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**“At This Point, Why Bother
Trying”: Electoral Behaviour in a
Democratic Crisis – The Case of
Bulgaria**

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents -----	1
Introduction -----	2
Psychology of Civic Engagement -----	3
1.1 Group Psychology, Civic Engagement and Empowerment-----	3
1.2 Trends in Engagement of Citizens-----	4
1.3 The Need for Active Citizens-----	7
1.4 Connecting Psychology and Politics-----	7
Bulgarian Political Reality - Past and Present -----	10
2.1 Communist Past of Bulgaria-----	10
2.2 Democratisation - Towards the New Century-----	11
2.3 Current Political Environment-----	13
Discussion -----	18
3.1 Connecting the Bulgarian Example to Theory-----	18
3.2 Proposals for Future Developments - Engagement of the Bulgarian Population-----	19
Conclusions -----	23
Bibliography -----	24

Introduction

The functioning of society and its effects on both groups and individuals in relation to politics and political engagement is represented in the psychological study of civic engagement (Almond & Verba, 1963). Examining the amount of involvement, opinionation and concern with political issues reflects not only in an individual's health, social trust and psychological empowerment, but also develops necessary critical thinking and enhances their internal political efficacy in order to successfully and constructively approach political topics (Zimmerman, 1988). The study and research into civic engagement are crucial for understanding the functioning of society and developing adequate strategies for resolving conflict, whether internal or between different political powers (Delamater, 2018).

Bulgarian politics, as all other political realities, is challenging and complex to examine in its full depth. One can dedicate an entire academic career to analysing and dissecting the seemingly endless variables affecting turnout levels. From foreign influence to corruption to political clientelism (Mares et al., 2017), the roots of problematic practices in Bulgarian rule seem ineradicable. The decades-long layering of malpractice is showcased in recent instances related to elections - record low turn-out level, multiple campaigns in a significantly short period and mistrust in the political conduct (Zankina, 2024). That is why Bulgarian politics is the case study of this writing.

This thesis is a literature review of materials and articles connected to psychological theory of group-workings and Civic Engagement, Bulgarian politics and methods for increasing engagement in individuals in Bulgaria. The articles were gathered by using specific keywords (e.g. psychology of civic engagement, psychology of political activism, Bulgarian politics, etc.) on Google Scholar with the aim to approach this topic through the lens of psychological theories applied to a particular political case study. This work is one of few that attempt to create a psychological profile of Bulgarian voters in such a niche way, taking into account both historical and current influences. This thesis could be useful not only for people specialising or interested in political psychology, but also individuals in the fields of sociology, political analysis and other academia, as well as policy makers and non-governmental organisations that aim at increasing civic engagement in Bulgaria specifically, or even in countries of similar background in Eastern Europe.

Psychology of Civic Engagement

1.1 Group Psychology, Civic Engagement and Empowerment

Understanding social shifts in behaviour and opinion starts with exploring the realm of group psychology and how individuals behave when put in the context of different social units they belong to, what influence that has on their perspectives and the occurrence of conflicts that trigger disagreements. Groups can be defined as social systems, possessing structured and determined relations between their two or more members (Delamater, 2018). These units have four necessary attributes that need to be present in order to be called a group - membership, member interaction, common incentives and agreed-upon norms and standards (Delamater, 2018). Group cohesion, which is determined by the degree of intent a member has to remain in a group and continue to contribute to the common goal (desirable outcome) and maintain group's norms (consistent behavioural actions for given circumstances), is heavily influenced by the emotions experienced by members, especially when positive (Delmater, 2018). The standards and expectations that are set with the norms are the backbone of members' ability to evaluate and analyse the surrounding environment, especially in the presence of unfamiliarity. The members create their "cognitive frame of reference" on the basis of the shared values and priorities by the group they identify with and enhance a "common identity" (Delamater, 2018).

In the presence of conflict, the commitment and cohesiveness of a group increases, which in turn contributes to even more rigid boundaries, and particularly prioritise those behaviours that increase the likelihood of attaining a desired goal, which in this case would be to become the victors at the end of the conflict (Delamater, 2018). Applied to the case of politics, the electoral process and political campaigns could be seen as the "conflict" - increase in self-promotion of the parties and their leaders, wish to occupy as many seats in parliament as possible in order to be seen as "victors", members and followers of parties judging economic and social issues through the "cognitive frame" of the norms the party elevates. This is where Civic Engagement and Civic Participation become relevant.

Civic Engagement and citizenship are two closely related concepts, yet do hold some differences in their meanings. Citizenship could be interpreted both as a residential and legal status of the individual, or as cultural requirements that shape the individual into a citizen (Pancer, 2015). Civic Engagement (CE), however, includes in itself the intent of the actions

of citizens. Pancer (2015) describes it as the “broad set of behaviors that link individuals to others in their community and serve to enhance community life”. The intention of civically engaged citizens is to contribute to the general well-being of their social surroundings. When such individuals commit to work towards solving particular issues or worries of the community, either alone or in coordination with others, and volunteer to help their social circles, Barret et al. (2014) connects those active traits to the term Civic Participation (CP). The distinctiveness between CE and CP lies on the cognitive-behavioural spectrum. Engagement can compose more of interest in, attentiveness towards and knowledgeability of civic matters, while participation relates to behavioural conduct (Barrett et al., 2014). Both concepts are directly linked to one’s Psychological Empowerment, or more specifically, the “expression of construct at the level of individual” and the growth of such a sense as the “process by which individuals gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community” (Zimmerman, 1988). Increase in PE connects to greater involvement in social decision-making, lower levels of alienation and enhancement of perceived control of one’s own life conditions (Zimmerman, 1988).

1.2 Trends in Engagement of Citizens

The Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement, developed by Pancer (2015), proposes that CE occurs at two levels - the individual and the system level. Initiating factors for the individual are Social Influences and Instrumental Motives, while systematically it is the availability of Community Programmes and Norms of Reciprocity. Moreover, there are Sustaining/Inhibitory Factors which “make-or-break” the success of an individual to engage civically. Individuals sustain CE when they have Positive Experiences and Supportive Social Environment. In order for systems to sustain CE, key factors are the Structure of Community Organisations and the Sense of Community. Both levels of the theory are related to an individual’s presence or lack of self-esteem, where they find themselves on the optimist-pessimist continuum, as well as their general identity development, social commitment and mental health (Pancer, 2015).

Pancer et al. (2007) developed the Youth Inventory of Involvement (YII) measure with the aim to gather and interpret data for CE. The responders were required to give their answers to whether and how much they have participated in each of the 30 activities described in the measure during the past year. These activities were grouped in four types - Political Activities; Community Activities; Passive Involvement and Helping Activities.

Once the data was gathered and analysed, the various attitudes and behaviours were summarised in four main clusters - Activists, Helpers, Responders and Uninvolved.

Activists stood out with their higher involvement on all subscales, followed by Helpers (lower involvement in Political Activities), Responders (mainly limited to high scores on Passive Involvement) and Uninvolved (general lack of engagement in any activities) (see table below).

Table 2. Means for Clusters on Measures of Involvement and Social Responsibility

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Cluster</i>			
	<i>Helpers</i>	<i>Responders</i>	<i>Activists</i>	<i>Uninvolved</i>
N	229	302	72	276
YII				
Total score	46.12	27.83	72.12	15.27
Political activities	0.46	0.20	1.52	0.09
Community activities	1.15	0.62	2.21	0.34
Passive involvements	2.56	2.17	3.19	1.13
Helping activities	2.16	1.10	2.85	0.65
Social responsibility attitudes (YSRS)	197.08 ^a	184.62 ^b	196.06 ^a	175.62 ^c

Note. The *F*-values for the YII analyses were in all excess of 200, with *p*-values <.0001. All YII means (total and sub-scale) differ significantly from one another. YSRS means with the same superscript do not differ significantly (*p* < .05) from one another.

Table 2 - Pancer, S. M., Pratt, M., Hunsberger, B., & Alisat, S. (2007). Community and political involvement in adolescence: What distinguishes the activists from the uninvolved? Journal of Community Psychology, 35(6), 741-759.

Furthermore, the independent clusters explained particular dependent variables, some of which are Self-Esteem (SE), Optimism, Adjustment and Social Support (SS). Generally, Activists and Helpers had the highest levels of Adjustment and significantly higher mean scores for SE, Optimism and SS. Responders also shared high SE scores as their peers, yet scored lower for Optimism and SS (see table below). The Uninvolved individuals have the lowest scores on the above-mentioned variables. Based on these findings, Pancer et al. (2007) concluded that Civic Engagement acts as a causal factor in relation to an individual's mental health and self-perception.

Moreover, the effect of family and friends was also taken into perspective. Using a one-way MANOVA, the researchers observed the effects that different familial and peer interactions have on CE. They collected measures on Parent Interaction, Peer Interaction,

Parental Warmth, Parental Strictness and Family Functioning. Generally, all clusters differ significantly (see table below). Youths that belonged to the Activists, Helpers and Responders clusters reported healthier family functioning. With repetition from the previous variables, Activists scored the highest, followed by Helpers, Responders and Uninvolved.

Table 3. Means for Clusters on Measures of Adjustment, Identity, and Parent, Peer & Family Influences

Measure	Cluster				ANOVA results		
	Helpers	Responders	Activists	Uninvolved	df	F	p
<i>Adjustment measures</i>							
Self-esteem (SES)	69.57 ^a	68.35 ^a	70.79 ^a	65.68 ^b	3,875	4.02	.01
Optimism (LOT)	49.77 ^a	46.58 ^a	50.53 ^a	44.40 ^c	3,873	10.86	.0001
Depression (CES-D)	17.18	17.42	18.24	18.16	3,871	<1	
Social support (SPS)	186.07 ^a	181.70 ^b	182.59 ^{ab}	174.37 ^c	3,874	11.22	.0001
<i>Identity measures</i>							
Diffusion	27.40 ^a	31.14 ^b	26.94 ^a	32.19 ^b	3,873	18.18	.0001
Foreclosure	20.25	20.50	21.39	20.36	3,870	<1	
Moratorium	29.69	30.83	30.15	30.47	3,870	<1	
Achievement	38.87 ^a	36.83 ^b	40.22 ^a	35.77 ^b	3,870	10.24	.0001
<i>Parent, peer & family influence measures</i>							
Parent interaction	36.83 ^a	31.47 ^b	40.10 ^c	28.83 ^d	3,876	27.93	.0001
Peer interaction	32.10 ^a	26.29 ^b	32.12 ^a	24.92 ^b	3,875	25.4	.0001
Parental warmth	67.95 ^a	67.09 ^a	67.55 ^a	61.79 ^b	3,875	8.26	.001
Parental strictness	42.12 ^a	41.26 ^a	40.83 ^{ab}	38.61 ^b	3,873	5.57	.001
Family functioning (FAD)	77.56 ^a	74.44 ^a	74.31 ^{ab}	70.79 ^b	3,868	4.35	.001

Note. Means with the same superscript do not differ significantly ($p < .05$) from one another.

Table 3 - Pancer, S. M., Pratt, M., Hunsberger, B., & Alisat, S. (2007). Community and political involvement in adolescence: What distinguishes the activists from the uninvolved? *Journal of Community Psychology*

Almond and Verba (1963) considered the effects of education and established that it acts as the strongest variable connected to political perceptions and beliefs. They hypothesise that as educational level increases, the more intrigued a person becomes by national events, hence their CE expands. Nonetheless, they recognise the importance of socialisation with family and other social groups. While criticising the Psychocultural approach, which mainly focuses on childhood effects on political attitude development, they contribute to the discussion and believe that both childhood and adulthood play a role. The attention is moved towards non-political authority that is encountered in everyday life, such as family, school, work, and how they dynamically contribute to the formation of opinions about politically authoritative figures - described as a person's "tendency to generalise from one social sphere to the other" (Almond & Verba, 1963).

1.3 The Need for Active Citizens

At this particular point, one might begin to wonder why should someone be engaged or interested in civic activities? What could be a motivation that encourages participation and acquisition of knowledge about the community and its social functioning? As presented in the previous subsection, high CE relates to greater life satisfaction, general care for one's state of life and that of others, better self-perception and appreciation of diversity among family, peers and others alike (Pancer, 2015). Higher self-efficacy displays itself through the belief in one's own ability to overcome obstacles and make decisions (Pancer, 2015; Almond & Verba, 1963). Moreover, social trust increases, which further leads to elevated confidence in the capacity of the collective to inspire change and creates a valid sense of "belonging" (Pancer, 2015). Psychological Empowerment, which was talked about in the first subsection, is directly associated with community participation (Zimmerman, 1988). Not only that, but the overall human wellness is dependent on the balancing of personal, relational and collective factors, meaning that the internal world of an individual also changes due to occurrences in the community one belongs to (Prilleltensky & Fox, 2007). Conclusively, the Activists or Active Citizens experience great benefits for themselves and additionally influence the community they are active in. Within this same community, those individuals who are part of the Uninvolved, while having their psychological and familial factors limiting them, might be affected by the activity of the Activists and thus be motivated to further educate themselves and benefit their own health and that of others (Pancer, 2015; Pancer et al., 2007).

1.4 Connecting Psychology and Politics

In order to connect the already discussed psychological theory of Civic Engagement and the realm of politics, further terms and definitions have to be introduced. Political Participation (PP) is analogous to the definition of CP with the only addition that the performed activities aim to affect regional, national or international governing strategies by either creating public policies or indirectly contributing to the selection of responsible persons to formulate such policies (Barett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). The factors determining the level of PP are named "Macro Contextual Factors" and include in themselves the Design of Electoral System; Population Characteristics; Structure and Design of Political Institutions (within country) and Historic, Economic, Cultural Characteristics of a country (Barett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). Additionally to those, there are particular psychological factors enhancing or inhibiting participation in political issues (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).

Some of those have already been discussed, such as belief in self- and collective efficacy, influence of positive experiences and social identification (Almond & Verba, 1963; Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Delmater, 2018; Pancer et al., 2007). “Political capital” is a concept described by Zukin et al., as quoted by Barrett & Brunton-Smith (2014), and reflects the “total set of political resources an individual has at psychological level”, including actual knowledge, immersion in political matters and own sense of civic duty.

In order for an individual to be considered politically aware, they develop a pattern of political culture based on the possessed information of governmental output they have already considered (Almond & Verba, 1963). Cognitively engaged persons can, however, not approve of particular governmental conducts - that, according to Almond and Verba (1963), makes them Alienated Subjects (AS). In other words, they are aware of current policies, but do not approve of them and experience dissatisfaction. Zimmerman (1988) found that increase in Psychological Empowerment decreases alienation, thus there is a connection between community engagement and political satisfaction. Nonetheless, deciding not to exercise particular political rights is not necessarily an independent individual decision - as previously discussed, there are many factors (family, peers, education, etc.) that contribute to such decision-making (Arzheimer et al., 2017).

Evidently, there are numerous conditions that have to be met in order for a person to engage politically. The reality becomes even more complex and peculiar when a crisis or instability occurs. Political crises can be detrimental to the electoral process due to the fact that it implicates the individual voting behaviour (Braun, 2020). When such circumstances occur, the voter is presented with two alternatives - to cast their ballot or abstain from voting. In case they choose the former, their voting pattern corresponds to either their personal circumstances (Egocentric Voting) or consider the overall national condition (Sociotropic Voting) (Braun, 2020). This micro-level decision is consequential for macro-level results - an individual's perspectives are limited due to the crisis, which influences political priorities, this process is then present in a number of individuals, which can influence the macro-level governmental and coalition outcomes (Arzheimer et al., 2017).

A tendency towards voting for less established parties can be observed during times of uncertainty, due to the loss of faith and trust in the already established political representatives (Braun, 2020). In the case of countries members of the European Union, the leap towards newly formed parties is additionally a result of the combination of the occurring

crisis and the way the EU handles such conditions - thus, if the crisis perseveres within the country, there could be a tendency to also evaluate the functioning of the EU as negative (Braun, 2020). All in all, the critical political condition seems to be attributed first to the mainstream parties and, in the case of membership, also to the EU (Braun, 2020). Other reasons for lack of voting are proposed in the Funnel Model of Turnout, in which turnout is seen as the “test of the overall condition of the political system and functioning of the democratic process”, meaning that citizens find it logical and significant to cast their votes (Arzheimer et al., 2017). The immediate factors for engaging in voting behaviour are the Convenience of Voting, Desire to Express an Opinion and the Perception of Voting as Civic Duty. Proximally, the Level of Political Interest is of importance, and lastly, the distal causes include the Effective Number of Parties and Competitiveness of Election. Reasons for not voting, as identified by Arzheimer et al. (2017) are lack of resources and motivation at the proximal level, as well as lack of mobilization at the distal level. The stable democratic conduct of politics is determined by the high individual participation and the high system performance - if persons do not see outputs as useful or beneficial, decreased participation reduces political stability (Almond & Verba, 1963).

Bulgarian Political Reality - Past and Present

After direct contact with the political and social developments in Bulgaria in the last half a decade, one is compelled to investigate the potential reasons and layers that have led to the current state of democracy. Generally speaking, Eastern European countries were more recently introduced to the democratic ways compared to their Western counterparts, with civic education being particularly low and Civic Engagement being forced in a concrete and particular way during the Communist regime (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). Eastern European countries have an overall lower PP and turnout levels (Barrett Brunton-Smith, 2014). The Bulgarian political environment is taken as a case study example of the variability of levers that encourage or diminish the wish to participate politically and civically, which is reflected by rapid changes in political opinions, political fragmentation and record-low turnout levels. Primarily, one should consider the influences of the restrictive communist past and the turbulent beginning of democracy, in order to gain further insight into the Bulgarian political mentality.

2.1 Communist Past of Bulgaria

Connections between the past political status of a country and the present phenomena can be identified by comparison of the conditions of governing and individual opinions. Balkan political history is closely influenced by the Ottoman rule and afterwards, the two World Wars. During the Ottoman Empire, Balkan countries developed an “inferiority complex”, believing they do, in fact, want to be independent, but do not possess the skills and knowledge to be successful in their independence (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019). This complex creates this shared belief among Balkan nations that they need a “patron” or “big brother” on the way to sovereignty, the choice being between Western powers or Russia (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019; Pastarmadzhieva & Sakal, 2021). This phenomena is observed in the Balkan people’s higher trust in foreign rather than national institutions, while still holding an unseemingly concrete national pride and fear of loss of national identity, leading to the development of a contradicting self-awareness (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019; Pastarmadzhieva & Sakal, 2021).

Particularly for Bulgaria, a large period in the 20th century marked the move away from Europe and European values, despite disagreements, and towards becoming the “most trusted Soviet ally” among Eastern European countries (Zankina, 2017). The Cold War period

further established the bond between Russian-Bulgarian political agenda with Soviet propaganda (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019). With the already existing “inferiority complex”, the Bulgarian cling to the Soviet ideology took root quickly (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019). During the Communist regime in Bulgaria (1945-1989), the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) applied twice for the country to become the sixteenth member state of the USSR republics, adopted a one-party rule, nationalisation of all properties of individuals and businesses, collection of agriculture and general cultural control (Zankina, 2017). People were instructed to vote for BCP and not seek information further than that (Pastarmadzhieva & Sakal, 2021). The dictator Todor Zhivkov was the longest-standing communist ruler and held power for the last 35 years of the regime (Zankina, 2017). The decades before the fall of the Berlin Wall were marked by “outright repression, a widely accepted parochial political culture, limited national sovereignty, and the clientelistic cooptation of most intellectuals into the system” - misbehaviour led to communist camps, which consisted of intense unpaid physical labour, torture/death and lack of adequate living conditions (Kitschelt et al., 1995). Many individuals were asked or forced to become informants for the State Security Service (Darzhavna Sigurnost - DS), which was detrimental to establishing interpersonal trust (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019). When people are forcibly discouraged to think about, interpret and oppose politics, are regularly censored and are made suspicious of every individual around them, there were no well-established opposing groups - the political conditions were working against the formation of a dissident movement (Kitschelt et al., 1995; Zankina, 2017). Communist propaganda was displayed to everybody everywhere - the government aimed to establish itself as a valid member in every group and subgroup - family, friend circles, school, work (Almond & Verba, 1963). Infiltrating the personal and professional lives of all individuals, acquiring from them whatever the State deems necessary, punishing disagreement with slavery and controlling formal and informal groups were the main features of the governmental conduct of the Communist regime in Bulgaria.

2.2 Democratisation - Towards the New Century

In order to fully understand the scope of the complexity of Bulgaria’s democratisation, some definitions and specificities need to be identified. Democracy can be understood as the establishment of a firm link between the ordinary citizen and political elites - there is a diffusion of the influence every citizen can have and possess the right to exercise such influence on those governmentally responsible (Almond Verba, 1963; Kitschelt et al., 1995). Elections and voting are, consequently, the active and determined execution of such

political rights - they serve as a feedback machine for the persons in government to understand whether the citizens are satisfied (Kitschelt et al., 1995). This seemingly straightforward democratic approach to politics, however, can be difficult to adopt by individuals, both ordinary citizens and political actors alike, when they have lived in a strict authoritarian regime for almost half a century (Kitschelt et al., 1995).

As previously mentioned, the interpersonal trust between people in Bulgaria was unstable during the Communist regime. Meanwhile, democracy requires formation of determined groups in order to function and achieve desired goal or change (Almond and Verba, 1963; Delamater, 2018). Political involvement seems unnecessary after decades of instructed electoral behaviour, lack of knowledge of democracy and irritation with identifying economic interests in an undetermined economic course of governmental action (Kitschelt et al., 1995; Pastarmadzhieva, 2019; Pastarmadzhieva & Sakal, 2021). Generally, the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bulgarian politics were marked by four main trends in individual voting behavior - presence of “civilizational incompetence” due to nonexistence of knowledge of democracy after Communist rule; inability to identify economic priorities due to property and market-relations shifting their legal owners (see previous subsection and Zankina, 2017); establishment of many but poorly formed political parties with close or identical policies, contributing to voters’ hardship to make a choice; and general lack of Civic Engagement (Kitschelt et al., 1963).

Interestingly enough, the Bulgarian electorate had intriguing voting patterns during the closing decade of the last century. Overall, the main divide between voters was on the communist/anti-communist spectrum, which were represented by two opposing powers - Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the previous BCP, and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) (Kitschelt et al, 1995). Even though the civic activity was high in the 1990-1991 elections, it was marked by chaos and lack of a solid construction, with the system ultimately being called a “proto-democracy” that lacks political culture (Kitschelt et al., 1995; Pastarmadzhieva, 2019; Pastarmadzhieva & Sakal, 2021). The politics of the whole decade could be described as “a power struggle between BSP and UDF” - the lack of effective policies in the beginning further crystallised the nomenklatura’s high governmental status, gatekeeping of documents issues by the State Security Services of the regime and disorganisation of the new political parties in their internal functioning (Zankina, 2017). The result of, as Zankina (2017) calls it, the “forgive and forget rhetoric” was seen in the

decreased trust in political representatives, as well as increased disillusionment and alienation with both sides (Pastarmadzhieva, 2019).

There was, however, the single strongest predictor that gave insight into potential voting behaviour - an individual's opinion and attitude towards the potential role of the previous king after his return from exile, Tsar Simeon (Kitschelt et al., 1995). As a nine-year old in 1946, he was forced to leave Bulgaria as the Communist regime began and eventually moved to Spain (Zankina, 2017). Throughout the decades, the Tsar became a symbol of the "political cleansing" of Bulgaria towards democracy - Kitschelt et al. (1995), after conducting extensive research, state that "the Bulgarian survey exhibits a fairly strong association between consideration to vote for the UDF and the wish to see the former tsar as the new king, the president, or at least the leader of a major party in post-communist Bulgaria.". Once again, the person coming from another political system with different political functioning will be the "saviour", indicating the continuation of the Bulgarian "inferiority complex" (Zankina, 2017; Pastarmadzhieva, 2019). The blind belief that the new and foreign actor will be the key to democratic development. An important element is that he entered the political life of Bulgaria in 2001, meaning that for more than a decade the Bulgarian democratic electorate was experiencing many dissatisfactions with UDF, enough to put all of their belief in one single political participant, and Simeon's freshly formed party NDSV won the first elections of the new century (Zankina, 2017). His governing was heavily marked by populism - he became the first politician with personalist party model in Bulgaria, leading to a "fragmented and unstable party system marked by internal divisions, regroupings and political nomadism" and a "trend of new parties riding on big promises" (Zankina, 2017). Consequently, the patience of voters decreased, as did their belief that political engagement and participation are important at all, after years of protests and unstructured, but pure efforts to change the status quo.

2.3 Current Political Environment

The most crucial drawbacks preventing Bulgaria from having a stable political system are not necessarily newly formed, but are detrimental enough for the critical decrease in the people's interest in political functioning and engagement with such information. In order for a democratic system to be considered successful and secure its long-term governing, it must bring satisfaction to the citizens and should be accepted by the citizens as the "proper form of government" - including trust in national institutions and adoption of policies (Almond &

Verba, 1963; Pastarmadzhieva, 2019). Zankina (2024) perfectly encapsulates the gravity of the political situation in Bulgaria in the period 2020-2025 with one sentence - “The past ... years in Bulgaria have been characterized by political instability, turmoil and never-ending electoral campaigning”. New political actors started appearing at every corner of a campaign, many of which faded away faster than they could predict (Zankina, 2017). Some, however, managed to stir the situation and bring some dynamic to the political realm.

Further elaborations are necessary if one wants to grasp the totality of the events between 2020 and 2025, primarily a brisk recap of the period before the completion of one fifth of the 21st century. Remembering from the previous subsection, the tsar’s party NDSV had a flamboyant but short lifespan - after making big promises with little results, their power lasted a single mandate (Zankina, 2024). Consequently, a new party was created with the aim to repeat the same effect NDSV had on the people - inspire trust and determination at any cost, including making untruthful overestimations on the basis of charisma (Zankina, 2024). With general lack of structure and concrete ideologically sound propositions, Citizens for European Development (GERB-SDS) and their leader Boyko Borisov enjoyed many years of successfully executing their corrupt and populist nature (Zankina, 2024).

By 2020, the people were more or less infuriated with the “corrupt status quo” of GERB, as Zankina (2024) phrased it, and then major anti-government protests began. These protests are of importance not solely because they serve as proof of the frustration and annoyance the electorate feels, but also because they gave birth to yet another freshly and poorly formed party - There is Such a People (ITN) (Stoyanov & Ibroscheva, 2024; Zankina, 2024). The leader, Slavi Trifonov, is better known as a musical performer of the pop-folk genre “chalga”, which through its catchy rhythm and blunt cynical and consumeristic lyrics gave particular members of society a tool for self-expression, which was limited during Communism (Stoyanov & Ibroscheva, 2024). Those people are known as “mutri” in Bulgaria, the closest translation to English being “thugs” (Stoyanov & Ibroscheva, 2024). Typically, the “mutri” are young men with little or no formal education and within the songs they listen or create there is usually promotion of illegal or criminal activity, a fascination with danger and focus on having “money, women and, most of all, power” (Stoyanov & Ibroscheva, 2024). This cultural development is directly connected to politics due to the fact that Slavi Trifonov was one of the most influential and well-known “chalga” singers in the country.

Consequently, even after witnessing a surprisingly high support in the April 2021 elections, results of the July 2021 elections were nothing short of shocking - ITN became the largest political power in parliament, pushing GERB out of the spotlight (Stoyanov & Ibroscheva, 2024; Zankina, 2024; Neudorfer et al., 2024). Yet, as it has happened before to parties with no concrete base and a populist approach, they could not even form a government and new elections were scheduled for November 2021. Following six elections throughout the period after their victory, ITN “has since oscillated around the parliamentary threshold” (Zankina, 2024).

Even if one does not take into account the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic at that time, another crucial world event took place - the war Russia started with Ukraine in February 2022 (Zankina, 2024). This event further fueled the pro-Russian/anti-Russian divide in Bulgaria and opinions where the government’s alliance should lie, leading to a steady increase for the support of right-winged parties such as “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”) and its leader Kostadin Kostadinov (Zankina, 2024). They have been strong with their anti-EU and anti-NATO positions, as well as their heavy nationalistic tendencies, which they still connect to the “Russian way”, further confirming that the Bulgarian “inferiority complex” perseveres even in an overblown nationalistic campaign, increasing their support significantly with each election (Zankina, 2024; Bankov, 2023). The ironic contrast between slogans urging people to move towards Russian allegiance while still promoting the concepts and morals connected to the “pure Bulgarian mentality” are contradictory by default, even more so when one considers the trust in national (14.9%) compared to foreign institutions (49%) (see Figure 5). Yet when individuals are losing more and more patience with the previously trusted parties, they become more radicalised (Zankina, 2024; Stefanova, 2009).

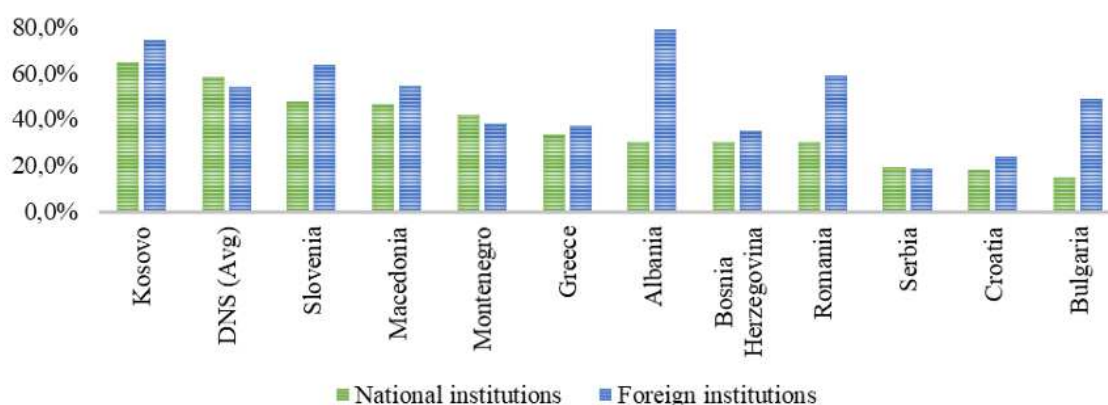


Figure 5. Comparison of confidence in national and foreign institutions⁶

Source: Author's calculations, based on data from EVS (4th wave)

Table 5 - Pastarmadzhieva. D. (2019). *Political Culture of the Balkans: Historical Background and Contemporary Characteristics*

Furthermore, due to so much turmoil and instability, many of the elected governments could not function properly due to too many different parties being chosen to represent and were unable to find a common language, additionally showcasing society's compartmentalisation and divide (Zankina, 2024). Even when a government was able to actually formulate and execute policies, it still could not survive for long and was destroyed from the inside-out - the government of Kiril Petkov and "We Continue the Change" ("Prodalzhavame Promyanata" - PP) (Neudorfer et al, 2024).

PP had a similar rise as ITN, during the anti-government protests. The newly formed PP seemed to be on the move away from the populist format compared to most other parties. PP won the elections in November 2021 just as ITN did the elections right before - the people put all of their hope in PP's proposals, once again despite it being a newly established party. The same trend of dissatisfaction followed - in February 2022, 35% said they would rate the Petkov government as positive and 23% negative, yet the numbers changed dramatically after two months - in April of the same year, the work was rated as positive by 19% and 48% negatively (Alpha Research, 2022a; Alpha Research, 2022b). There was a steady and constant decrease in trust in the government from January 2022 (36%) to April 2022 (15%), which led to a deepened "crisis of confidence" (Marketlinks, 2022).

Throughout the party's existence, PP openly and extensively criticized GERB's corrupt ways, political clientelism and empty charismatic promises and had many instances

of “political bickering and mutual accusations” after their coalition government that formed after the elections in April 2023, when PP worked together with the party Democratic Bulgaria (DB) due to their similar ideologies and electorate profile (Zankina, 2024; Mares et al., 2017). The coalition between PP-DB and GERB was particularly interesting due to the fact that PP-DB had made promises to bring GERB away from their corrupt grip on businesses and individuals, yet quickly realised that the choice was between forming a collaboration or repeating elections with an already fatigued electorate (Zankina, 2024). Some voters of PP and DB saw this coalition as a major let-down which led to increased “political apathy and disillusionment” due to the same principles that applied before - they trusted the new and promising trend, and in their eyes, they were let down once more (Bankov, 2023; Zankina, 2024). All of this political and governmental instability led to a record-low turnout level of 34.41% in the July 2024 elections, the lowest since 1990 (ODIHR, 2024; Petkova, 2024). The Bulgarian population perceived the political crisis as a constant, usual state of being, and the low turnout level is a reflection of that (Petkova, 2024; Marketlinks, 2024; Arzheimer et al., 2017)

Discussion

3.1 Connecting the Bulgarian Example to Theory

After presenting the theoretical background and the case study, it is only natural for the two to be connected. The Bulgarian example is a complex one, as many others, yet in its depth one can find all of the elements described in psychological theories connected to political behaviour and civic life. The following paragraphs are dedicated to the bridging of the theory and the example - understanding the profound political dissatisfaction of the Bulgarian electorate and explaining it through psychological constructs.

The fact that there were many fleetingly successful parties throughout the central to this thesis 5-year period showcases the poor group cohesion of both the particular party's members and mainly its followers. It is correct that during times of conflict, which in this case corresponds to the numerous elections, cohesiveness tends to grow, yet that is only true in full when the group has clear incentives, described acceptable behaviours and aims. The fresh parties which the Bulgarian electorate trusted, such as ITN, PP (even the parties from before, such as NDSV), had no clear structure, with ITN relying strongly on a populist image. Hence, group cohesion could not exist, because the group members were not instructed on the behavioural expectations and aims necessary to wish to continue belonging to that group. Consequently, the negative emotions experienced in relation to one's membership to that concrete group translates into a decreased sense of belonging. This urges the individual to search for a new group membership, a party that has not disappointed them before, especially during a crisis. Yet the parties that have not disappointed the Bulgarian electorate are impossible to identify - there is a great dissatisfaction with the well-established ones that have seemingly failed to deal with political conduct thus far, and a disappointing attempt after another when voting for the newer ones. This creates a general lack of incentive to belong to any group whatsoever, leading to alienation, apathy and disinterest. It is only logical that this resulted in the lowest recorded turnout, which only means that the Bulgarian population evaluated the democratic functioning of the government as record-low.

Naturally, the disturbed sense of political community is reflected in the lowering of CP and PP due to evident lack of results when belonging to one, as well as decreased CE due to growing detachment from political life. The proximal macro-factors for PP further confirm this trend - the historical background of Bulgaria did not encourage political interest,

there is a decrease in confidence in the political institutions of the country, and the characteristic of the population as having low interpersonal trust. The past and the present combine and create a deeply fatigued and fragmented society.

Moving from the community towards the individual, one's PE is affected by the decrease in community activities - individuals begin to see themselves as less capable of controlling their own lives, further distancing them from information that they fear might confirm that, such as further political turmoils, bickering and ineffectiveness, hence lowering CE. This decrease in a political Social Environments, reduced Sense of Community and previously mentioned experience of Negative Emotions prevents CE from being sustained.

As presented, CE is high in individuals who fell into the categories of Activists and Helpers, who were the most politically involved out of the four categories. As mentioned, Activists and Uninvolved differ greatly in their psychological well-being and self-perception. When CE is low, then there is a substantial worsening of mental health and self-esteem, also reflected by PE. Disinterest with community activities and politics is highly probable to decrease the mental well-being of Bulgaria's electorate. Worse psychological well-being manifests as lack of motivation, which is the main proximal reason for individuals to abstain from voting.

Unfortunately, this is the vicious circle of the democratic crisis in Bulgaria: individuals are dissatisfied with the government, they put their faith in new "saviours", the electorate is disappointed again, decide not to vote because previous voting proved "meaningless", this in itself reduces political stability, which then leads to even worse conduct of politics, ending again with an even more dissatisfied and frustrated electorate. However improbable it seems for such a trend to end, there are strategies for increasing CE, achieving a balanced political participation and increasing one's sense of belonging.

3.2 Proposals for Future Developments - Engagement of the Bulgarian Population

In order to create a productive and sustainable intervention to increase CE, PP and the individual PE, one has to take into account the personal and systematic levels as explained by the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement. If one wishes to increase awareness of civic matters, it is essential to understand the interdependence of the well-being of the individual and the productivity of the collective, especially in terms of political involvement. Human wellness, as Prilleltensky and Fox (2007) describe it, is the balancing of personal, relational

and collective realities, which coincides with the definition of health, provided by WHO (2025), which states that “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” and the enjoyment of health is a fundamental right. Hence, developing and accepting interventions for increasing civic knowledge and interest is a fundamental part of human development, as it teaches individuals how to exist in a community, the importance of being Civically Engaged and understanding politics as a concept closely connected to one’s existence, rather than the “status quo” - a distant and unreachable condition.

For an intervention to be successful when talking about increasing CE, the main determinants whether it will be sustained are Positive Experiences and Supportive Social Environment at the individual level, as discussed before (see table below). Consequently, the experience of learning about civic topics and political constructs should be made intriguing and the information provided as “attainable”, making knowledge acquisition natural and engaging. Amplification of the internal efficacy and creating an environment for persistent growth of one’s PE leads to a better self-perception and belief in one’s own abilities to judge, interpret and decide on civic and political occurrences. Persistent development of trust in personal abilities for critical thinking are crucial for initiating and maintaining CE, which in turn contributes to a more balanced and democratic political culture (Pancer et al., 2002).

On the systematic level, again based on Pancer et al. (2002)’s research, institutions should adopt solid and clear values that permit and reward civic activities, especially in youths. It is necessary for governments and institutions to provide the right circumstances in order for the individual factors to exist and persevere. Interventions focused at enhancing the educational system to encapsulate classes or courses connected to current political reality, as well as the importance for both the person and the group to engage civically, are crucial for not only sustaining, but also even just initiating CE in individuals. Organisations that have members who fall into the Activists category, as previously mentioned, have the power and knowledge to contribute in such a way that they can trigger enough chain reactions both personally and systematically that Uninvolved individuals begin to explore topics of political importance (Pancer et al, 2007). If the system provides an adequate platform for the more civically involved individuals to express and present their views and understandings, there is a high chance Uninvolved persons will begin to engage.

Figure 3.1. Youth engagement framework

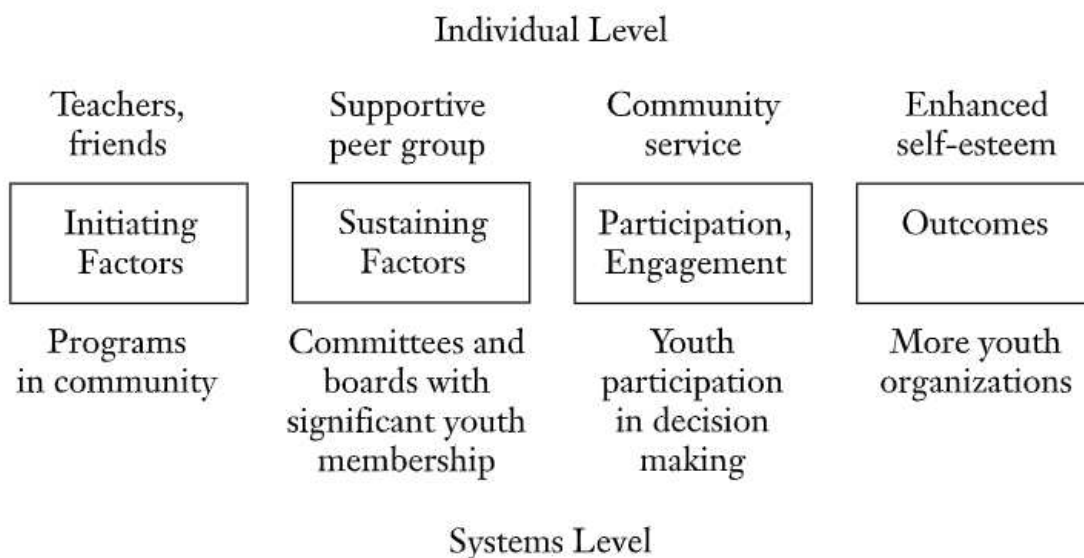


Table 3.1 - Pancer, S. M., Rose-Krasnor, L., & Loiselle, L. D. (2002). Youth conferences as a context for engagement. New Directions for Youth Development

Once the individual and systematic layers of CE development are covered, the result would be a more civically aware and conscious society, which in turn changes the political culture of the country. As Pastarmadzhieva (2019) discussed, the countries which were under a totalitarian regime experience many alterations and shifts in their political culture after the regime ends. In Bulgaria, the association between culture and politics is particularly strong, especially due to the previously mentioned Communist party inserting its values in both professional and personal aspects of an individual’s life. Nowadays, education about the functioning of the European Union, understanding and explaining democratic values and the importance of human rights and their protection is crucial if the Bulgarian electorate wishes to sustain a democratic way of functioning. Yet the distancing of individuals from political life prevents them from adopting any position on the matter whatsoever.

This distancing can be addressed and limited through shifting the educational system towards inclusion of particular activities that engage the students with the community. As Almond and Verba (1963) presented, education is the strongest predictor of the development of political attitudes. Thus, if schools begin to encourage meaningful participation from early age, which Pancer et al. (2007) recommend, then such educational institutions become active promoters of CE, CP and PP through their curriculum and programmes that promote both

personal development (self-reflection, self-esteem development, critical thinking) and interpersonal relations (sharing personal experiences, learning from peers) (Pancer, 2014).

Inclusion of such programmes into schools and educational institutions would enhance students' psychopolitical literacy, which is the ability to understand and interpret the bond between politics and psychological well-being, as well as critical thinking about political proposals (Prilleltensky and Fox, 2007). In the concrete case of Bulgaria, enhancing psychopolitical literacy would limit the success of the numerous populist parties, due to the fact that individuals would have learned how to be more attentive to information or promises made by such politicians. This would decrease the ability of politicians to promote myth-like values that have no actual backbone, because the electorate is more educated as to how a healthy democratic political system actually operates. The more cognitively oriented individuals become, which signifies that they are more knowledgeable of factual governmental output, the less likely it is for empty political promises to take root.

Further than schools, some programmes can be included in higher-education institutions. At university, particular community collaborators can be hired or introduced that promote Civic Engagement and developing the interest of individuals. The two strategies for introducing knowledge of civic matters can happen both administratively (top down approach), meaning that the university organises particular forums or workshops, or through student organisations and faculties engaging in civic activities, further spreading this approach to Civic Engagement towards the administratively responsible sectors of the institutions (bottom up approach) (Chenneville et al., 2012).

After the introduction of such interventions in the educational environment of Bulgaria, it would be interesting to explore the shifts in political engagement, particularly in current youth as they enter adulthood. Furthermore, 2027 will mark the 20th anniversary of Bulgaria's membership in the EU, making it all the more interesting to observe what changes and trends can be seen as a result of the two decades when compared to previous opinions and perceptions of the EU's functioning and membership importance.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed to present concepts and theories from social, political and civic engagement psychology and connect them to the current political reality of Bulgaria.

Group functioning was presented in order to explain how groups interact with others, and how membership desire is relevant for maintaining group cohesion. Furthermore, Civic Engagement and Civic Participation are crucial terms for understanding society's behavioural and cognitive aspects - what encourages an individual to be civically active or not. Naturally, accentuating the importance of having civically engaged individuals is presented in order to provide an explanation as to why one should aim towards being an Activist.

The political environment of Bulgaria is a result of decade-long political changes and shifts - from Ottoman rule, through a totalitarian regime to a chaotic process of democratisation, all leaving their mark on the current electorate. The result today - a profoundly fatigued and apathetic electorate, part of which vote blindly due to the many let-downs and disappointments, as well as due to the lack of political culture that is not encouraged or taught in the educational system. This decrease in political engagement of the Bulgarian society is proven by the record-low turnout level.

Through this analysis of the Bulgarian political realm and the presentation of psychological concepts, one can clearly interpret the trends and occurrences visible in Bulgaria's society and the reason behind this disengagement. The discouragement of interpersonal trust during Communism and the populist approach after the democratisation did not foster psychopolitical literacy, and even though the newly formed parties did result in higher electoral activity, it lasted for fleeting periods of time, not enough to create a stable change. Thus, with every new election date, the population was seemingly put in a corner with no adequate options, leading to increased alienation and apathy and lowering of Civic Engagement and Political Participation.

There are, however, plenty of possibilities for increasing Civic Engagement, Political Participation and encouraging one's personal development of Psychological Empowerment through adaptation of the educational system and interventions aimed at increasing interpersonal trust. One is compelled to believe that no matter how doomed a political crisis seems, there are ways in which personal wellbeing, comprehension of politics and Civic Engagement can improve not in spite of, but thanks to their entanglement.

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