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(NON)EXISTENCE OF BULGARIAN PARTY-BASED EUROSCEPTICISM – WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

ABSTRACT Euroscepticism is often linked to the disappointment with the outcomes of transition as well as overgrown expectations that accompanied the accession to the European Union. The main aim of the paper is to investigate if and how party-based Euroscepticism has been active in Bulgaria, a post-communist country in CEE and a member of the European Union since 2007. The paper will present the rhetoric and characteristics of main Eurosceptic political parties in Bulgaria. Bulgarian public opinion used to be perceived as one of the most pro-European among the member states, but current events show that the European issue is not so salient for the Bulgarian society and political elite. The difficult social and political situation marginalises discussions about the functioning of the EU and the future of Europe. Not only the absence of Euroscepticism, but also the lack of any European issues in party manifestos is puzzling. This paper aims to answer the question if Bulgarian politicians are so pro-European or rather if Europe doesn't really matter to the elites.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, Bulgaria, political parties, European integration

Many scholars have already noticed that Euroscepticism has developed in Eastern Europe after the "big bang" EU enlargement of 2004, and it is often linked to the disappointment that some felt with the outcomes of transition as well as overgrown expectations that accompanied the accession to the European Union. The main aim of

the paper is to investigate if and how party-based Euroscepticism has been active in Bulgaria, a post-communist country in CEE and a member of the European Union since 2007. The paper will present the rhetoric and characteristics of main political parties in Bulgaria, as well as the evolution of the Eurosceptic arguments, and it will search for the anti-European postulates that are included in the programmes and political practice of the main Bulgarian political parties. Although Bulgarian public opinion used to be perceived as one of the most pro-European among the member states, current events show that the European issue is not so important for the Bulgarian society, and similar to other new member states, Bulgarian political parties seem to treat European elections as second order elections or even just as a test before the national ones. A difficult social and political situation marginalizes discussions about the functioning of the EU and the future of Europe. Not only the absence of Euroscepticism, but also the lack of any European issues in the party manifestos is puzzling. This paper aims to answer the question if Bulgarian politicians are so pro-European or rather if Europe doesn't really matter to the elites.

INTRODUCTION

One of the outcomes of the 2014 European Parliament elections in all the member states is the relatively good performance of parties critical towards the European Union and European integration in general. This phenomenon is visible not only in the Old Member States, but also in the countries that joined EU during so called "big bang" enlargement of 2004 and 2007, as well as in the newest member state – Croatia, which became the 28th member of the EU only on 1 July 2013. I suggest that various factors (political, social, economic and cultural) are responsible for the development of Euroscepticism in the new member states of CEE. Some of these factors could be compared to ones found in the pre-enlargement EU-15, hence some of the determinants of Euroscepticism might be present only in the countries of post-communist Europe. Still, Bulgaria seems to be the only EU country without a clearly defined Eurosceptic political party – European elections of 2007, 2009 and the last ones of 2014 were treated as a "litmus test" of the popularity of the current government, but haven't pointed to Eurosceptic political actors. Being treated as a domestic issue for the opposition in the EP campaign, the elections served as a measure of the possibility of winning the next parliamentary elections.

When discussing the election results, one should pay attention to the turnout rate. Low turnout during the European Parliament election is a general pattern, shared among almost all of the EU member states. It's not different in the case of new member states – Bulgaria among them. In 2014, the turnout was only 35.84%, which was similar to other post-communist countries and lower than the already low EU average of 42,54%.[1]

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[1]   European Parliament, *Results of the 2014 European Elections*, 'Election Results', 2014, at <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/seats-member-state-absolut.html>, 10 September 2014.

Similarly, in 2007 and 2009 the turnout was under the EU average – 29,22% and 38,99% respectively.[2]

Lack of interest in the European issues might be an outcome of the domestic political situation. For over a year now Bulgaria has been hit by serious and long lasting anti-government street protests that are linked to the dismissal of Boyko Borissov's government and the creation of a new one, which due to its policies has generated new protests and been dismissed just after 14 months, and new elections have been scheduled for October 2014. Since 2009, Borissov's party GERB has ruled with support from three other parliamentary groups (including the nationalist party Ataka). The GERB government was in power till February 2013, when it submitted its resignation as a result of massive street protests. Early elections resulted in the formation of a new government by the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, supported by the Ataka party and led by Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski. Soon after new protests started, mainly in the capital city – Sofia, they continued for several months and were considered the biggest and longest in Bulgaria's recent history. On August 2014, Oresharski's government was officially dissolved and the President appointed a new government that is supposed to lead Bulgaria through early elections in October 2014.[3] Protesters demanded more transparent politics, fighting corruption effectively, applying rule of law and adherence to European law, as well as social reforms and raising the standard of living. European flags were used by the protesters next to Bulgarian ones.

Nowadays only 26% of Bulgarians trust the government and as few as 32% feel that the seven years of EU membership have brought positive change, while 51% do not believe that it has resulted in any significant change.[4] With the political and economic situation becoming more exacerbated, one may assume that Bulgarians will attend European Parliament elections either to express their attitudes – their dissatisfaction with membership in the European Union, or to support the EU as the only possible stimulator of the domestic changes. Those opposing the EU and Bulgarian membership might voice concerns about the profits of membership, as the European Commission is regularly cutting or freezing funds and accusing Bulgarian government of ineffective reforms and corruption. European Union supporters are stressing the fact that European institutions are guarantors of the rule of law and that EU membership is the last possible stimulator of indispensable reforms. With these two oppositional stances, one might have anticipated an expressive campaign focused on European issues, but this did not happen. As it will be presented in the next paragraphs, not only was Eurosceptic rhetoric not very visible, but European matters in general were nearly invisible.

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[2]   More about EP turnout: European Parliament, *Results of the 2014 European Elections*, 'Election Turnout', at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout--%281979-2009%29.html>, 10 September 2014.

[3]   N. Popkostadinova, 'Bulgaria Heads for Early Elections after EU Vote', EUobserver, 19 VI 2014, at <http://euobserver.com/eu-elections/124652>, 19 June 2014.

[4]   Eadem, 'Angry Bulgarians Feel EU Membership Has Brought Few Benefits', EUobserver, 3 III 2014, at <http://euobserver.com/eu-elections/123199>, 3 March 2014.

EXPLAINING EUROSCEPTICISM

Euroscepticism is a social and political phenomenon that was first noticed and which gained popularity in the United Kingdom, and it is generally associated with opposition towards European integration, rejecting the so-called European values and criticising European Union and its institutions in general[5]. However, Euroscepticism cannot be treated as a single ideology. One can find Euroscepticism in different forms, from nationalistic claims that European integration is a great danger to the nation state and national identity, to socialists who see a decrease in solidarity and in the risk-regulation system of the EU.[6] As Vasilopoulou[7] claims, Euroscepticism should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, as it can be directed at the *system as a whole, to its institutional design, specific policies (for example, enlargement, the euro), or the perceived general direction of the EU regulatory system, with the assessment of the latter being largely subjective.*

As the term is vague and used both in academic and public discourse, researchers still are debating the best possible definition of the term. Taggart proposed to understand Euroscepticism as *the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration.*[8] Measuring the level and roots of Euroscepticism brought many different classifications of stances toward European integration and the European Union.[9] Szczerbiak and Taggart[10] classify

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[5]   H.-J. Trenz, P. de Wilde, 'Euro-Scepticism. Mapping a New Research Field for RECON', *RECON Working Papers*, 2008, p. 1.

[6]   N. Styczyńska, 'Euroscepticism in New Member States – The Case of Poland', *Contemporary European Studies*, Special Issue (2009), p. 139.

[7]   S. Vasilopoulou, 'Continuity and Change in the Study of Euroscepticism: Plus ca change?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Special Issue: *Confronting Euroscepticism*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2013), p. 3.

[8]   P. Taggart, 'A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (1998), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00387>, p. 365.

[9]   Many scholars aimed to explain and classify Euroscepticism, typologies were proposed by Szczerbiak and Taggart ('Theorizing Party-Based Euroscepticism: Problems of Definition, Measurement, and Causality' in iidem (eds.), *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, Vol. 2: *Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives*, Oxford 2008; *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, Vol. 1: *Case Studies and Country Surveys*, Oxford 2008; 'A Touchstone of Dissent...'), Zuba (*Polski euroceptycyzm i eurorealizm*, Opole 2006 (*Studia i Monografie – Uniwersytet Opolski*, nr 367)), Kopecký and Mudde ('The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe', *European Union Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2002), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1465116502003003002>) as well as Flood ('Euroscepticism: A Problematic Concept'. Paper presented at "32th UACES Annual Conference", QU Belfast, 2002), Sorensen (*Love Me, Love Me Not... A Typology of Public Euroscepticism*, Brighton 2008 (*SEI Working Paper*, No. 101. *EPERN Working Paper*, No. 19)), Trenz and de Wilde ('Euro-Scepticism...') and Vasilopoulou ('European Integration and the Radical Right: Three Patterns of Opposition', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2011), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2010.01337.x>) among others.

[10]   A. Szczerbiak, P. Taggart, 'Theorizing Party-Based Euroscepticism...'

Euroscepticism in two categories – they define the so-called soft and hard Euroscepticism. Soft Eurosceptics do not oppose European integration in general, but criticise selected aspects of the European Union and are associated with "qualified" and "contingent" opposition. Hard Euroscepticism refers to a general rejection of membership of the European Union, rejecting the entire European project.[11] The division between hard and soft Eurosceptics proposed by Szczerbiak and Taggart was criticized for being too broad. The analytical model proposed by Kopecký and Mudde[12] allows one to distinguish between those who constructively criticise the European Union, but do not negate the idea of European integration (Eurosceptics), from those who reject the very idea of the EU and demand withdrawal from the Union (Eurorejects). The Eurosceptic and Eurorealist rhetoric is often blurred, especially in public discourse. This is mainly due to oversimplified media coverage, but is also caused by a shift in rhetoric among particular individuals in the post-accession era from a Eurosceptic (EU-rejecting) position to a more realistic position – questioning particular areas of integration.[13] Flood[14] proposed a six-point continuum that includes rejectionists, revisionists, minimalists, gradualists, reformists and maximalists. This definition, although very complex, was not incorporated into the public discourse, probably because of its detail. Other definitions include that of Conti,[15] that introduced the differentiation between hard Euroscepticism, soft Euroscepticism, no commitment, functional Europeanism and identity Europeanism. Some scholars proposed a more concise way of categorizing attitudes towards European integration, such as Vasilopoulou, who mentions 3 categories of rejecting, conditional and compromising attitudes,[16] or Sorensen,[17] who focused on public-based Euroscepticism, identifying economic, sovereignty, democratic and socio-political types of Euroscepticism.

To better understand Euroscepticism, it must be analysed within the context of nation states. In the case of post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, anti-European attitudes may be caused by disappointment with the economic and political transition, or might be linked to overgrown expectations that accompanied the accession to the European Union. Countries or the social groups which managed to make it through the transformation period successfully provided stronger support to European integration and the EU, than those who were faced with greater difficulties or still are in the process of transformation.[18] Zuba classified a few

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[11] Ibid.

[12] P. Kopecký, C. Mudde, 'The Two Sides of Euroscepticism...'

[13] N. Styczyńska, 'Bundle of Emotions. Polish Identity and Euroscepticism' in R. Gura, N. Styczynska (eds.), *Identités et espaces public européens*, Paris 2014 (*Local & Global*).

[14] Ch. Flood, 'Euroscepticism: A Problematic Concept...'

[15] N. Conti, *Party Attitudes to European Integration. A Longitudinal Analysis of the Italian Case*, Falmer 2003 (*SEI Working Paper*, No. 70. *EPERN Working Paper*, No. 13).

[16] S. Vasilopoulou, 'European Integration and the Radical Right...'

[17] C. Sorensen, *Love Me, Love Me Not...*

[18] K. Zuba, *Polski eurosceptycyzm...*, p. 109.

of the main fears concerning European integration, some of which were stronger in the post-Communist countries than in the old member states of the EU. However, universal fears can be found in both Western and Eastern Europe and usually focus on the issues of political sovereignty, culture and identity, which according to those opposing European integration, are threatened by the EU and the process of further and deeper integration. Central Eastern European fears referred to the anticipated cut-throat competition with the "old" member states mainly in the agriculture sector – this kind of threat was mostly seen in Poland, Slovenia and Latvia. The problem of weak and unadapted agriculture was combined with a fear of the repurchase of land by foreigners, a fear visible among almost all new member states, including Bulgaria.[19]

Some anti-EU arguments are the common ground for Euroscepticism and populism, as these two trends often appear together on the political arena. In both discourses, clear and extreme slogans are the key to bringing together all those disappointed by economic or political transformation, giving a clear picture of who is to blame. Populists using Eurosceptic rhetoric often argue that European integration is an elite project in which ordinary citizens have no say.[20]

IN SEARCH OF BULGARIAN PARTY-BASED EUROSCEPTICISM

In researching the rhetoric of the Bulgarian political parties, one may find arguments against EU accession that are concerned with economic issues (all economic and financial implications of integration) as well as political and cultural ones. The latter ones are related to issues of sovereignty as well as cultural, religious and national identity. Had they appeared, Eurosceptic arguments of Bulgarian political parties would include economic and identity issues. Identity-based Euroscepticism is linked to the integration dilemma that involves a contradiction between national identity and European identity and includes a fear of being "absorbed" by a supranational institution, therefore losing national sovereignty.[21] This is visible not only in Bulgaria but also in many other countries of the region (e.g. Poland). Other and more politically driven arguments include immigration issues and joining the Schengen Area. The possibility of European institutions intervening in the domestic issues is also an important matter for the EU adversaries. Euroscepticism in Bulgaria (similarly to other post-communist countries, such as Poland or Hungary) is the domain of populist parties, especially the populist radical right, which perceives the EU as a threat to the national economy. It

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[19]   Ibid., pp. 113-114.

[20]   E. Nalewajko, 'Eurosceptyczne partie i ich liderzy w publicznej debacie o integracji prowadzonej w latach 2000-2003' in L. Kolarska-Bobińska (ed.), *Przed referendum europejskim. Absencja, sprzeciw, poparcie*, Warszawa 2003 (*Ekspertyzy, Rekomendacje, Raporty z Badań – Instytut Spraw Publicznych*).

[21]   S. Riishoj, 'Europeanization and Euroscepticism: Experiences from Poland and Czech Republic' in R. Kanet (ed.), *Identities, Nations and Politics after Communism*, London 2008, p. 102 (*Nations and Nationalism of Eastern Europe and the Former USSR*).

uses nationalistic and xenophobic arguments, claiming that the main "enemies" of Bulgaria are the Turkish and Roma minorities as well as European institutions that treat Bulgaria as a "second category member state". This amalgam of Eurosceptic and xenophobic attitudes may affect not only the domestic, but also European politics and international relations in the region. Still it is important to notice that Eurosceptic rhetoric and anti-European attitudes are marginal and do not constitute an important part of the political discourse.

The turning point for the Bulgarian political system was the return of the former Tsar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to the country in spring 2001, and the quickly launched political movement called Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), which gained an almost absolute majority in the Parliament. After elections in June 2001[22] Simeon's movement reshaped itself to be a party and in June 2007 changed its name to The National Movement for Stability and Progress. After gaining more than 42% of votes in the Parliament elections, Simeon II formulated a government in coalition with the Turkish minority party: Movement of Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and became the first royal in Europe to regain power in-line with democratic procedures. Interestingly, until Simeon II's comeback on the political scene, the Bulgarian party system followed a classical bi-polar model, with a post-communist left (Bulgarian Socialist Party – BSP) and an anti-communist centre-right (The Union of Democratic Forces – SDS, then after 1998 Alliance of Democratic Forces – ODS). For the first time after 2001, the structure of the political competition changed, opposing both traditional parties (BSP and SDS) to the newcomer NDSV[23]. Many scholars and publicists investigated the phenomenon of NDSV's rapid popularity, and they stressed the charisma of Tsar Simeon II and his European background and equated that support that he was given with overall disappointment with the political elite among Bulgarian society[24]. After 2001 a "populist wave" was rapidly cresting[25] – in 2005, shortly before the general elections Nacjonalen Sojuz ATAKA party was created by Volen Siderov. Shortly after its creation, the party gained 21 seats out of 240 in the National Assembly. Ataka developed a radical right political discourse not only against the establishment but also against minorities, utilizing nationalistic rhetoric on the defence of national interests that included criticism towards the European Union and the accession negotiations.[26] The party mobilized its supporters while taking to the streets and organizing public meetings, manifestations and protests all around Bulgaria. Ataka entered the European

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[22]   M. Spirova, 'Consolidating the Post-communist Party Systems: Political Parties in Bulgaria', 2003, at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/kokkalis/GSW5/spirova.pdf>.

[23]   B. Cholova, 'Populism in Bulgaria: A Recent Phenomenon?'. Paper presented on the "9th Belgian--Dutch Political Science Conference", 27-28 May, 2010, Leuven, Belgium, p. 12.

[24]   D. Smilov, 'Bulgaria' in G. Mesežnikov et al. (eds.), *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, Bratislava 2008; S. Andreev, 'Is Populism the "Bad Wolf"? Post-Accession Crisis of Representative Democracy in Bulgaria and Romania'. Paper presented at "Bringing Civil Society In", International conference, EUI Florence, 13-14 March 2009; B. Cholova, 'Populism in Bulgaria...'

[25]   D. Smilov, 'Bulgaria'.

[26]   B. Cholova, 'Populism in Bulgaria...', p. 16.

Parliament in 2007, gaining 3 seats and together with other European populist parties, such as Austrian Freedom Party and French National Front, they formed the Tradition and Sovereignty (ITS) group in the European Parliament. Up till 2009, Ataka was an outsider on the Bulgarian political scene, criticized both by other parties and media for its radical xenophobic attitudes. In 2008 Siderov declared *I want a new monolithic Bulgaria, I want an end to the theft, I want a new policy on incomes and a revision of all the privatization deals and I want a stop to the construction of mosques, even in areas where Muslims live*.[27] Ataka declares the major enemies of the Bulgarian nation and state to be the Roma and Turks who are accused of causing the present bad economic situation of Bulgaria; moreover, Ataka labels the DPF party as an anti-systemic ethnic party, and calls for its prohibition[28].

The political program called "20 Princliples of the Ataka Political Party" includes the anti-NATO declaration in point 13: *Leaving NATO. Abstention from taking part in military unions. Total neutrality. No foreign military bases on Bulgarian territory* and ends with a demand: *Let's bring Bulgaria back for the Bulgarians!* Siderov called for removing the Turkish-language news broadcasts from Bulgarian state television, which originally was a result of Bulgaria's ratification of European human rights conventions.[29] Ataka won 2 seats in 2009 European Parliament elections and joined the Non-Attached group of the EP. In 2009 elections to the national Parliament Ataka gained 9,5% of votes (21 seats) and decided to support the government established by Boyko Borissov and his party GERB. In the 2013 earlier elections to the Parliament Ataka managed to collect 7,3% of votes, that means that more than 250 000 Bulgarians supported their nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric. In 2013, the National Front for Bulgaria's Salvation which splintered from Ataka in 2011, took part in the elections and gained 3,7 percent of votes. As Tucker[30] argues, this proves that radical nationalist vote actually increased from 9,4% in 2009 to 11% in 2013 (if we count votes for Ataka and National Front for Bulgaria's Salvation together).

The party called Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) was launched by Boyko Borissov, the mayor of Sofia and former Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior in 2006. He gained popularity while being a mayor of the capital, Sofia, declaring efforts to fight organized crime. Thanks to Borissov's charisma and populist anti-elite and anti-mafia rhetoric in 2007, the party scored well

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[27] P. Kostadinov, 'A Message from Siderov', *Sofia Echo*, 9 May 2008, at <http://sofiaecho.com/2008/05/09/660554_a-message-from-siderov>, 9 August 2009.

[28] M. Smrčková, 'Comparison of Radical Right-Wing Parties in Bulgaria and Romania: The National Movement of Ataka and the Great Romania Party', *Central European Political Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2009), p. 55.

[29] B. DeDominicis et al., 'Repertoires of Contention of the Bulgarian Nationalist Right: Militant Nationalism, Social Movements and European State-Building in Post-Colonial Bulgaria'. Paper prepared for the "International Society of Political Psychology Annual Conference", 14-17 July 2009, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, p. 5.

[30] J. Tucker 'Post-Election Report: 2013 Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections', The Monkey Cage, 20 May 2013, at <http://themonkeycage.org/2013/05/20/post-election-report-2013-bulgarian-parliamentary-elections/>.

(21% of votes) in the European and local elections and finally won the 2009 general elections, gaining 116 seats out of 240 and allowing it to form its own government, although without a majority in the Parliament (but supported by nationalist Ataka). GERB also won the 2009 elections to the European Parliament gaining 5 seats (more than 24 percent of votes) and joined the European People's Party in the EP. As Cholova stressed, Borissov as mayor of Sofia *developed a classical populist rhetoric, criticizing the governing parties for the lack of efficiency and bad management*, he called the other parties "they" and emphasized that his priorities are not words but "deeds".[31] DeDominicis et al state that Borissov's charisma *stems partly from the perception that he, as a former police official, knows and understands the world of official corruption and has both the will and the skill to fight it*.[32] Nowadays GERB is not so radical in its rhetoric and declares being a moderate and pro-European party, which has as its main aim the fight against corruption and the improvement of the standard of life of the average Bulgarian. Nonetheless, some xenophobic attitudes can be easily found in the speeches of GERB's politicians. While visiting the USA, Borissov referred to a huge number of Bulgarian immigrants and stated that Bulgaria was left with bad "human material" consisting of "one million Roma, 700 000 Turks, 2,5 million retirees". Although GERB declares to be a center-right conservative party, and at the same time pro-European, it is constantly adapting some of the Ataka's postulates, taking over some part of Ataka's protest votes as well. The EU is not discussed often, however, it is mentioned in the foreign policy section of the party programme, arguing that Bulgaria's foreign relations must be expanded to include not only the EU but also other states.[33]

As stated above, since the 2014 EP elections the main Eurosceptic political party in Bulgaria was Attack (Ataka), having 3 and 2 MEPs in the 2007 and 2009 elections respectively. During the 2014 European Parliament election campaign the Ataka party did not dedicate much space in its electoral programme to Europe, indicating that the issue is of low salience. The program of the party – called the *20 Principles of the Ataka Political Party* refers to the EU when raising issues concerning economic solutions. According to the party manifesto *every Bulgarian investor, entrepreneur, and/or manufacturer shall have precedence over any foreign one, up until Bulgaria's living standards reach the average European level. Bulgaria's production, commerce, banks and all other means of production should be in Bulgarian hands*.[34] The party claims the need of introducing the *minimum labour pay by law with hourly wages corresponding to the average European ones* and calls for *reconsideration of the closed chapters in the accession negotiations with the EU; renegotiation of all unfavourable clauses, damaging Bulgaria's interest. This includes the cancellation of any agreements, accords or memoranda implying or demanding*

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[31]   B. Cholova, 'Populism in Bulgaria…', p. 14.

[32]   B. DeDominicis et al., 'Repertoires of Contention…', pp. 30-31.

[33]   Ataka Party official web page, 2009, at <http://www.ataka.bg>.

[34]   Ataka Party programme 2014, see: Ataka Party, *20 Principles of ATAKA Political Party*, 2014, at <http://www.ataka.bg/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=27>.

the decommissioning of the Kozlodui Nuclear Power Plant.[35] This indicates that although the party is a fervent supporter of national sovereignty, it indirectly accepts the existence of the EU, yet calls for renegotiation of the accession treaty and seeks to reinforce foreign relations with other states. It does not wish for Bulgaria's withdrawal from the EU. It is important to mention that while backing the ruling parties, Ataka managed to push a ban on land sale to foreign citizens, despite EU regulations in this respect, and supported the decision to construct a border fence to keep Syrians and other immigrants in Turkey.[36]

When examining the party manifestos during the 2014 European Parliament election campaign, one may be surprised how little (or nothing) they propose on the European issues. As Anthony Georgieff points out, none of Bulgarian parties standing in the European Union elections in 2014 – except the Ataka party, which claimed to oppose "Euro-perversion", meaning same-sex partnership rights – had any stand on any of the major issues Europe was faced with.[37]

With low turnout, GERB gathered 30,4% of the votes, compared to 18,9% for the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) gained 17,27%, which was considered a big success, especially since the party is experiencing heavy critique from the right wing political scene. The Coalition Reformist Block (RB) consisting of 5 small parties, gained one seat (6,45% of votes). The biggest looser of the 2014 elections was doubtlessly Ataka. Apart from good results in 2007 and 2009, Ataka gained only 2,96% in 2014 EP elections.

Still, there is one more political coalition that appeared just before the elections and managed to win 2 of the 17 seats assigned for Bulgaria in the EP (gaining 10,66% of votes). The coalition is composed of small parties and movements: Bulgaria Without Censorship, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation--Bulgarian National Movement, Agrarian People's Union and St. George's Day movement.

The coalition is led by Nikolay Barekov, who is a former journalist and supporter of Boyko Borisov. The political programme of the coalition is populist, and for example promises to reintroduce conscription and to reinstate the Communist-era name of the country, the People's Republic of Bulgaria,[38] provide free medicine for children, set up state-owned companies for the purpose of buying off and processing agricultural produce, abolish flat income tax and reintroduce progressive income tax. Although the views on Europe and European integration remain mostly unclear, both of the MEPs representing the coalition joined the ECR political group.

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[35]   Ibid.

[36]   N. Popkostadinova, 'Angry Bulgarians...'

[37]   A. Georgieff, 'Dark Cloud Tiny Silver Lining', *Vagabond*, Issue 92, at <http://www.vagabond.bg/politics/item/2769-dark-cloud-with-tiny-silver-lining.html>.

[38]   Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS

Bulgaria might be considered a trouble-maker – not only in the eyes of European institutions that must coordinate, lead and assess Bulgaria to account for what they have achieved in the area of domestic reforms, but also for researchers tracing Eurosceptic attitudes in the party politics of the Member States. It seems that the European issue is not on the top of the political agenda in Bulgaria, and we may risk the assumption that this is because European issues are not of such great importance for Bulgarian citizens as well.

The feeling of distrust towards politics is a general attitude of Bulgarian society, and the EU might be perceived by part of the citizens as a last and only guarantor of stability and the rule of law. As Tismaneanu argues *in Eastern Europe the point of historical reference is the former communist regime: the new elites are accused of being "the old elites with new masks"*,[39] thus the external structures might be seen as a possible provider of a positive change, being still supported by a bigger group of citizens than the domestic institutions. On the other hand, Bulgarian society is not interested in European issues and despite a positive approach towards European institutions, has little knowledge about their performance and rules of conduct.

Seven years after Bulgarian accession to the European Union, one may observe some parties using Eurosceptic rhetoric, but none of them has built its programme around European issues. Even though the Bulgaria Without Censorship coalition used some Eurosceptic arguments, the general attitude towards the EU is pragmatic. This pragmatism is a part of a political strategy, as strong anti-EU stances are not popular in Bulgaria. Bulgarians are rather pro-European, and the level of trust towards the EU institutions is much higher than towards the national ones. Eurobarometer polls demonstrate that Bulgaria is among the countries which are most optimistic about the future of the EU (61% optimistic and 27% pessimistic), while the EU average is 53% optimistic, versus 40% pessimistic. Although part of the society declares pro-Russian attitudes and claims that joining the Eurasian Union would be a better choice than being a member of the EU, supporters of such opinions are naturally more willing to support Eurosceptic political parties.

The absence of Euroscepticism in public and political discourse might be interpreted as a general lack of interest in European issues that is accompanied and determined by a deficit of knowledge about European Union and its functioning. However, a positive outcome of the EP 2014 elections in Bulgaria is the fact that Ataka and other extremist organisations such as the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, which used xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric failed to win any seats in the European Parliament. This is not only another inverse trend compared to other European countries, but also a sign that there are limits to extreme positions in Bulgarian public and political discourse.

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[39]   V. Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Societies*, Princeton 1998, p. 527.

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