

Bulgarian Political Parties and European Integration: From anticommunism to Euroscepticism

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Abstract: In this article, we review the political developments in Bulgaria since the fall of communism in 1989, including the process of European integration that it underwent. We pay a particular attention to the positions that political parties in the country take with respect to the country's membership in the European Union (EU). The place of the EU in the profiles of Bulgarian political parties is assessed through quantitative data available from the Manifesto Project. The qualitative discussion of the extent of European Union support within each of the major players in Bulgaria's party system adds to the quantitative data and provides the details on the specifics of Bulgarian socio-economic and socio-cultural Euroscepticism. We conclude that although Bulgarian political elite continues to have a pro-European orientation, Bulgarian Euroscepticism is already part of the party competition, and it is here to stay.

Keywords: Bulgaria, political parties, European integration, Euroscepticism

Introduction

Thirty years after the democratic breakthrough of 1989-1991, Bulgaria is unequivocally a country committed to free and fair elections, a market economy and the rule of law. Democracy is backed by a host of civil society groups and entrenched by way of Bulgaria's membership in the European Union (EU). But in several respects it remains an evolving, fraught, democracy, and political developments in the country are often ridden with contradictions. An illustration of the contradictory state of affairs could be observed in January 2018, at the start of Bulgaria's first rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). The presidency was hosted by the country's coalition government led by a populist Prime Minister and including members of a vehemently nationalistic junior partner. The EU's rotating presidency was an important opportunity for the country's political elite to showcase their commitment to European values and priorities yet this occurred amidst repeated

calls by the Socialist president for ending EU sanctions against the Russian Federation, measures that were put in place after the latter's 2014 annexation of Crimea and massive support for separatism in eastern Ukraine.

More broadly, Bulgaria has been lauded for being the first post-communist country to adopt a democratic constitution. Its peaceful transition and relative stability led Barany (2002) to refer to the country an "island of tranquility" (141). Bulgaria has a long tradition of resolving its political and ethnic crises through its political system (Ganev 1999; Krastev 2016), and Fish (1999) calls the consolidation of its democracy an achievement that few "could have predicted" (802). Yet, economic reforms struggled for nearly a decade in Bulgaria, its democracy has been "ineffective" (Barany 2002, 145) and societal traditions of anti-party sentiments date back to the 1930s (Krastev 1997). In recent years, moreover, political developments in the country led Dawson and Hanley (2016) to call it an "illiberal trailblazer" (25). The longstanding tensions between forces that promise to deepen and consolidate democracy and, conversely, those that are undermining or reversing such efforts provide the context that frames the evolution of European sentiments across Bulgaria's political parties that are the focus of this article. The article is structured as follows: In the first section, we briefly present government changes in the country since the establishment of multiparty competitive system, and the role of these governments in Bulgaria's European integration process. The second section of the article presents quantitative data on the EU-relevant divisions in Bulgaria's party system, putting the country into comparative perspective. Next, we turn to a qualitative discussion of the place of the European Union in the profiles of individual Bulgarian political parties, and this section is divided into mainstream actors, and national-populist parties that express hard or soft Euroscepticism. Lastly, we discuss the specifics of Bulgarian socio-economic and socio-cultural Euroscepticism. The final section concludes that Bulgarian Euroscepticism is already part of the party competition in the country and this is the novelty about this EU-supportive country.

Political Developments and the European Integration Process

Following events in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany, and under pressure from the public, in November 1989, the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party stepped down, paving the road for multi-party elections. The terms of the transition were negotiated at a ‘round-table’ with representatives of the budding opposition, and the first competitive elections took place in June 1990, electing a Grand National Assembly of 400 members tasked with adopting a new constitution. The Constitution was adopted on July 12, 1991, and elections for a ‘regular’ parliament took place in October of that year. Another eight legislative votes took place in subsequent years. Below, we briefly recap the government changes that followed each of these elections, and their role in the process of EU integration of the country.

Having won the 1990 elections, the *Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)* formed the first competitively elected government that lasted from September until December 1990. Despite having legislative majority, *BSP* was not able to maintain public support, and the collapse of its single-party government was followed by the formation of one that was broad-based and multi-party. This government was led by a non-partisan prime minister with the legislative support of *BSP*, the *Union of Democratic Forces (SDS)*, and *Bulgarian Agricultural People’s Union (BZNS)*. Subsequent elections resulted in a slim victory by the anti-communist and pro-European *SDS*, which formed a single-party government lasting 11 months –until December 1992– and was followed by another expert cabinet with the support of *BSP* and the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)*, also led by a prime minister not affiliated with a specific political party. The 1994 elections returned *BSP* to power in coalition with the *People’s Union (NS)*, which was to last two years, followed by another caretaker cabinet and another early election. The role of these governments regarding Bulgarian EU integration was controversial.

BSP was a party not ready to embrace the idea of accession whole-heartedly and the position of *SDS* in the executive was still weak. Thus, during this period Bulgaria signed an Agreement for Trade and Partnership in 1990, European Association Agreement 1993 and officially declared its will to join the EU in 1995. Still the steps were not very promising and Bulgaria was slowly moving in its integration process, far behind the former communist countries from Central Europe.

The significant change in Bulgarian integration process happened during the single-party government by *United Democratic Forces (ODS)* that formed following the 1997 snap elections. This was the first cabinet in Bulgaria to complete its term, and steps towards EU integration of the country were fast. The negotiations for accession started in 2000 and the country made a significant effort to progress during this process, and to compensate the lost time during previous governments. In 2000 Bulgaria received a visa-free regime with the EU member states, and this had a stimulating effect both for the government and the citizens support for the integration. The accelerated integration policy of *UDF's* government was followed by the next coalition government led by Bulgaria's exiled former king. Although his party, National Movement Simeon II (*NDSV*), barely qualified as a political party eligible to participate in the elections it received half the seats in the legislature in 2001. After the elections, *NDSV* entered into coalition with the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)*. This government went through several reshufflings but managed to stay in power until the next regularly scheduled elections in 2005. During this coalition government, Bulgaria became a member of NATO (2004), and received a confirmation by the European Council that will join the EU in 2007. As a result of the efforts of the government, Bulgaria finalized the accession negotiations six months earlier, and was preparing to join the union.

Four parties from the 2001 legislature (*NDSV*, *BSP*, *ODS*, and *DPS*) were also elected in 2005, although *NDSV* lost substantial support, and *ODS* split into two factions, including a newly formed *Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)*. In addition to *DSB*, two new parties, the ultra-nationalist *Ataka*,

and *Bulgarian National Union (BNS)*, were elected to the National Assembly. No party had majority control and the largest legislative party (*BSP*) accounted for only 34% of the seats. After prolonged negotiations, *BSP* formed a coalition government with *NDSV* and *DPS*, which also completed its term in office. In 2007, Bulgaria became a member of the EU and this government was the first government that needed to operate in a new political environment. Bulgaria was under the monitoring of the European Commission (Cooperation and Verification Mechanism) in the areas of judicial reform, corruption and organized crime, and needed to prove that it is trying to cope with these issues. The government was not successful in this aspect and the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) continued during the whole mandate of the cabinet. This was the first significant failure of the country in the EU and demonstrated that the capacity of EU to stimulate political reforms in the countries, which are already members of the Union, is rather limited. The 2009 vote resulted in another reshuffling of the party system, with *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)* winning 40% of the vote, and forming Bulgaria's first minority government.

The elections of May 2013 were the first won by an incumbent party, yet *GERB* did not have a viable coalition partner, and another minority cabinet was not feasible. Following some tense procedural negotiations, a coalition government was formed between *BSP* and *DPS*, which held 120 of the seats in the National Assembly and won the investiture vote with the tacit approval of *Ataka* (Kostadinova and Popova 2013). The cabinet was short-lived, however, and new parliamentary elections were held a year later. Once again, *GERB* won the most votes, and was able to form a minority coalition government with the *Reformist Bloc*, a new and short-lived pre-election coalition of right wing parties (Kostadinova and Popova 2014). The second *GERB* cabinet lasted two years, with coalition rifts precipitating early elections in 2017. For the fourth time in a row, *GERB* won the plurality of votes, and was able to form a cabinet with the support of the *United Patriots*, a pre-election coalition of three far-right/far-left nationalist parties. Although declared as a strongly pro-European and

reformist party *GERB* and its governments did not succeed to tackle the important problems of the country. In the last ten years, Bulgaria lost many opportunities in political and economic terms. The country is in the periphery of the integration process, and declarations by the prime-minister Boyko Borissov, that the country is oriented towards deeper integration, are not supported by effective actions. The focus of the government is predominantly on its fund-absorption capacity and Bulgaria, more than ten years after accession, is still not a member of the Schengen and euro zone. The issues addressed by CVM regarding judicial reform are still valid and the country is steadily losing its attractiveness for foreign investors and political partners. The current governing coalition of *GERB* with national-populist parties is making the reputation of the country in the European Union even worse.

The place of the EU in the Bulgarian party system: quantitative assessment

In this section, we present quantitative data on the place of the European Union, and issues related to EU membership in the profiles of political parties in Bulgaria, and we utilize available coding of the text of party platforms, as well as country experts' assessments of party positions. The section starts with broader overview of the emphasis on EU issues across parties, available for the period 1990-2017. The last part in the section contains an overview of the positions and assessments for each of the major parties in Bulgaria, with a particular emphasis on statements indicating the two types of Euroskepticism discussed in a subsequent section – socio-economic and socio-cultural.

Party Positions

Figure 1a and 1b present the longest available data on parties' (general) emphasis on, and positions with respect to the EU, available from the Manifesto Project. The Manifesto Project codes sentences (or section of) by topic, producing scores reflecting the share of the party program dedicated to each topic. Thus, these scores are numerical representation of the text of the official party platforms

for each election year and country. A set of variables is then constructed from these scores, and for this article, we utilize two such Manifesto Project variables, per 108 (positive mentions of the EU) and per 110 (negative mentions of the EU). From these two variables, we then calculate a score for salience (the sum of the two variables) and position (the difference between the two variables).¹ For comparison, we graphed the average scores for parties in Bulgaria, and compared them with the averages for parties in, the other country that accessed to the EU in 2007, Romania, and across the EU. For clarity of presentation, we show the scores only for the years when elections took place in the two countries of main interest here, Bulgaria and Romania, although data for other years are available across the rest of the EU member states. In the figures below, the darkest shaded columns show the EU average scores, the lightest ones - those of parties in Bulgaria, and the grey-shaded columns – those for parties in Romania.

{Figures 1a and 1b about here}

Overall, for most years, the topic of the European Union has a fairly low salience for parties in Bulgaria, reflecting between zero and 2.5% of the manifestos (Figure 1a). The importance for the EU in party programs increased in the early years of transition as the country was ramping up accession negotiations, declining after membership, and increasing somewhat in the last couple of elections. The trend is very similar for Romania, although there, average salience scores are slightly higher, ranging from around 1% to a little over 4%, with two distinct peaks, around 2000 and 2012. On average, the EU is less salient for parties in Bulgaria and Romania, than it is for parties across the EU. These broad assessments of the place of the EU in party platforms are consistent with the limited research on this topic that indicates that the EU is generally absent from the election programs of parties in post-

¹ Additional information on the Manifesto Project data and codebook are available at <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>. The Manifesto Project has the only available longitudinal data on political parties that allows for country comparisons.

communist countries (Krasovec and Lajh, 2011). This is the case since the issues that most voters care about are “largely beyond the purview of the Union ... the EU is still treated largely as a foreign policy issue” (Haughton, 2011, p. 7).

The relatively low salience of EU issues across party platforms, though, presents only a limited assessment of the how political actors differ in their positions on the European Union, and Figure 1b shows the average score with respect to parties’ EU positions, i.e. are they, on the aggregate, pro- or anti- EU. Overall, parties in Bulgaria share positive positions on EU issues; they are, on average, pro-European integration. The extent of positive mentions of the EU increased substantially in the country in the years leading up to its accession to the EU, declining sharply after, with a small subsequent peak during the 2017 elections. Trends in Romania are similar, with slightly stronger pro-EU positions than in Bulgaria, preceding the accession. Parties in both countries take distinctly more pro-European positions as compared to other parties in the EU. The increasingly positive mentions of the EU in Bulgaria and Romania is contrasted with a decline in such support for the EU, across parties in other member states, and for the same period. One notable difference between Bulgaria and the rest of the data presented here is the distinct negative assessment of the EU in the platforms of parties participating in the 2014 elections, which stands out as the only year when anti-EU sentiments dominated. We explore the details of this Euroscepticism among Bulgaria parties in subsequent sections.

Within-country comparison across parties

The previous figures and the above discussion presented an aggregate picture of the relevance of the European Union, and the support for it, across all major political parties in Bulgaria. These summary measures conceal some of the diversity of positions within the country’s political spectrum. Thus, below we turn to a more detailed comparison across parties in Bulgaria, utilizing the same

metrics and assessments as in the above discussion but for individual parties in the country. Figure 2 presents how legislative parties within Bulgaria differed in the tone of mentions of the EU across election platforms, based on the Manifesto Project scores.² The only political party with strong anti-EU positions, based on these data, is Ataka, whose anti-EU sentiments reached a peak during the 2014 elections. Examples of statements against the EU from Ataka's election platform include a proposal to renegotiate the closed chapters in Bulgaria's EU accession treaty (2005) and to impose 100% import tariffs for agricultural products from the EU (2009).³

{Figure 2 about here}

Other major political parties took pro-EU positions, if they mentioned the EU at all in their election platforms. In some elections, select parties, such as BSP (2009), DPS (1990) and SDS (1991) did not take a position on the European Union. Most of the time, though, parties in Bulgaria expressed a favorable position, even if minimal, towards European integration. The party with the highest share of pro-EU statements was DPS in 2009 and 2017. Among the most consistent DPS pro-EU positions are series of promises in favor of Bulgaria's membership in the economic and monetary union, including the adoption of the Euro as a national currency, after meeting the Maastricht criteria.

Further, in 2001, as prospects for Bulgaria's membership in the European Union looked up, both BSP and NDSV had a relatively high share of pro-EU statements in their platforms, such explicitly restating their priority for EU membership, including completion of the accession negotiations, and creating conditions for the utilization of structural funds. On the other hand, GERB which has been in most governments, since 2009, does not stand out as an expressively European party in its election manifestos, and has made virtually no explicit EU-related promises over the years.

² For clarity of presentation, we report the score for EU position, i.e. the share of each party platform that has positive (or negative) mentions of the European Union. The absolute values of these scores reflect the EU salience measure.

³ Party pledges, examples of which are presented in the text, are coded by the authors consistent with the methodology used in Thomson et al. (2017) and Kostadinova (2013).

Taking a closer look at the specific issues that indicate Eurosceptic attitudes, we consider two types, discussed in more details in the subsequent section – socio-economic and socio-cultural. As indicators of such positions, we look at positions indicating anti-imperialism, supporting (or opposing) traditional morality and multiculturalism, respectively.⁴ Both have increased among parties in Bulgaria since the country joined the European Union, and Ataka stands out as the most vocal proponent of anti-imperial positions; other parties in Bulgaria tend not to mention these positions in their manifestos. Parties tend to make more references of issues regarding traditional morality and multi-culturalism, with more diversity between parties and overtime. Again, as consistent with our narrative discussion, there has been an increase in negative references to multi-culturalism, accompanied by positive mentions of traditional morality (Figure 3).

{insert Figure 3 about here}

In this section, we provided a summary overview of the place of the EU in the profiles of parties in Bulgaria, as manifested in their election platforms. Having overviewed with quantitative data the salience of the European Union, and the positions that parties take towards it, in the next section, we turn to a qualitative discussion of the extent of European Union support within each of the major players in Bulgaria's party system. The discussion that follows is framed to describe the shift that occurred in Bulgarian politics, which is depicted in the quantitative data, of growing Euroscepticism.

Bulgaria's political parties and the EU: from mainstream support to national-populist Euroscepticism

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), scholars observe (Houghton 2014, Laure

⁴ CMP variables per103_2 f to capture anti-imperialism; difference between positive (per607) and negative (per608) mentions of multi culturalism (+) per607; difference between positive (per603) and negative (per604) mentions of traditional morality.

Neumayer 2008, Batory 2002) a significant overlap between European integration and post-communist transformation. The positioning of a party in general political competition depended greatly on its stance in relation to post-communist transformation, the goals of this transformation, and its attitudes towards the process of European integration. During that period, debates on Europe served as a mechanism whereby a party could be included or excluded from political competition. The EU was still a symbol of peace, prosperity, democracy, and “political parties were classified as legitimate or illegitimate political actors based on their attitude towards the EU” (Houghton 2014). Because of this broad support for the EU, even some communist parties from CEE countries, such as SDL in Poland and MSzP in Hungary, adopted pro-EU positions and refashioned themselves as social democrat parties. This was also the case in Bulgaria, where the ex-communist BSP expressed its support for European integration, though at first vaguely and reluctantly. Yet in 1995 the BSP government officially declared Bulgaria’s will to join the EU (see above), a move regarded as “breaking with the past” (Neumayer 2008) and which guaranteed the place of BSP as a “mainstream socialist party” in domestic political competition (Zapryanova 2011: 167). In this period a “transition consensus” (Smilov 2008) was established in Bulgaria, which led to the process of “mainstream party convergence” (Zapryanova 2011). This convergence is visible by the ideas expressed by mainstream political parties in their European Parliament (EP) electoral manifestos in the period after the accession 2007-2009. BSP’s first electoral manifesto for EP elections “Our Plan for Bulgaria in European Union” (*BSP* 2007) shows significant influence of the European socialists’ idea of “New social Europe”. Its 2009 EP elections manifesto “People first. New direction for Europe” is also strongly influenced by PES political priorities. In its manifesto from 2009, DPS states that the “actual strategic goal of Bulgarian state” needs to be the transformation “From formal membership to real integration into EU.” In its electoral manifesto “For a Prosperous Bulgaria in the European Union” centrist *NDSV* (2007), describes itself as “the most European Bulgarian political party”. The right wing, Bulgarian populist

party GERB, states in its 2009 EP manifesto that as its main political goal the “... modernization of the social, political and economic life in the country in accordance with European norms and standards”.

However this “party convergence” constrained party competition and led to a lack of debate regarding Bulgaria’s EU accession, which in turn created fertile ground for the emergence of “anti-mainstream protest parties” (Zapryanova 2011). These parties used the EU as a weapon to criticize the establishment for failures during the transition period and, at the same time, distinguish themselves from the parties participating in the transition. This became easily visible in the case of Bulgaria where with the unfolding of the economic crisis the nationalist-EU divide has been taking more space (Zankina 2017).

Bulgarian national-populist parties and the EU

The last parliamentary elections before Bulgaria’s accession to the EU marked an important change in Bulgarian party politics: for the first time a national populist party, *Ataka*, succeeded in gaining representation in the National Assembly. Many observers expected that this party, established shortly before the 2005 elections, would be a short-lived phenomenon, but the party has demonstrated unexpected political endurance. Not only did it survive throughout the following years but in 2017 officially entered a government coalition for the first time. Led by charismatic ex-journalist Volen Siderov, during the period after its establishment the party successfully transformed domestic political discourse imposing its xenophobic, racist and homophobic agenda on national politics. In this period, “ethno-cultural cleavage” (Krasteva 2016) became a part of Bulgarian politics and “what was once politically unacceptable has become quite mainstream” (Ghodsee 2008: 35). Currently, the party participates in Bulgarian government as part of the electoral coalition of the United Patriots. This coalition, formed prior to the 2016 presidential elections, includes two other large national populist

parties (*VMRO-BND Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Bulgarian National Movement*) and *NFSB* (*National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria*), as well as a number of smaller fringe parties, such as the Union of Patriotic Forces ‘Defense’, BG Patriot and Middle European Class (SEK). What unites this coalition beyond their desire to be part of the Bulgarian government, is their national populism, Euroscepticism and anti-establishment rhetoric, expressed in slogans such as “Bulgaria above all” (*Ataka*, *VMRO*), “Bulgaria for Bulgarians” (*Ataka*), “It’s time for revenge” (*VMRO*) and “Let’s get our Bulgaria back” (*Ataka*).

VMRO-BND, another party in the coalition, has the longest political history, dating back to the end of the 19th century, which in different periods of its history functioned as a militant political organization. The party was regarded by the communist regime as a dangerous enemy and suffered severe persecution in the period after 1944. After the fall of communism in 1989 it was reestablished, and its current leader Karakachanov (formerly a member of Communist State Security Service) is one of the longest standing Bulgarian politicians. Although this party has always situated itself on the right side of the political spectrum, it was only in recent years that it adopted firmly anti-establishment and harsh xenophobic sentiments that often echo *Ataka*’s discourse. Krasteva (2016) argues that the success of *Ataka* led to the radicalization of *VMRO-BND* in order to preserve its political competitiveness within the nationalistic niche. However, until recently, *VMRO-BND* had not been a Eurosceptic party: it supported the integration of the country in the EU and NATO, although it insisted that Bulgaria should be treated as an equal partner during the negotiation process.

The other important partner in the coalition is *NFSB*. The party is led by Valeri Simeonov, the owner of nationalistic TV SKAT, and composed of journalists and sympathizers of the television station. Since its creation, the party competed with *Ataka*, criticizing Volen Siderov for collaboration with the political establishment during the government of *GERB* 2009-2013, and the *BSP* and *DPS* government 2013-2014. However, it then re-oriented itself towards cooperation with *VMRO* and

formed the current coalition with *Ataka* before the presidential elections of 2016.

Thus, after Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007, gradually the Eurosceptic niche was populated with protest parties, predominantly coming from the far right spectrum of the political system. These parties used aggressively anti-establishment, nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric in their determination to gain public recognition and support. This observation has been supported by other scholars (Mudde 2004; Pridham 2008; Zapryanova 2001; Unikaite 2014) according to which in CEE countries we can observe a distinct overlap between Euroscepticism and populism. In an article from 2004, Mudde argues that existing socio-economic and cultural differences between the center and the peripheries in CEE countries will be used by political entrepreneurs to politicize these differences, pointing to the EU as a “ perfect external enemy to give... a classical populist spin” (Mudde 2004:7). Additionally, in recent years, the situation has changed significantly with the unfolding of the economic crisis, and Euroscepticism is now seen as more legitimate and salient. This allows fringe parties and positions to be taken more seriously and considered more acceptable by mainstream parties, and in this way enter governing coalitions.

Bulgaria – national populism and Euroscepticism after accession

The success of Eurosceptic national populist parties in Bulgaria has also been triggered by rising Euroscepticism among the population. According to Smilov (2008: 33), a significant part of the Bulgarian population, despite having generally positive feelings towards the EU, nonetheless share some sentiments that have helped trigger the development of Euroscepticism. For instance, the feeling of the inferiority of Bulgaria as an EU member state and a lack of trust in the ability of national institutions to adequately defend national interests within the union contribute to this. These fears could also be interpreted as sources for two different types of Euroscepticism in Bulgaria: socio-economic and socio-cultural (Beichelt 2004, Kriesi 2007, Kriesi and Hutter 2017).

Socio-economic Euroscepticism

In a survey carried out by Hughes et al. (2008), they observed “high levels of political pragmatism” in relations between CEE countries and the EU. This was visible in the case of Bulgaria as well, where the mainstream political parties promoted Bulgarian integration to EU, and the “civilizational choice” (Stoyanov, P. 1997) of the country, as a political decision that is mainly profit driven. Thus, during the political debates before and after accession, EU integration was presented as an exceptional opportunity for prosperous economic development of the country secured by EU funds. The EU was broadly regarded as a “cash cow” (Haughton 2014) and the capacity of a particular government to utilize EU funds were an aspect of political completion as an indicator of political competence and success (Haughton 2014).

On the other hand, Bulgarian national populists interpreted European integration as a process that destructs Bulgarian economy and society. To national populists, European integration is a threat for Bulgarian society, with foreign companies and entrepreneurs often viewed as “external enemies” (Kriesi 2016). In different forms, the national populist parties oppose big international companies, which they often call “robbers”, and the investments of big multinational companies investments in Bulgaria are presented as “colonial slavery” (Ataka) because of unequal relations between these corporations and the Bulgarian state. As early as 2005, Ataka called for re-negotiations of Bulgaria’s membership in the EU due to, in its’ views, unfavorable terms for the country.

These parties also strongly oppose land ownership by foreigners, which is an important aspect of their electoral appeal. Ataka also envisages a re-nationalization of some of the privatized companies as an economic tool for the protection of Bulgarian interests. The cooperation of Bulgarian governments with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund after the Bulgarian financial crisis of 1996 is also presented as a huge threat to Bulgarian independence. In the period immediately before

and after the accession Ataka and VMRO fiercely criticized the government for the closure of some of the reactors of the Kozlodui nuclear power-plant (Smilov 2008; Ghodsee 2008) and insisted that the Bulgarian government needed to defend the power-plant at any cost. They also stand for protectionism in favor of Bulgarian small and medium-sized businesses (Ataka and NFSB), and that this opposition to free trade can extend beyond Bulgaria. Thus, in 2009, for example, Ataka called for imposing tariffs on imports from the EU. The “patriotic” parties also support the creation of an independent Bulgarian energy system and the country’s transformation, with Russia’s help, into an energy hub for the region.

Socio-cultural Euroscepticism

As we already mentioned above, the rhetoric of Bulgarian mainstream parties during the accession period has been focused on economic benefits of the integration. These parties were discussing the financial support that country will receive in the coming years, but did not pay attention to the impact of the EU on socio-cultural processes within its member states. In this aspect, debates concerning the fundamental values on which the Union was built were almost missing from the domestic political debate. Although the impact the EU has on the “allocation of values and norms in Europe” (Hix 1999: 70) is significant and recognized by politicians and scholars, the issue of the EU’s “normative integration” became a topic of discussion only after the accession. At the same time, the debate about cultural aspects of the integration process are new for the old member states too. Thus, in an article from 2006, Cecile Leconte writes about this cultural aspect of integration, and discusses the EU as a “community of values” which is increasingly active in policy areas such as the fight against racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism (Leconte 2006: 1072). Based on this new dimension of the EU integration project, and its increasingly deep penetration into the social tissue of member states, the “democracy requirement” for membership in the EU is transformative and “now implies a qualitative understanding of democracy, involving issues such as the promotion of multiculturalism, and non-

discrimination.” (Leconte 2006: 1073). Leconte (2014) claims that this “normative integration” provokes Euroscepticism, and defends this claim by writing about the EU fundamental rights policy as a source of Euroscepticism.

In an article from 2013, Abbarno and Zapryanova observe that some Eurosceptic actors perceive the EU as a “threat to national culture”. This is certainly the case in Bulgaria, where NFSB’s 2013 program blamed EU liberal values for favoring minorities (Roma and Bulgarian Turks), whom they regard as “internal enemies” (Kriesi 2016) at the expense of the Bulgarian majority. In his research based on sociological surveys and interviews with members and supporters of Ataka, Dandolov (2014) demonstrates that Ataka sympathizers share the opinion that the EU assists and promotes minority rights in the country at the expense of ethnic Bulgarians. EU minority protection policies, dubbed as “multicultural genocide” are regarded as empowering Roma (“Gipsy terror”) and Bulgarian Turks in their desire for more rights (Dandolov 2014: 345). Even the EU cross-border cooperation programs executed jointly by Bulgaria and Turkey are regarded as “indirectly promoting Islamization within Bulgaria”, and “Turkization of certain Bulgarian regions” (Dandolov 2014: 347).

The “patriots” also criticize the EU’s liberal positions regarding homosexuality and the rights of LGBT people, which they see as destroying traditional social and family values. National populists use the expression “Gay Europe” (Krasteva 2016: 186) to demonstrate that European integration facilitates not only a political but also social and cultural malaise in European societies. The “patriots” also strongly oppose the accession of Turkey to the EU, since they believe it will be damaging to both the Bulgarian economy and society. They consider Turkish culture and the Muslim religion as unacceptable in Christian Europe. As Ghodsee (2008) observes, this position is in line with the radical anti-Islam position of the National Front in France and other far-right anti-Islam parties in Western Europe. Similarly, the issue of migration has become one of the pillars of electoral campaigns since 2013. Describing the migrant situation in Bulgaria and more generally in Europe as ‘catastrophic’,

parties from the Bulgarian populist far-right criticize the establishment for its incapacity to resolve the current crisis in Bulgaria and to oppose Brussels' liberal migration policies, which, according to them, will cause the destruction of European civilization. The government of Viktor Orban in Hungary is praised as a model for internal EU relations and his policy towards the migrants as a successful response to the migrant crisis, with Syrian refugees presented as "illegal" immigrants threatening national security and public order (Krasteva 2016: 185). This anti-immigrant stance also helped parties from the coalition present themselves as defenders of the Bulgarian population and Christian values from the invasion of Islamist terrorists, which was highly visible during the electoral campaigns of the three national populist parties, both in the national and European elections of 2013, 2014, and 2017.

Conclusions

At the start of the post-communist period, parties from all sides of the Bulgarian political spectrum demonstrated a broad consensus on European integration (Smilov 2008, Zapryanova 2011). Europe was associated with progress, modernization and democratization, and accession to the EU was perceived by most as an opportunity to overcome the legacies of communism. However, shortly before the country's accession to the EU, this European consensus began to disintegrate, and Eurosceptic views began to emerge. In this article, we followed the political developments in the country and the process of European integration since the fall of communism in 1989, with a particular emphasis on the period after the country joined the European Union. We discussed the salience of the EU and parties' positions, with respect to European integration. Our research reveals the rather contradictory role of the EU for political parties. The two sets of data that we used – quantitative and qualitative – show some important differences in the ways in which EU is presented in party manifestos on the one hand and in orientations of party leadership on the other. The Manifesto Project data clearly shows a low level of salience of EU issues for Bulgarian political parties. At the same time, these data confirm the existence

of a broad pro-European political consensus among Bulgarian political parties. On the other hand, our own qualitative analysis point out the existence of significant nuances of Bulgarian political parties regarding the EU. Analyzing the Bulgarian integration process, we can conclude that left/right divide concerning EU political issues does not exist in Bulgaria - parties from both the left and the right of the political spectrum support further integration of the union and there is no opposition expressed against the process of deepening and widening. Nevertheless, there is a clear link between national-populist parties (Ataka, NFSB, VMRO) and Euroscepticism. This Euroscepticism combines both socio-economic and socio-cultural argumentation, as national populist parties oppose economic integration and foreign involvement in Bulgarian economy on the one hand, and criticize the impact of European values on the traditional, and often patriarchal Bulgarian culture, on the other hand.

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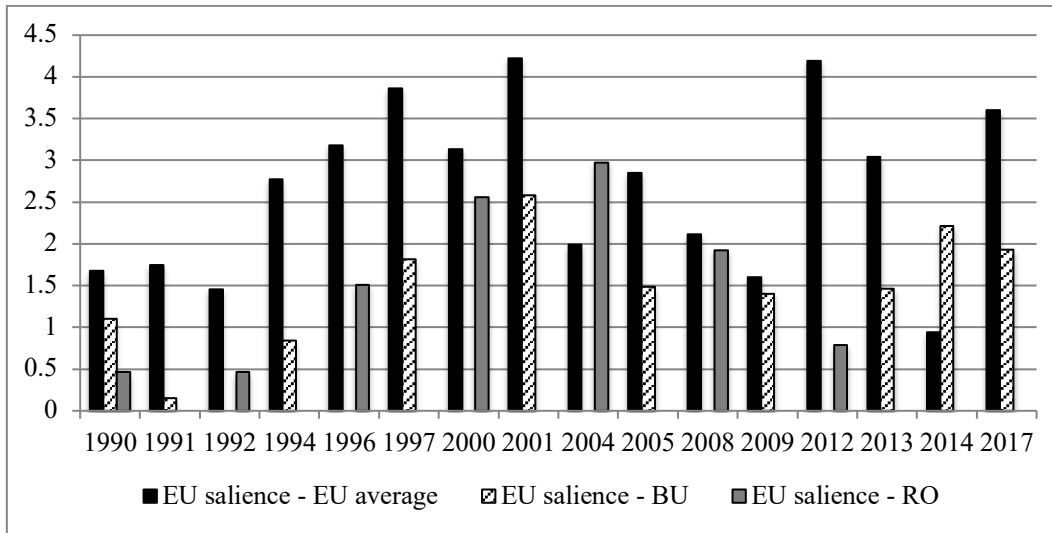
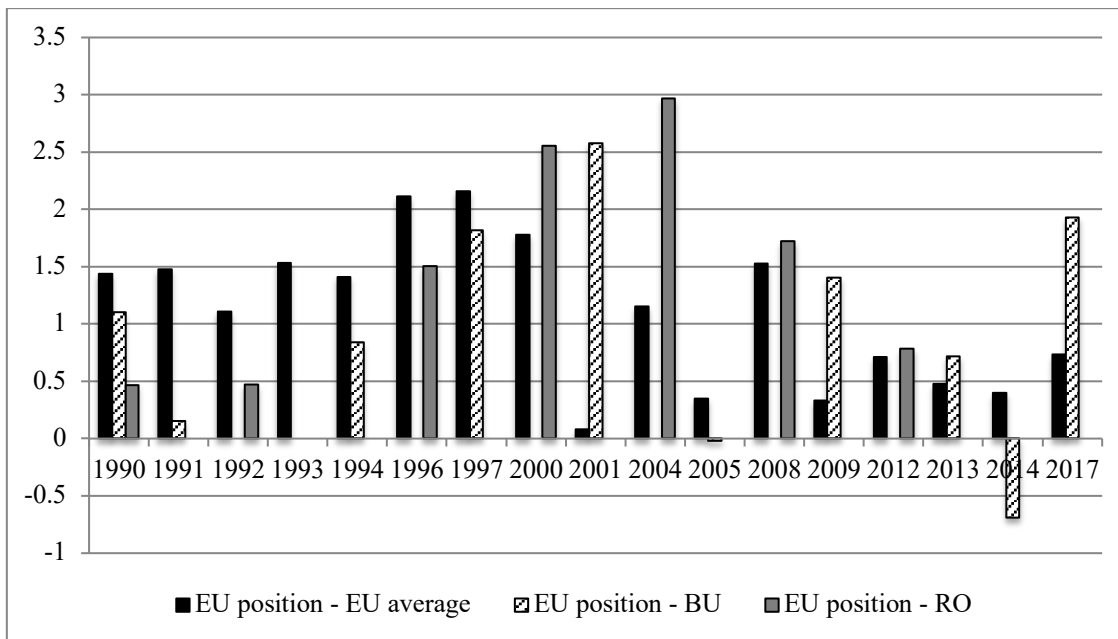
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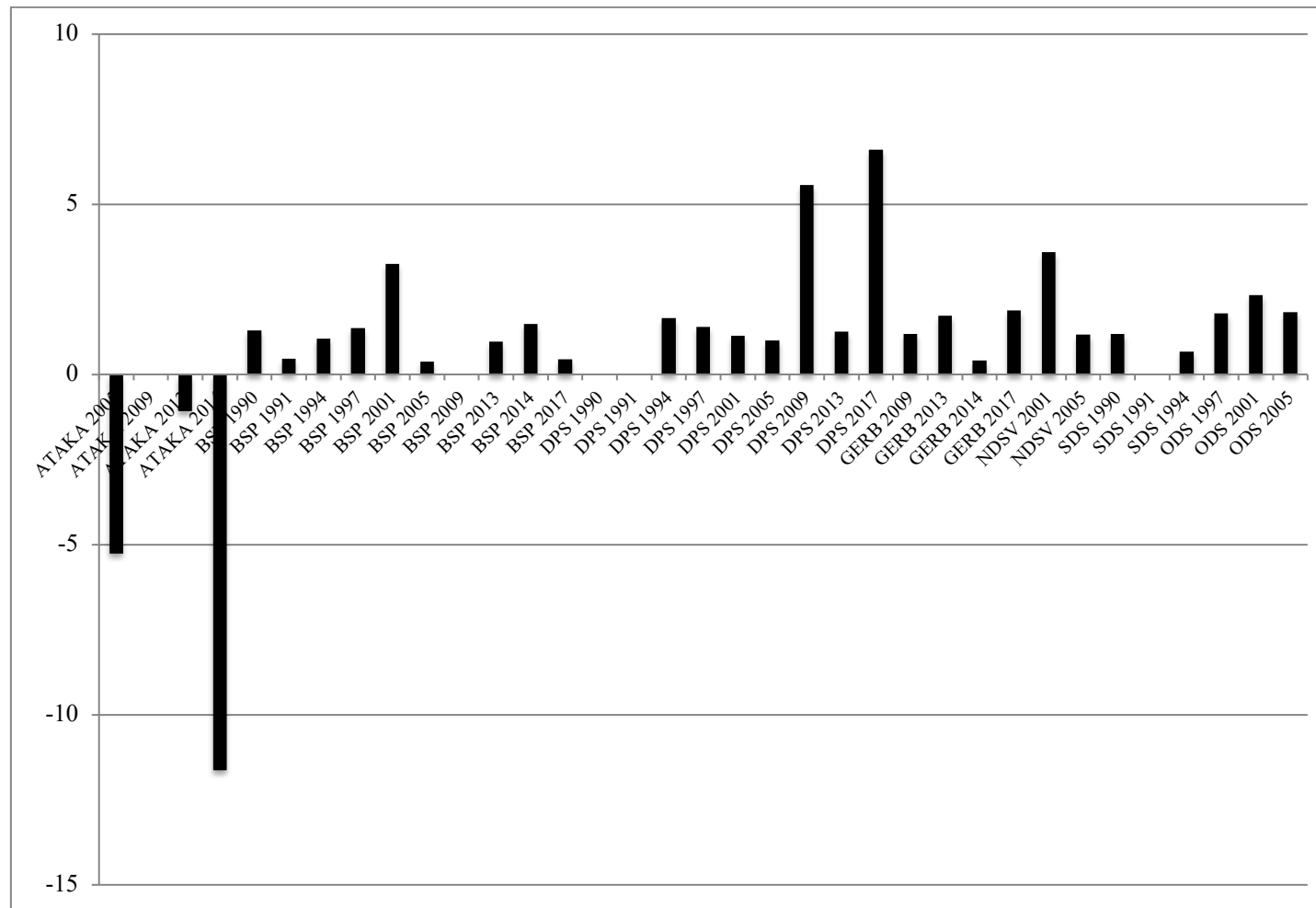
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Figure 1a. Average salience of EU issues for parties in Bulgaria, Romania, and the EU.**Figure 1b.** Average strength of EU positions for parties in Bulgaria, Romania, and the EU.

Notes: Authors calculations from the Manifesto Project data. Salience is calculated as the sum of the per 108 and per 110 variables. Position is calculated as the difference between the per 108 and per 110 variables.

Figure 2. EU position for parties in Bulgaria.



Source: Manifesto Project. Position is calculated as the difference between the per 108 and per 110 variables.

Figure 3. Socio-cultural Euroscepticism reflected in party positions

