population. They give 15% of the total parliamentary votes but provide 20% of the parliamentary seats in NA for the BSP in the country. They are distinguished by a relative wealth of land resources. Their characteristic features are the rapid depopulation, the high relative share of the rural and Christian population, the low level of economic activity and investment attractiveness, high rate of unemployment, the clearly expressed agricultural specialization of the economy. The average parliamentary voter turnout in them is higher than the average for the country – 68%. The relative share of votes for BSP candidates in the first round of presidential elections in them is 43%. Over 54% of the mandates for municipal mayors in the indicated administrative districts are cast or are clearly supported by the BSP.

Electoral districts distinguished by a clearly expressed ethno-social vote.

The most characteristic of this electoral type are 4 administrative districts, which are distinguished by an average of 39.4% support for the MRF in parliamentary elections: Kardzhali (60%), Razgrad (39%), Targovishte (27%) and Silistra (27%). Their total relative share, in terms of territory, population and GDP indicators, is 10.1%, 7.4% and 5.2% of the national potential, respectively, which is a sign of even lower values of the indicators of demographic density, economic density and income of the population. They give 8% of the total parliamentary votes, but provide 41% of the parliamentary votes for the MRF in the country, during the period 1991-2005 (Russev, Vladimirova, 2007, 2010).

They are distinguished by relatively favorable characteristics, in terms of land resources and the ecological state of the natural environment. Their characteristic features are the high relative share of Turkish and Muslim population, the widespread rural lifestyle, low investment attractiveness, high unemployment, a relatively favorable crime environment and high economic activity in the primary sector. The average parliamentary voter turnout in them, for the period 1991-2005, is 71%, which is significantly above the national average.

Electoral districts with predominant right-wing and center-right political preferences.

Unlike the already mentioned administrative districts, this electoral type is represented by administrative districts that are distant from each other with a clearly expressed center-periphery spatial structure. The most typical in this respect are Sofia-city, Plovdiv-city, the districts of Varna (excluding the municipality of Dalgopol) and Gabrovo. At the same time, significant for the final election results in the country are a number of right-wing electoral nuclei, whose center plays a major regional administrative role - Burgas, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Dobrich, Pernik, Pazardzhik, Blagoevgrad, Veliko Tarnovo. The total territory of the mentioned administrative districts and municipalities represents nearly 11% of the national territory, about 41% of the country's population lives in them and about 48% of its GDP is produced. The population is distinguished by a relatively preserved age structure. The share of the Turkish and Muslim population is small. The contingent of the Roma population is significant, which usually occupies compact territories in separate residential neighborhoods with unfavorable infrastructure characteristics. The relatively high values of the indicators for economic density and living standards are the result of their greater investment attractiveness, the predominant economic specialization in the industries of the secondary and tertiary sectors and lower unemployment. The prevailing urban lifestyle is associated with a less unfavorable criminogenic situation. The high degree of anthropogenic pressure gives rise to problems of a social and environmental nature. The prevailing electoral preferences of the population are directed towards political platforms of parties and/or coalitions, presenting themselves in a diverse and dynamically changing format over time - UDF, DSB, NMSII, Atack, CEDB, etc. In parliamentary elections, during the period 1991-2005, a total of 39.4% of all valid votes in the country were cast in them, but only 27.9% of the votes cast for the BSP and the MRF, taken together, were received (26.7% and 1.2%, respectively).

Electoral districts in areas of divided electoral-political gravity.

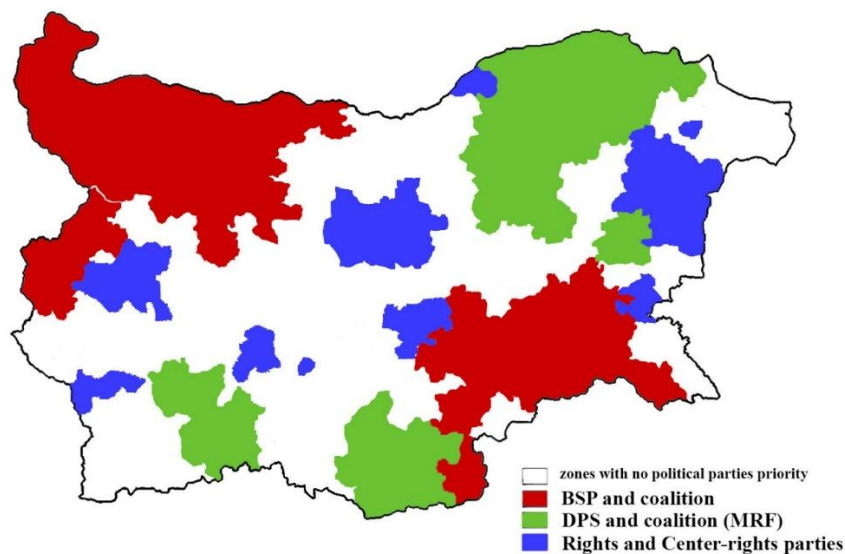
The remaining administrative units cover about 60% of the country's territory, where 37% of its population live and 35% of its GDP is produced. The majority of them are sparsely populated, mainly mountainous and semi-mountainous, regions. They are characterized by an imperfect biparty or pure multiparty model and dynamic changes in electoral sentiment, especially with the emergence of new populist formations. Depending on the specific political configuration, two subtypes of administrative districts and municipalities are distinguished. The first includes those in which there is relative parity between left-wing and right-wing political parties and coalitions. Typical in this respect are the districts of Veliko Tarnovo, Sofia and Blagoevgrad, and among the municipalities – Belene, Levski, Tsarevo, Svilengrad, Simeonovgrad, Nedelino, Bratsigovo, Parvomay, Sadovo, Septemvri, Panagyurishte.

A second subtype is formed by regions with relative parity between several parties and coalitions. These are mostly administrative units in which the MRF plays an equal or balancing role between left and right formations. At the level of administrative districts, such as Haskovo, Shumen, the predominant part of Ruse can be mentioned. Among the municipalities, typical

examples are Gotse Delchev, Hadzhidimovo, Aytos, as well as the pre-Balkan Lovech municipalities.

During the first half of the transition (1991-2005), several macro-electoral regions emerged (Figure 2) with a traditional political orientation towards a certain spectrum of the political space – Northwestern, Western Sofia-Pernik periphery, Southeastern, Northeastern, Eastern Rhodope, Western Rhodope-Mesta.

**Figure 2. Macro-electoral regions 1991-2005**



Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Russev, Vladimirova, 2010: 202.

In the 2009 parliamentary elections, the CEDB political party managed to win the elections by uniting the traditional right-wing and center-right voters behind it, with the greatest influence in large cities and regional centers.

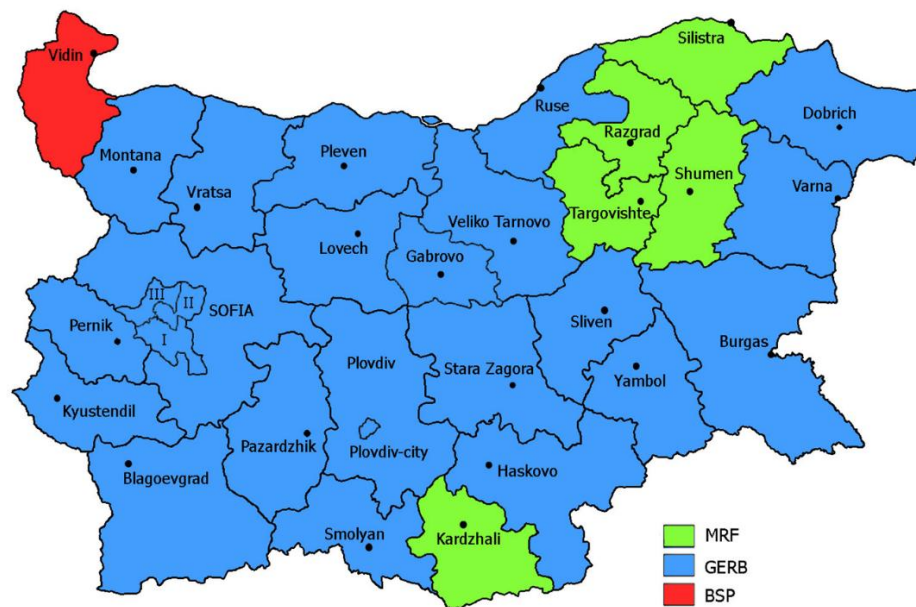
At the same time, the BSP electorate began to decline sharply even in its traditionally strong electoral districts. A factor in the latter is the relatively higher average age of BSP voters, due to which they are declining for natural reasons.

Traditionally, the MRF retained its electoral influence in the districts of Kardzhali, Razgrad, Shumen, Targovishte and Silistra. This electoral model was maintained in the next ten years without significant changes, while CEDB became the longest-ruling political party in Bulgaria since 1989 (Figure 3).

Significant changes in territorial terms are noted by the MRF (Figure 6). In regions such as Lovech, Sliven, Sofia – 2, the electoral votes are halved. At the same time, in a total of 12 other

regions, the votes are increasing, such as in Pernik by 60%, and Sofia – 1 by 38%. These regions are not traditionally supporting the MRF.

**Figure 3. Leading political parties by constituencies, averaged 2009, 2013, 2014 and 2017**



Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

CEDB's long rule led to the mobilization of a strong opposition against the ruling party, but it was divided into separate political formations that were unable to unite against the ruling party. This led to strong opposition in Bulgarian society, a parliamentary crisis in the period 2021-2023, and the inability to form a stable government. Despite this, CEDB retains its dominance in the country in terms of electoral geography (Figure 4).

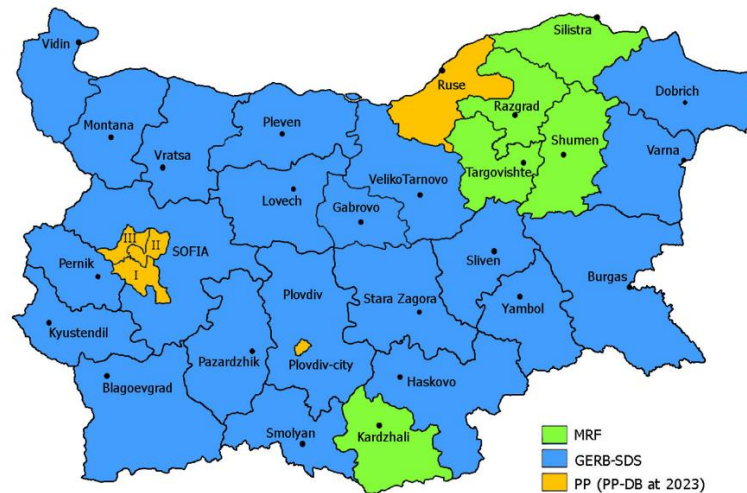
The intensive holding of parliamentary elections 2021 – 2024 and the emergence of new formations led to a loss of electoral votes for the leading parties (Figure 5 – 7).

For CEDB, the most significant voter outflow was registered in Haskovo (43%), Dobrich (38%) and Lovech (36%). Although a leading party in the country, CEDB is losing votes everywhere except for two metropolitan districts – Sofia 1 and Sofia 3.

The most noticeable loss of trust from voters is noted by the BSP, which is losing about 50% of support in almost the entire country, with the exception of Targovishte (-22.4%). The

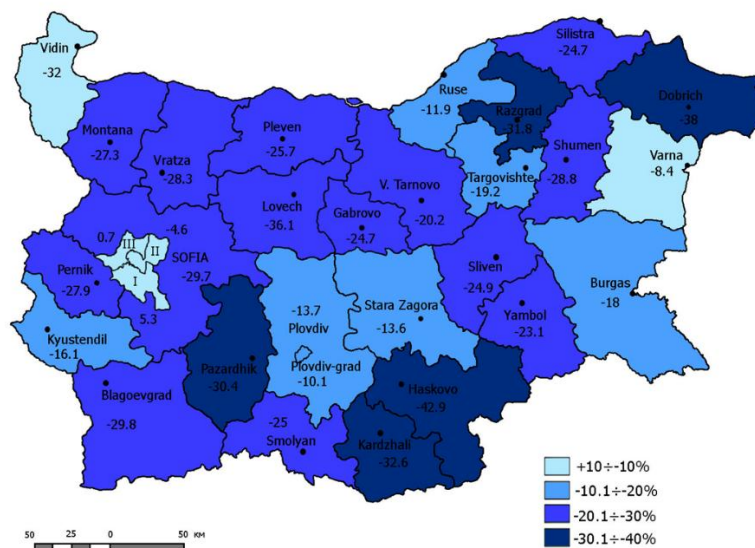
traditional electorate is attracted by the pro-Russian party "Revival", which is gradually increasing its electoral and parliamentary presence (table 7).

**Figure 4. Leading political parties by constituencies by average data for 2021, 2022, 2023**



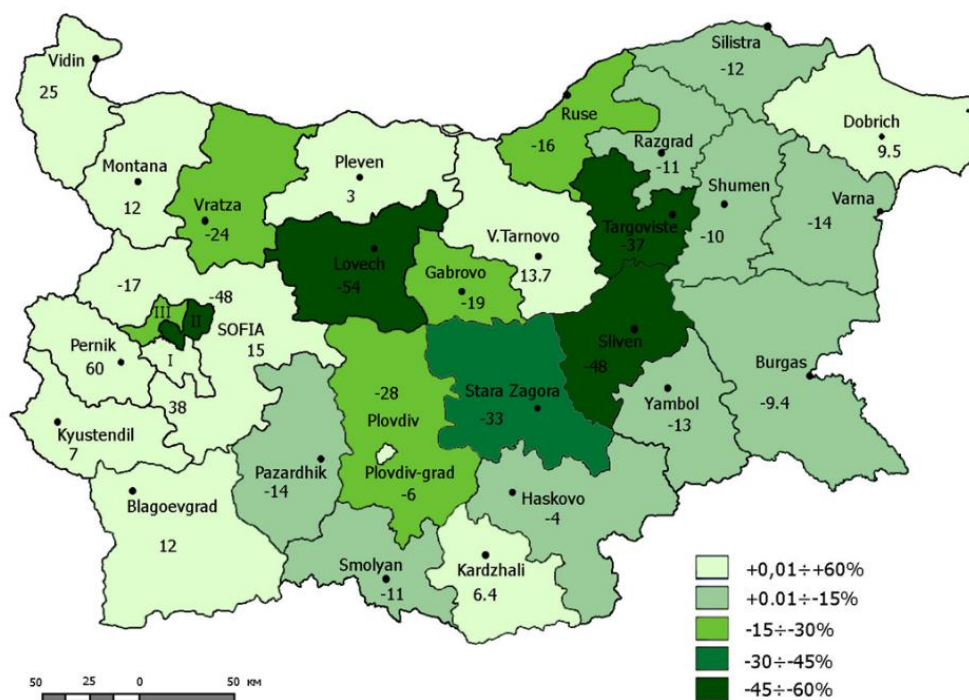
Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

**Figure 5. Increase/decrease in CEDB votes by multi-mandate electoral districts - April 2023 compared to April 2021 (%)**



Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

**Figure 6. Increase/decrease in the votes of the MRF by multi-mandate electoral regions - April 2023 compared to April 2021 (%)**





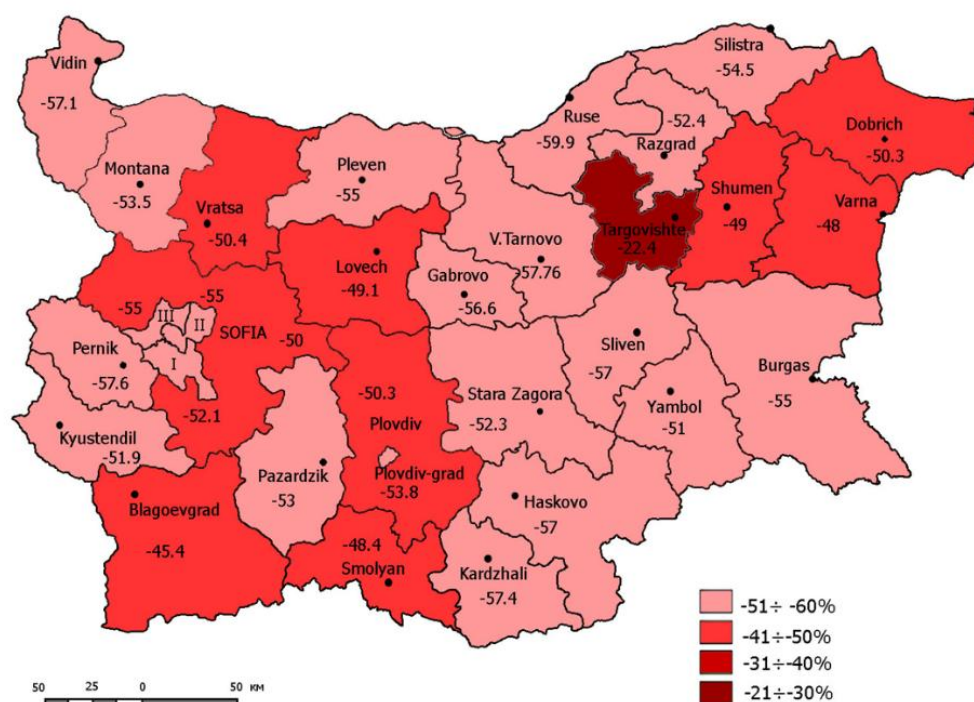
Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

**Table 7. Votes for Revival and votes for BSP 2021 – 2024 г.**

Elections	Revival	BSP	Seats Revival	Seats BSP
April 2021	78 414	480 146	-	43
July 2021	82 147	368 695	-	36
November 2021	127 568	267 817	13	26
October 2022	254 952	232 958	27	25
April 2023	358 174	225 914	37	23
June 2024	295 915	151 560	38	19
October 2024 <sup>5</sup>	325 358	184 361	33	19

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

**Figure 7. Increase/decrease in BSP votes by multi-mandate constituencies - April 2023 compared to April 2021 (%)**



<sup>5</sup> Decision of the Constitutional Court/15.03.25 reviews the results in 441 sections and declares the election of 16 deputies invalid.

Source: Authors' elaboration on the basis of Central Election Commission data.

## **Conclusion**

The political and parliamentary crises in Bulgarian society have led to a strong distrust of political parties by voters. At the same time, the political elite of all parties is accused of corruption and abuse of office. Combined with the frequent holding of elections, in which more and more new formations emerge around individual political leaders without a distinct political concept, this has led to a lack of interest among voters in participating in the electoral process.

Paradoxically, or perhaps naturally for Bulgaria, foreign policy factors (the war in Ukraine, the country's aspiration for Schengen and Eurozone membership, etc.) are once again proving to be the unifying factor in Bulgarian society between different parties and citizens. However, the strong negative sentiment regarding the lack of a motivated policy regarding the country's internal development remains. In conditions of deepening depopulation and economic backwardness of a number of provincial regions compared to the capital and large cities, the issue of changing the electoral system and electoral zoning remains significant.

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