The (lack of) participation in the European elections 2014 in Bulgaria – a matter of inherent political culture or a systematic failure?

Georgi Dragomanov

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
E-mail: stojchevap@phls.uni-sofia.bg

Abstract: The essay analyses the European elections 2014 in Bulgaria and in particular the participation and roles of political parties, platforms, and messages. The focus in on the factors, political participation, attitudes of the citizens, etc.

Keywords: European elections, Bulgaria, participation, political culture, systematic failure.

Introduction

Since 1979, the citizens of all the EU countries have been granted the ability to vote for and elect their representatives in the European Parliament. However, the regarded as a "triumph of democracy" election at a supranational level has proved to be a little far-fetched as we can clearly observe an ever declining turnout in those elections [1]. The reasons for this phenomenon can be observed at a multinational system level – such as the gradually reduced trust and image of the EU institutions, according to the citizens, increasing euro-pessimism in some countries [2] and the general crisis in the contemporary democratic system and more specifically the crisis of participation [3]. That being said, the weak political participation of the European citizens in European parliament elections clearly has its national dimensions and causes as well. In this essay we will focus on the turnout of the elections to the European parliament 2014 in Bulgaria, with a specific interest on the peculiarities of the local political culture as we review both the systematic and the individual aspects of it.

Let us begin by quickly addressing the factors that are related to the low turnout on European level.

EU, European Parliament, elections

Despite the efforts of the pro-European political bulk to encourage political participation in the EU elections in the members states by making the Parliament of the EU a co-legislator with the Council of the European Union and by incorporating the opportunity of a European-level referendum amongst the rights of the European citizens, there has been an irreversible decline of citizens' political participation in those elections in almost every European country. In addition to that, the voters that cast their votes in EP elections are far fewer than the voters in national-level elections, be that elections for national parliament in the pure parliamentary republics or elections for president in the presidential and semi-presidential republics. Thus the statement of Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt (1980), that European elections are the impersonation of "*second-order*" [4] national elections, where citizens vote with less eagerness and the political parties show less interest seems truer than ever. Even if we take into account the efforts stated above, the elections for EP are obviously still far less significant than national elections and there is much less put at stake and when there is less at stake it is normal that the ones who are willing to vote will be fewer as well. Distance is also an important factor, as the

representatives, elected in these elections are being sent to a place which in most cases is thousands of miles away from the place where they were originally elected. Despite the evident availability of rapid means of transportation in our modern society, a few thousand kilometres are still quite a distance to travel, especially for an ordinary citizen. Thus, most Europeans are viewing EP elections as very distant from them purely physically and as we are well aware the popular saying "Out of sight – out of mind", we could easily conclude the distance of the EU institution from its citizens and their everyday lives is an obvious turnout reducer. (In order to convince ourselves in this assertion, I think it would be enough to notice the electoral behaviour of Belgium and Luxembourg, where most of the EU institutions are, which is the highest in terms of voter participation in all EU member-states) [5].

Additionally, in order to assure that they are being represented, the national parties joining the EP need to place themselves into larger coalitions, thus suffering from reduced "party-sovereignty" and therefore less political "power". This and the fact that there are no subsidies for the parties that are being represented in the EP after winning the elections forms a much lower stimulus for the political parties to carry out campaigns on the national level, therefore they spend much less money on PR and advertising, therefore voters are much less organized to vote, therefore the smaller turnout [6] (Reif ; Schmitt, 1980). Those are, in short, the systemic reasons for low turnout in EP elections in all countries at the European level. However, these are not the only reasons for the smaller general number of votes cast in European elections.

There are, obviously many individual factors on a European level that conduct the voting behaviour on a micro-level (each separate person). For example, we know that educated people tend to vote more than uneducated-ones. Older people vote much more frequently than the youngsters. In some countries, like Bulgaria for instance, minorities, paradoxically tend to be a more frequent electorate than the ethnic majority [7], which is only one of the many paradoxes of the Bulgarian political culture, as we will find out.

As far as the European level of EP elections is concerned, the individual explanations for the turnout are most frequently related to the attitude of the European citizens towards the European Union and its institutional structure as a whole [8]. Studies have shown that the higher the support for the EU membership in the countries – the higher the voting turnout is [9]. Countries which are traditionally euro-pessimistic and sport a poor image of the EU like Great Britain, Cyprus and Austria and also countries, where the image of the EU has dropped significantly in the latest years like Poland, have average or below average turnout in EU elections [10].

Also, in this train of thought the turnout trend varies according to whether the countries are net contributors to the EU budged, or net beneficiaries. The higher the contribution is to the budged, the lower the turnout is and vice-versa [11]. This is really self-evident. The more people feel more like they are benefiting purely financially from a certain structure, the more they would want to participate in it. The less they benefit, the less their participation would be. Additionally, people in the newly joined EU member-states seem to be much more enthusiastic in participating as voters in the European elections (with the exception of Croatia, where the needlessly prolonged procedures for accession have proved to be detrimental for the turnout). This becomes apparent if we observe the voting turnout in EU countries in the years when they joined the Union, or the years immediately after that [12]. We are humans after all, everything that is new is exciting for us, look at the hype over the new IPhones…!

However, in the turbulent realm of Central and Eastern Europe (if we agree to accept the common understanding of where that is, disregarding the fact the purely geographical centre of Europe is actually somewhere in Belarus), thing seem to work quite differently. To that specific realm we can include Bulgaria, which we have agreed to focus on at the beginning.

The situation there, concerning the turnout and voting behaviours in the elections for EP is quite bizarre, because given the information on the voting determinants that we have stated

above the political participation in Bulgaria was a little above 35% [13] (still, much lower than the EU average)! And all this while, in fact, Bulgaria is, together with Romania, the newest member of the European Community. It is also a net beneficiary and the trust and support for the European Union amongst the people there is one of the highest in the entire union – 71% of the Bulgarians support their membership in the EU! [14].

This situation is at first sight illogical, so we will try to seek its roots and causes in the peculiarity of Bulgarians' political culture, by examining both the systematic specifics such as the way the elections were carried out and with exceptional interest - the cultural ones.

European elections 2014 in Bulgaria
Let us begin with the systematic context of the political features in Bulgaria regarding the elections for EP. At the time of the elections, voting in Bulgaria was not yet mandatory (it is as of 21 April 2016). Clearly, a mandatory vote, would ensure at least some surge in the political turnout in the elections (regardless of the fact that the whole concept of a mandatory vote in a contemporary democracy is highly controversial). Furthermore the elections were held on Sunday, which is the preferred time by the majority of the political electorate. (see in the bibliography, Mattila: 2003). Hence, despite the general issues in the system of the elections on the European level mentioned above, there is little excuse for the low turnout in one of the most euro-optimistic countries in the EU at a domestic level. Political scientists have argued that elections for EP are often used by the voters as a way to exercise a protest vote over the ruling party majority or coalition. However, again, this was not the case here in Bulgaria, as the votes were received mainly, by the usual suspects, again [15]…

By considering the specific context of the time period when the elections of the EP are being held, we can begin to grasp the political situation of not only on a system level, but also on the level of the peculiar political culture in Bulgaria.

Probably the most shocking example was that during the campaign of the first elections of EP in Bulgaria in 2007, the president of the Municipality council of the town of Nesebar was shot dead (supposedly by the mafia). Also, there were corruption scandals in the high ranks of the government. And all this during the heat of the EU monitoring of the judicial system and the battle against crime and corruption, led by the EU Commission! How is it to be expected from the citizens to go and cast their vote, when the whole political and social environment itself makes you want to leave the planet..? The situation during the latest European elections in 2014 was not too different. They were held exactly one year after the failing minority government of Plamen Oresharski came into being after the national elections in 2013, and 5 months before the emergency elections in October 2014, which basically brought back the preceding government… this is not only a description of contemporary Bulgarian political life, but a true metaphor for the "magic circle of eternity" of our political despair, which seems to be inherent to our political culture as I will try to prove later on.

The root causes of this specific situation are undoubtedly very, very deep and ancient. But let us begin by some facts from nowadays. According to a survey on the public trust in state and international institutions, the European ones rank the highest in the public opinion. This is very peculiar, given the stated above in this text, distance of the EU institutions from the citizens of the Union. Bulgarians have the highest trust in institutions, which have almost zero practical presence in Bulgaria and most of us have never ever seen (Dimitrov 2012) [16]. This by itself is a truly interesting assertion, which is of key importance to the understanding of our political culture.

The real paradox here is, that we have a low turnout in the EP elections, despite the fact that EU institutions are the ones we trust the most. And the "intensity" of our political participation in these elections is in the same basket as the most, currently and traditionally, euro-sceptic states! This is, in my opinion, quite extraordinary. We are mostly positive to our membership

in the EU, we almost entirely agree that we benefit a lot from it economically, we trust the most into the institutional system in the Union and we are new members that can't exactly complain of euro-weariness. According to political science, we have all the reasons to be active in the elections to European parliament. This leads us to believe that the low electoral participation in Bulgaria is not so much an effect from the system-level issues in EU elections (despite being affected by them undoubtedly), but most likely, it derives from the specific characteristics of our political culture as well. Let us have a closer look.

Bulgaria is one of the countries that fell in the area of influence of the USSR after the Second World War, which makes it part of the so called "Eastern Bloc". Therefore, its political system and establishment were replaced by new ones, corresponding to the Marxist-Leninist ideology that all the public and economic resources should be state-controlled and placed under the guidance of "the vanguard party".

And so it happened. After 1946 by constitution, there could be only one party in the state, which implemented the "public policy", abiding by the will of the "proletariat", or the working-class. The problem with elections and democracy here is obvious. In a single-party system, there can be no opposition. Without opposition, there is no right to opinion and choice and without those you have no democracy. Actually, the whole point of the total state dominance in every aspect of the public life in the country (and also in many private ones), is exactly this – to distance citizens from any kind of public activities as they can and rest assured that the Party will take care of them (presumably the party is always right).

This is a very crucial moment, as this act of stripping the citizens away from their right to public participation alters current values of the society as well. This is evident as active participation in public life becomes impossible and the political environment becomes impure, being active is no longer considered a subject of any value. And what is culture, if not precisely a set of values that shape our idea of what is precious and therefore determine what we desire and aim towards?

This is why many argue that the socialist states in the "Eastern bloc", which functioned through totalitarian regimes destroyed political culture in eastern societies. What actually happened is that the new socialistic set of values did not simply destroy or demolish some already built construction of a political culture in these societies. The set of values of the Marx-Leninist ideology created and encouraged its own type of values, which begin to seep in, forming (or deforming) the political culture – one of political passiveness and unawareness. This way an "abyss" of its own kind appeared between the governors and the electorate. [17].

This set of values contradicts with the western democracies, where the protestant ethic and culture, which is shaped by the ideas that man has his own mission on this earth, and an ideal to follow and thus seek fulfilment in life in order for it to have meaning (by doing so, man indulges God). Therefore, active participation in public life is considered "a must", a key value for modern societies. This is the definition of what we call a "civic society" – this is the element that binds the political class and the electorate, creating one whole social texture. Because of the lack of this texture in eastern societies they are considered by some authors to be in a pre-modern state [18].

However, Bulgaria was not the only country who was under the influence of the USSR during the Cold War. There were many others, and they are all undoubtedly similar in a way, as their societies were also shaped by the political culture of socialism and many have even lower turnout in the elections to EP in Bulgaria. They, however, are not the subject of this essay and there are other reasons, besides the type of political culture that totalitarian states have formed, which have caused this inherent in my opinion political passiveness and nihilism that goes back more deeply in the Bulgarian past.

We shall place the political culture into a historical context, because, after all the Bulgarian idea of politics and state and the idea of what is valuable and what not has developed, I believe through the course of time and it has shaped our political culture in its own specific way.

If we take a closer look on the Bulgarian history, we can actually discover that this peculiar "abyss" between the citizens, or the people of the country originates from way back – the Middle Ages. From the very moment in which our state was first created, we have had a socio-political division, as the strongly centralized statehood here was brought by the proto-Bulgarians and the state was crafted after their model, in contrast with the less centralized Slavs. With the conversion to Christianity in 864, this gap became not only political, but also cultural. The forceful imposture of the new Christian values, the gap between rulers and ruled increased and was used later on, by the religious movement of the Bogomils, who preached a complete denial of all authorities and institutions, but also the absolute futility of trying to change anything in the material world [19]. This by itself is a unique form of political nihilism and sounds strikingly familiar to the current situation of unwillingness to participate and political desperation, that we have described above.

The "hole" between the governors and the masses was only amplified during the ages. With the imposture of the Christian culture, which was to us exterior, as it came from Byzantine, a new kind of paradox was formed. At that time Byzantine was not only a source of culture for us, but it was also the most powerful political enemy of the Bulgarian Empire. Therefore, a situation of interior friction was created, originating from both the confrontation to, but also the acceptance of the exterior culture, which shredded the integrity of our ancient society. Examples of this are also found on the more recent pages of our history, such as the poor execution of the April uprising, which did not have the support of the richest and more influential bulk of our society for again, familiar reasons [20].

The opinion that this situation is ever-lasting seems to be supported by facts of our present, too. In a survey with the specific question: "*Do you believe that most people can be trusted?*" 82% of the interviewed Bulgarians have answered "*No*". Imagine this! Suspicion and mistrust lead over confidence and mutual trust four to one [21]. This significant difference can lead us to only one conclusion – our social texture seems to be deeply deformed from internal friction and controversies, therefore there can be no society, no common social tissue that binds together the citizens and voters and compels them to stand for their interests together (Dimitrov: 2012) [22]. And with no civic society to connect politicians and voters, the gap between them will grow ever lager. Therefore, we cannot expect an especially high turnout, regardless of the stake of the elections and the level at which they are held, whether European or national. This is also why, in theory we have a functioning system, but the reality is in fact different. Without a specific culture, which has at its core a certain set of values, you cannot have a functioning democratic system. One cannot build a house on shifting sands.

Conclusion

The fear and detestation of our own institutions, in contrast with European ones, has the same core. Our historical development seems to have deformed, or rather shaped the way we look at the state and politics in a very peculiar way. With this inherent distance of the rulers from the ones who are being ruled and the use of the state apparatus for conducting oppression and implementation of certain values by force, there is no wonder that we as a society have become allergic to it. This is why we choose to trust in the EU institutions, whose actions we practically cannot see.

The facts and thoughts stated in this expose, lead me to believe that despite the issues with EP elections that can be found on the system-level, there are specifics of the Bulgarian political culture, which determine the low turnout in those lections. They are separate in their own nature and have deep socio-cultural origins. It may seem that the picture that I have drawn is brutally

pessimistic. However, this is not the case. The aim of this essay is to point out the current issues in our political culture, not to imply that they are irreversible. In fact, the understanding of the problems and the diagnosis is always the first step towards finding the cure.

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