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POLITICAL PARTIES IN BULGARIA

Organizational Trends in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Trends in the organizational development of Bulgarian political parties are discussed in this article. Original data are presented on several indicators of party organization and compared to data on East-Central European parties reported elsewhere. An explanation for the somewhat higher level of organizational development of Bulgarian parties is given and the article concludes with an examination of the impact stronger organization has had on the Bulgarian parties and party system.

KEY WORDS ■ Bulgarian political parties ■ party organization ■ post-communist party systems

Introduction

Exploring trends in organizational development has a long tradition in the study of political parties. In addition to classifying parties based on their organizational characteristics, scholars have sought to explain the genesis of organizational types and speculated on the impact of emerging organizational trends on the role of parties in a democratic political system. There appears to be a consensus that in recent decades the mass party has been in decline and has been superseded by alternative models of party organization (Katz and Mair, 1995; Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988).

While parties in Eastern Europe, since 1989, have tended to develop in ways similar to those in Western Europe, their evolution displays characteristics peculiar to this region in the post-communist era. They seem to lack strong organizational structures and to have weak electoral and partisan links with society. For the most part, these new parties are professional, personalized and closely linked with the state (Golosov, 1998; Lewis, 1996: 14–15; Toole, 2003: 112; van Biezen, 2003).

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Not only do parties in the post-communist world lack robust organization, some have argued that it is becoming impossible for them to shift to a mass-membership model (Toole, 2003: 114). Moreover, parties in Eastern Europe might not need to develop in the same way as Western European parties, but can instead 'leapfrog' into the current era of counter-organizational tendencies (Olson, 1998). In Eastern Europe, parties are financed by the state, their 'catch-all' slogans are powerful and suited to the East European tradition. Rather than members, these parties need votes, which they can obtain by using modern means of communication rather than a cohesive party structure (Olson, 1998).

However, it is not clear that these conclusions can be extended to all of Eastern Europe, because research tends to deal almost exclusively with Central European countries and Russia. Scrutiny of trends in party development in Bulgaria's post-communist political system suggests a different model of development. In Bulgaria, party membership is higher than in the rest of the region, organizational structures are more extensive and the level of professionalization is lower. The attitudes of Bulgarian party leaders towards organization-building indicate a concern with party organization that is more reminiscent of West European party leaders. Indeed, Bulgarian parties seem to have been moving away from an electoral focus to a stress on organization. This somewhat surprising development clearly needs detailed examination.

This study provides evidence to support these observations. Data are reported on several indicators of the organizational strength of Bulgarian political parties and compared to data regarding other post-communist systems. The study also suggests an explanation for the greater concern with party organization in Bulgaria. It is argued that there are two main factors which have forced the Bulgarian parties to engage in more active organization-building than parties in other similar systems. First, the behaviour of the major parties in Bulgaria established organization-building as the model for gaining electoral support. Second, the sequence of national and local elections has necessitated the establishment of stronger and more extensive party organizations than in countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic. Finally, it is concluded that the stress on organization has not consolidated the party system, as suggested by some authors, and some speculative arguments are presented as to why this has been the case.

Bulgarian Party Politics during the 1990s

The democratic transition in Bulgaria started in November 1989 through what Linz and Stepan would call an internal coup within the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) (Linz and Stepan, 1997). Unlike the situation in other Eastern European countries, no opposition organizations strong enough to challenge the Communist Party regime had been created by that

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point. The multitude of new political parties that formed shortly afterwards – 42 of which contested elections in June 1990 – thus had no pre-existing structures or organizations, and, compared to the major opposition challengers in other Eastern European countries, lacked widespread popular support (Karasimeonov, 2002: 25).

With the largest oppositional formation, the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), gaining about 36 percent of the popular vote, the first democratic elections in Bulgaria clearly indicated that the BCP/BSP remained the most influential party in the country (Table 1). Bulgaria thus became one of the few Eastern European countries which kept the revamped Communist Party in power through democratic elections. The 'successor' party was thus probably more influential in the initial stages of democratization in Bulgaria than similar parties in the Central European countries.[1]

During the 1990s the political process in Bulgaria continued to be dominated by the BSP on the left and the SDS on the right of the political spectrum. For most of the period, the BSP advocated a social-democratic platform, and by the late 1990s had come to support a pro-EU and pro-NATO foreign policy. While for most of the period since 1989 it has lagged behind the Hungarian and Polish successor parties in its embrace of market reform, it has been a consistent supporter of political and economic reform (Derleth, 2000: 162; Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999: 123; Murer, 1999: 213, 2002: 392). The SDS, established in 1989 as a coalition of 11 opposition parties, claimed to be a 'centre-right' political formation, but included parties as diverse as the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party and the Bulgarian Christian-Democratic Party. The SDS suffered numerous defections and organizational challenges and finally transformed itself into an unambiguously centre-right political party in 1997 (Karasimeonov, 2002; Kumanov, 1999: 156; Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996).

In addition, a myriad of smaller political formations struggled 'for survival between the poles' (Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996: 140). The 1991 elections saw the biggest and most unsuccessful surge of political party activity. Of the 38 parties that contested elections, only 3 passed the 4 percent threshold mandated by Bulgarian Electoral Law and made it into Parliament, and a quarter of the popular vote was 'wasted' on unsuccessful parties. By the 1997 elections, however, the Bulgarian parties had established a more stable pattern of interaction. The BSP and the SDS kept their dominant positions in the electoral field, but both parties had to form coalitions with smaller formations to retain these positions.

A major blow to the stability of party interaction was delivered in 2001 when the entry of a major new contender, the NDSV, ended the 'bipolarity' of the party system (Karasimeonov, 2002: 54). A formation built around the personality of the Bulgarian ex-monarch Simeon Sax-Coburg-Gotha, the NDSV created a platform focused on economic and financial issues, while its leader repeatedly advocated the abandonment of partisanship and unification around 'historical ideas and values' (Harper, 2003: 336).

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Table 1. Bulgarian parliamentary election results, 1990–2001

	Percent of the popular vote				
Party/coalition	*1990*	*1991*	*1994*	*1997*	*2001*
Bulgarian Socialist Party and coalition, under various names (BSP)	**47.2**	**33.1**	**43.5**	**22.5**	**17.1**
Union of Democratic Forces (SDS–Centre*)	**36.2**	**34.4**	**24.2**	**53.2**	**18.2**
Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS)**	**8**	3.9	**6.5**	With ODS	With ODS
Movement for Rights & Freedoms (DPS)***	**6**	**7.5**	**5.4**	With ONS	**7.5**
Fatherland Party of Labour	**0.6**	0.3	0	0	0
Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (Nikola Petkov)	–	3.4		–	–
Union of Democratic Forces–Centre	–	3.2	0	–	–
Union of Democratic Forces–Liberals (SDS–Liberals)	–	2.8	0	–	–
Kingdom of Bulgaria Confederation	–	1.8	1.4	–	–
Bulgarian Business Bloc	–	1.3	**4.7**	**5**	0
Bulgarian National Radical Party	0.1	1.1	0.5	0.2	0.1
Democratic Alternative for the Republic	–	–	1.9	0	0
Bulgarian Communist Party	–	0.7	1.5	1.2	0
New Choice Alliance	–	–	1.5	0	0
Patriotic Union	–	–	1.4	0	0
Alliance for National Salvation (ONS)	–	–	–	**7.7**	
Bulgarian EuroLeft (BEL)	–	–	–	**5.6**	1
Union for the King	–	–	–	1.1	0
National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV)	–	–	–	–	**42.7**
'Simeon II' Coalition	–	–	–	–	3.4
VMRO-Gergjovden	–				3.65
National Union for Tzar Simeon II	–	–	–	–	1.7

Only parties winning more than 1 percent of the vote are reported. Parties in bold are the ones that won representation in the National Assembly at each election. *ODS in 1997 and 2001. **People's Union (NS-BZNS – Mozer and DP) in 1994, and as NS, part of the ODS in 1997 and 2001. ***Part of the ONS in 1997.

Source: Rose and Munro (2003).

Bulgarian Parties: Organizational Trends

Most Bulgarian political parties are relatively new formations that trace their organizational roots to the early 1990s. The most notable exception is the BSP, which inherited from the Bulgarian Communist Party a membership of close to a million people and highly structured nationwide organization (Waller, 1995). The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS), a satellite organization of the BCP before 1989, also initially benefited from their

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favourable position. However, over the course of the 1990s, the BZNS suffered from so many splinters, reforms and reorganizations that it cannot be considered a 'successor' party in the way the BSP is. Claiming direct lineage from the BZNS by any of the 11 splinter formations would be close to impossible.

The remaining parties, both 'historical' and new formations, had to start building organizations from scratch. Historical parties like the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party and the Democratic Party, which had existed in the pre-communist period, tried to evoke past activities, but 'failed to establish an organizational continuity with that previous existence' (Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996: 134). Among the new parties, the only one which could claim organized structures in the early 1990s was the Movement of Rights and Freedom (DPS). This *de facto* ethnic party inherited the clandestine organizational bases of the 'Turkish National Liberation Movement in Bulgaria', which were established in 1986. However, at this time, its structures were concentrated in only two regions of the country (Tatarli, 2003: 9).

Fourteen years after the collapse of communism, Bulgarian political parties demonstrate levels of organizational development that speak of a relatively high concern with organization-building. For purposes of comparison, the measures of organizational development employed in this study are those as used by van Biezen in her study of party organization in Southern and Central Europe (van Biezen, 2003). These include indicators of the size of party membership, the extensiveness of their organizations, the level of professionalization of the political parties and the attitudes of their leaders towards organizing.

A total of 12 parties reported data: the Bulgarian EuroLeft (BEL), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS), the Communist Party of Bulgaria (CPB), the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), the Democratic Party (DP), the Green Party (GP), National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), the Radical-Democratic Party (RDP), the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), the Union of Free Democrats (SSD), and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO).[2] This sample includes parties that have had a continual and influential presence in Bulgarian political life (BSP, BZNS, SDS, DP); parties that are relatively new, but are playing a major role in Bulgarian politics (NDSV, SSD and VMRO); and parties that have played a major role in Bulgarian politics but are no longer influential.

The Membership Organization

Membership figures for Bulgarian parties are reported in Table 2. The data reflect figures reported at the parties' respective congresses or conferences during 2002 and 2003.

Political parties in Bulgaria report membership figures that are higher than membership figures in Hungary, but similar to Czech and Polish figures.

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Thus, van Biezen (2003) reports Hungarian party membership figures of between 3,500 and 59,000 and Czech party figures of between 13,000 and 200,000. Polish parties report membership figures between 3,000 and 150,000 (Szczerbiak, 2001).

Similar to trends in organization in other post-communist systems, the 'successor' party in Bulgaria, the BSP, has the highest membership among Bulgarian parties. But its membership of over 200,000 people is also the highest among its counterparts in East European countries. Of the post-1990 parties, the DPS has the highest membership, around 59,000 people as of late 2002. While figures for some of the other parties might be exaggerated, the level of organization-building among the newest parties, the SSD and the NDSV, clearly demonstrates a concern with organizational structure. Both parties have memberships of around 19,000 after only about a year of existence for each of them.

Table 2. Bulgarian party membership as of 2002–03

Party	*Membership*
BEL	18,000
BSP	210,000
BZNS	30,000
Green Party	5,000
CP of Bulgaria	29,000
DPS	58,000
DP	7,000
NDSV	19,000
RDP	3,000
SDS	35,000
SSD	17,600
VMRO	12,000
Total	444,700 (6.48 percent of the electorate)
Parties in Parliament only	352,000 (5.15 percent of the electorate)

Table 3. Membership/electorate ratios in Bulgaria and selected other countries

Country	*M/E ratio*
Bulgaria	5.1
Hungary	2.4
Czech Republic	3.2
Poland	1.5

The M/E ratio for Bulgaria is based on membership figures from 2002–03 and registered voters for the 2001 elections. Hungarian data are for 1997, Czech data for 1999.
Sources: van Biezen (2003), Szczerbiak (2001).

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There are two measures that are used to compare party membership across countries: the ratio of members to electorate (M/E) and the ratio of members to voters (M/V) (Mair, 1997: 186; Szczerbiak, 2001: 111; Toole, 2003: 104; van Biezen, 2003: 111–12). Both of these are used to evaluate the extent to which membership in political parties is common among politically active people. The M/E ratio represents the percentage of the registered voters in a given country who are also members of a selected number of parties – usually the ones represented in Parliament. The M/V ratio compares the number of votes each party receives to the number of members it has. For comparison purposes, the M/E and M/V ratios for Bulgaria are calculated for parties represented in Parliament only.

The M/E ratio for Bulgarian parties is 5.1 percent, almost double that of any other East European case for which data are available. Although they are still far below average Western levels of party organization – Toole cites 10.4 percent for the average M/E ratio for Western European countries – Bulgarian parties demonstrate distinctly higher levels of membership than any of the Central European countries. Indeed, Bulgarian party membership figures compare with those found in West European countries such as Ireland, Portugal and Germany, and are way above the levels found in the United Kingdom, The Netherlands or France (Mair, 1996).

The membership to votes ratios for each of the Bulgarian parliamentary parties are presented in Table 4. These figures are not as straightforward as they should be because, of the four parties, none ran without a coalition partner in the elections: BSP ran with over 20 smaller left-wing parties and organizations; the SDS ran with the Democratic Party and BZNS-Mozer; the DPS ran in coalition with two other smaller parties; and the NDSV ran on the same ticket as two other political formations. The membership figures for the Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Bulgaria were thus included in the membership figures for the SDS and BSP, respectively. The M/V ratio is calculated using the results at the 2001 elections.

Of the four parties for which the measure was calculated, the NDSV shows the lowest rate of loyalty from 'its' support base. Members do not even constitute 1 percent of the people who voted for the NDSV. However, the appropriateness of this measure is questionable, as the NDSV did not even register as a party until almost two years later, and membership reflects

Table 4. Membership/voters ratios in Bulgaria, 2002–03

Party	*M/V ratio*
BSP (incl. CP of B)	30.6
DPS	16.9
NDSV	1.0
SDS (incl. DP)	4.2

These ratios are based on membership figures from 2002–03 and votes at the 2001 general election.

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developments as of mid-2003. For all practical purposes, it can be said that the NDSV won 42 percent of the vote in 2001 with no members. However, the M/V ratios for the other parties suggest that this was highly unusual and can almost certainly be attributed to the extreme nature of the pro-NDSV vote in 2001. This partly nostalgic, partly protest, vote was a one-time phenomenon, as the dismal showing of NDSV at the 2003 local elections demonstrated. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even the NDSV, the most 'electoral' and personality-driven of the parties in Bulgaria, felt it necessary to start an active organization-building campaign. By mid-2003, two years after its conception and less than a year after formally registering as a party, it had a membership of about 19,000.

The other three parliamentary parties in Bulgaria demonstrated M/V ratios higher than those in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. The BSP shows the highest rate, with about 30 percent of all the votes cast for it coming from its members. This is higher than any M/V ratios reported by van Biezen and Toole in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic in the late 1990s. For Hungary, van Biezen reports M/V ratios ranging from 2.08 to 12.60 percent, with the conservative parties showing the highest levels of member loyalty. For the Czech Republic, rates range from 0.073 percent to 24.30 percent, with what van Biezen calls 'old parties', or 'successor' parties, showing the highest levels of loyalty. Polish parties have the lowest M/V ratios, ranging from 0.9 to 9.3 percent, with the 'successor' party again showing the highest. The BSP is thus similar to the other successor parties in its stronger organizational link with its voters. Only the MSZP in Hungary has a uniquely low M/V ratio.

The DPS also shows a relatively high degree of member loyalty at the ballot box, with about 10 percent of its votes coming from members. Of the new parties, it seems to be the one most concerned with gaining popularity through organizing. The SDS manifests a member/voter ratio that is typical of parties in the post-communist world; about 4 percent of all its votes come from members.

Overall, the members to electorate and members to votes ratios seem to support the claim that organization-building is more popular in Bulgaria than in other post-communist countries. While the analysis is limited, owing to a lack of earlier data on Bulgarian parties, the comparison seems to provide consistent conclusions over several indicators.

Organizational Structure

Another measure of the organizational complexity of political parties is the extent to which they have developed their organizational structures across the country. In line with the previous discussion, the Bulgarian parties have structures which seem to be more extensive than the structures of parties in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. Bulgarian parties report local branches in the majority of the municipalities of the country.

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The Democratic Party, BEL and the Green Party report the least extensive networks – they have local clubs in about 140 (50 percent), 146 (52 percent) and 130 (48 percent) of 280 municipalities, respectively (Dzudzev, 2003; Kutov, 2004; Zankov, 2003). BZNS and VMRO report higher levels of reach. Both parties have branches in around 200 municipalities (71 percent). The youngest and most active party in terms of organization-building, SSD, reports active branches in 218 municipalities (78 percent) (Milanov, 2003). Even the regionally bound DPS reports branches in 223 municipalities (79 percent) (Dal, 2003). The BSP, the SDS and the CPB have active primary organizations in all of the 280 municipalities in the territory of the country (Krusteva, 2003; Stojanova, 2003; Vanev, 2003).

The two dominant parties, the SDS and the BSP, clearly show the most extensive organizations among the parties in Bulgaria. This could be expected from the BSP, which inherited the pervasive structures of its predecessor. The extensive development of the SDS is more surprising, given its relatively small membership. The CPB's high level of organizational reach can be attributed to its close ties to the BSP and its hardcore communist ideology, which mandates a strong and extensive organization.

Also surprising is the relatively high level of reach of the DPS, a formation that could be expected to have a more regionally limited structure. However, since the late 1990s, the party has been trying very hard to change from an ethnic party into a 'liberal' party with national appeal. Consequently, the party has made a conscious effort to reach outside the ethnic regions of the country to recruit members and solicit support among voters nationwide (Dal, 2003).

Bulgarian parties seem to have more extensive structures than parties in other post-communist systems. None of the Hungarian parties reports branches in all of the Hungarian municipalities, and van Biezen reports that most parties remain geographically limited to about one quarter of the country (2003: 118). The data available for Czech parties do not allow for meaningful comparison. However, it seems that Bulgarian parties manifest more consistent levels of organizational reach than Hungarian and Czech parties, where disparities are greater; in the Czech Republic, for example, some parties have five times as many branches as others (van Biezen, 2003: 140). Unfortunately, Toole and Szczerbiak do not present data on the extensiveness of party organization in Poland. While comparisons are difficult, owing to the different administrative structures of the countries for which data are available, Bulgarian parties generally appear to have more extensive structures and to be making greater efforts to extend their organizational reach.

Levels of Professionalization

Bulgarian parties also seem to be less professional than parties in Hungary and the Czech Republic, although data problems make comparison problematic. Based on data on five Bulgarian and three Czech parties, the

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average ratio of members to paid professionals in Bulgaria is almost twice as high as in the Czech Republic and significantly higher than in Hungary. In Bulgaria, there is on average one paid professional for every 1,736 party members, while the Czech parties employ 1 professional for every 753 members. The Hungarian data, which is the only complete set, shows an average of one professional per 1,395 members (Toole, 2003).

Attitudes Towards Organizing

A final aspect of organizational development to be discussed here concerns the attitudes of party leaders to attracting new members and building organization. Citing an SZDSZ party leader, van Biezen (2003: 115) argues that in East Central Europe expanding membership is seen as an old-fashioned phenomenon belonging to a different era. In general, parties tend to stress attracting voters rather than members. Other Hungarian party leaders expressed similar views in interviews conducted in early 2003. According to individuals from FIDESZ, MDF, SZDSZ, Centrum Part and Munkaspart, building organization was not a major strategy of the parties during the 1990s. More attention was paid to media presence and electoral campaigns, and it was not until 2002 that some of them (FIDESZ, for example) realized the need for more extensive local organizations (Fodor, 2003; Hack, 2003; Kupa, 2003; Navracsics, 2003; Szoke, 2003; Vajda, 2003). By contrast, Bulgarian party leaders expressed strong concern with the need to extend party organization. Many of them talked about the dichotomy between parties based on 'electoral presence' and parties based on organizational structures. Interestingly, with just one exception they all agreed that the time of parties of the 'electoral presence' kind is over. For example, Georgi Pinchev, BZNS Chairman, argued that:

> . . . after 1989, some parties influenced the electoral process not so much because of their regional structures, but because of their messages (the so-called 'electoral influence'). The victories of the SDS in both 1991 and 1997, and of NDSV in 2001, are examples of this trend. But this period is over. From now on, especially given the lower voter turnout in recent elections, the role of organizational structures and the membership will be more and more important.
>
> (Pinchev, 2002)

Similarly, Milan Milanov, Organization Secretary of SSD, claimed that 'Bulgaria has witnessed the creation of some so-called electoral parties, but further development in that direction is not possible'. Milanov argued that it would be extremely dangerous to allow personalities (like the ex-monarch and current PM Simeon Sax-Coburg-Gotha) to become more important than party structures. Organizational development becomes the 'only solution' if such trends are to be countered (Milanov, 2002).

The Bulgarian Socialist Party seems to share similar attitudes towards the issue of organization and membership. Although it still has the strongest

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and most extensive organizational structures of all Bulgarian political parties, it has to be remembered that in 1990 the BSP had close to a million members and has since experienced a dramatic drop in membership. However, it has recently begun to realize that it can no longer rely on its traditional supporters only and has made efforts to attract new and younger members. This is evident in the political reports of the party at the last two congresses, while such themes were absent in earlier reports (BSP, 2002a, 2000, 1997, 1995). The party has also tried to 'democratize' its view of membership. According to Penka Krusteva, Director of the BSP Coalition Politics department, the attitude of the BSP towards membership has evolved to stress not so much what she called 'solid membership', but to maintain a membership base and build around it a periphery of supporters and sympathizers (Krusteva, 2003).

In an even stronger argument, Miroslav Murdzhov, Deputy Chairman of the VMRO, attributed his party's better performance in certain regions of the country in the 2001 elections to the better organizational work done there. However, unlike the SSD and the BZNS, VMRO argued that organizational development was not the only path to success. For the VMRO, whose structures and hardcore membership are solid, media presence has begun to emerge as another way to evolve politically. However, Murdzhov stressed that this can be done only because of the extensive organizational networks already created (2003).

The attitude of the Union of Democratic Forces towards organization has evolved since its formation. Because of the anti-communist nature of its members and supporters, building a strong organization was initially impossible given that people associated such a strategy with the BSP. Besides, the coalition character of the SDS made building a unified structure and membership impossible (Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996: 134–62). However, since the transformation of the SDS into a party in 1997, the need for organization-building has been well understood (Mladenov, 2003).

The only party whose leaders expressed ambivalence towards extensive organization was BEL. Its deputy chairman, Roumen Zankov, argued that BEL, like most young parties, tended to follow the example of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and tried to cover the whole territory of the country with its structures. However, it had realized that there are other means of winning elections, and from now on they are putting their energy into formulating the policies they advocate and presenting them to the electorate in an attractive way (Zankov, 2003).

Overall, the Bulgarian parties surveyed seem to represent a higher level of organizational development than has apparently been typical of their East Central European counterparts. They display a more positive attitude towards organization-building, have more extensive organizational structures and seem to have fewer professionalized structures and larger memberships.

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Explaining Organizational Developments in Bulgaria

The Bulgarian parties exhibit features that distinguish them from post-communist parties studied elsewhere, a finding that certainly calls for an explanation. Authors have attributed the fact that most post-communist parties are elitist, personalized and have lean memberships to factors such as the popular reluctance to join party structures, the absence of salient political cleavages, the inherited organizational advantages of the 'successor' parties, the availability of technology, and the cheaper nature of elite-based organizations (Agh, 1996: 46–58; Kopecky, 1995: 52; Lewis, 1996: 14–15; Olson, 1998; Toole, 2003: 112). When parties can rely on the state for money, when enlisting members is closely associated with the old regime and the parties that inherited it, the new party elites choose not to build organizations but to create 'electoral' influence (Olson, 1998).

Most of these factors are present in Bulgaria, but although Bulgarian parties are not as well organized as parties in Western Europe, they seem to exhibit a greater concern with building organization than parties elsewhere in Central Europe. The reason for this, I would argue, is that there are several other factors peculiar to Bulgarian politics that have neutralized some of the negative impact of the roots of weak party organization in post-communist Europe.

BSP as the Mode-setter

Unlike most of the other post-communist states, Bulgaria kept the successor to its Communist Party in power for most of the early 1990s. Although the BSP officially governed only during 1990–91 and 1994–97, it was also the major supporter of the government in the interim period. Thus, its support and influence eroded only gradually, and it never experienced any major rifts or break-ups during the early 1990s (Karasimeonov, 1996: 258). This presence of a popular, strong and extremely well organized 'successor' party established the model of the successful party. Many smaller parties matched the BSP's organization-building strategies and succeeded in or attempted to build strong organizations themselves. This phenomenon is also observed in some studies of the US state and local party organizations where the differences in organizational strength are not so much along party, as along regional, lines (Cotter et al., 1984; Gibson et al., 1989).

What made the BSP particularly influential as a trendsetter in organization-building was the absence of a clear alternative. The other major political party in Bulgaria – the SDS – kept falling apart and failed to keep power once it achieved it. The SDS started to suffer from factionalism and splinters less than a year after it entered Parliament. By July 1991 the coalition was divided into two major groups: those who supported the introduction of the new constitution by the Grand National Assembly and those who opposed it on the grounds of it being dominated by the BSP and not 'democratic'

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enough. Factionalism was rampant and several of the major constituent components of the SDS decided to run independently in the belief they had enough popular support (Ribareva and Nikolova, 2000: 50–1). As a result, when regular elections came in October 1991, the SDS appeared as four separate political formations – three coalitions of their own and one independent party: SDS, SDS–Centre, SDS–Liberals and BZNS–Nikola Petkov (see Table 1 for contestants and results of all elections).

Further problems followed in 1992 when several leaders and their organization – the Alternative Social-Liberal – left the SDS. In 1994, the Democratic Party, the last of the big parties in the original SDS, followed suit. These splinters allowed for streamlining of the Union's policies, as there was less internal competition for power (Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996: 148). However, the SDS defeat in the 1994 elections led to further splinters by smaller organizations, and to even more tensions within some of the remaining member organizations. By 1995 it was clear the SDS had to either disintegrate or consolidate its organization (Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996: 150). The latter emerged as the dominant strategy and by 1997–98 the SDS had transformed itself into a single party with regular membership. With some small disruptions, the internal cohesion of the party endured until the defeat in the 2001 elections, after which two other leaders and their followers left the SDS to form their own parties.

During most of the 1990s, the SDS was publicly perceived as synonymous with factionalism and an inability to stay together in times of trouble. Its electoral failures in 1990 and 1994 and its inability to hold on to power (after the 1991 victory) linked organizational fractionalization with electoral and governmental failure. This contrasted very strongly with the image of the BSP, which never exposed its internal divisions (admittedly less numerous) to the public (Waller and Karasimeonov, 1996: 151). Moreover, the BSP's organizational coherence, although challenged at times, was seen as contributing to their favourable position in Bulgarian political life.

As a result, as some of the quoted leaders of smaller parties themselves indicated, the BSP set the mode of party-building in the early 1990s (Pinchev, 2003; Zankov, 2003). Parties saw organizing as a successful strategy to win elections. Although the SDS resisted organizing exactly because of the association of strong organization with the former regime, finally it had to come around and start building organizational structures if it was to stay a major player in Bulgarian politics (Mladenov, 2003). The dominance of the revamped and centralized SDS during the late 1990s further demonstrated that organization-building was the only way to success. The quick failure of the NDSV after its sweeping and completely disorganized entry into politics in 2001 further confirmed the link between absence of organization and failure (Milanov, 2003). The behaviour of the most recently created Bulgarian parties surveyed here (SSD, VMRO and NDSV after 2002) supports the dominance of organization-building as a way of winning elections in the early 2000s in Bulgaria.

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The Sequence of National and Local Elections

A second factor that, I would argue, has influenced the greater concern with organization-building in Bulgaria has been the sequence of national and local elections. There has been very limited research on the role of local elections on party competition in either Western or Eastern European democracies, partly because local elections are often considered inferior to, and second-order derivatives of, national elections. However, this argument is based on the assumption of simultaneity of national and local elections. When elections for both national and local offices are held together, national issues and national party strategies tend to dominate local elections. Turnout and interest are higher and the support for the party nationally often spills over into local races. This argument is supported by studies of American midterm elections and the effect the absence of national (presidential) races has on both the elections of state and US representatives.[3]

When local and national elections are not held at the same time, there is a need for more extensive local campaigns. Parties cannot simply use the impact of national issues and national strategies to campaign locally. In addition, when elections are held at different times, local elections can be used as an instrument for gauging party popularity (Szczerbiak, 1999: 82). As a result, off-year local elections become more important than elections held more or less simultaneously with national elections. In effect, parties carry out two independent political campaigns at two separate times, and there is a greater need for the local presence of party organization.

Of the four Eastern European parties discussed here, Hungary and the Czech Republic hold their local elections several months after the parliamentary ones. As parliaments have lasted their full terms (or exactly half that), national and local elections have not digressed from their scheduled times. In contrast, Poland has had to hold its local elections a year after its parliamentary contests. Although scheduled originally at the same time, the early dissolution of Parliament in 1993 necessitated the difference in scheduling. In a rare study of the effect of local elections on the party system, Szczerbiak highlights the key role played by the 1998 Polish local elections for the development of political parties nationally (1999).

Bulgaria has had the most disjointed elections of the four countries. The first regular parliamentary and local elections were held simultaneously in 1991, but the uneven mandates of Parliament have not allowed for this to happen again. Local elections were held regularly at four-year intervals: in October 1995 – about a year after the national elections of 1994; in October 1999 – more than two years after the 1997 parliamentary elections; and in 2003 – again more than two years after the parliamentary elections in 2001. This discrepancy has established the local elections as a much more important event than simply an occasion for deciding who will control the municipal councils and mayoral institutions. In effect, Bulgarian local elections serve as an indication of the popularity of the current party in government

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as well as the members of the opposition and can be used as a reason, at least rhetorically, for calling for early changes in government. Campaigns are devised and carried out quite independently from the national campaigns and are taken very seriously.

This stress on local elections is a factor that has necessitated the more extensive development of political party organization. The coalitional behaviour of the BSP, for example, is indicative of this trend. In order to decide how to behave in each municipality, the BSP requires that all of its potential partners present an updated list of local structures and members, and requires their own branches to verify this information. The BSP only backs a potential partner if the local organizations are deemed dependable. Similar statistics are required for national elections as well (Krusteva, 2003). Even the very act of checking on local organizations roughly every two years contributes to a larger concern with organization, not only in the BSP but also in its 20-plus coalition partners. This practice highlights the significance of party organization in local elections and the impact of their scheduling on party development.

Unfortunately, the dearth of information on local elections prevents any comparative analysis. Local elections in Poland have only begun to be dominated by national political groupings since the 1997 elections due to a reform in local government (Szczerbiak, 1999: 80). Given that most party organization data for Poland reflect the situation as of 1994–98, analysis of any relationship between local elections and party organization there is impossible. However, studies of US elections do point to the fact that scheduling matters and further investigation of this issue is clearly necessary.

Party Organization and Party System Development in Bulgaria

Scholars have often suggested that the development of party organization has a substantial impact on the level of institutionalization of the individual parties, and through that on the stability of the party system and the quality of democracy as a whole (Bielasiak, 1997: 24; Diamond et al., 1988: 19–20; Huntington, 1968: 408; Mainwaring, 1999: 25; Pridham, 1995: 1; Pridham and Lewis, 1996: 5; Szczerbiak, 2001: 97). Better organized parties should thus be associated with less factionalism and splintering, prevent successful entries into the system of new parties and be associated with lower levels of party system fragmentation.

Various indicators of the size and competitiveness of the party system are reported in Table 5: the number of parties running in elections, the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP), the number of parties represented in Parliament and the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Eastern European

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Table 5. Party system indicators for Bulgaria and selected other East European countries

Indicator	*Country*	*First election*	*Second election*	*Third election*	*Fourth election*	*Fifth election*
Electoral	Bulgaria	42	38	49	41	56
parties	Czech Republic	15	20	16	10	28
	Hungary	28	34	28	19	n/a
	Poland	110	34	12	16	n/a
ENEP	Bulgaria	2.75	4.197	3.88	2.89	4.54
	Czech Republic	3.13	6.21	5.33	4.72	4.82
	Hungary	6.71	5.50	4.47	2.837	n/a
	Poland	13.80	9.80	4.59	4.50	n/a
	EE Average	5.5	5.6	4.6	4.1	n/a
Parliamentary	Bulgaria	6	3	5	5	4
parties	Czech Republic	4	6	6	5	4
	Hungary	7	6	6	4	n/a
	Poland	30	8	6	7	n/a
ENPP	Bulgaria	2.42	2.41	2.73	2.53	2.92
	Czech Republic	2.06	3.35	4.15	3.71	3.67
	Hungary	3.79	2.89	4.08	2.21	
	Poland	10.86	3.87	2.95	3.59	
	EE Average	4.00	3.7	3.7	3.8	

Country indicators calculated with data from the *Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe Project*, available at http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections/. Averages for Eastern Europe from Bielasiak (2003).

region overall. Measures are calculated following Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 79).

There are two observations to be made regarding the Bulgarian parties: there seem to be more parties contesting elections than in other countries in Central Europe, but at the same time these seem to be less successful than in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. The absolute number of parties running in elections is consistently high in Bulgaria, and does not seem to decline over time. The number of parties contesting elections has varied between 38 and 56 over the years, with the highest number of participations in the most recent parliamentary elections of 2001. This contrasts significantly with the other countries considered here, where the number of parties running in elections has not only been lower overall, but has also been reduced dramatically from the first to the most recent elections (Bielasiak, 2003; Lewis, 2001).

On the other hand, the number of parties that 'matter' in Bulgarian politics – as represented by the other three measures in Table 5 – is relatively lower than elsewhere in Central Europe. The ENEP in Bulgaria is consistently lower than the Eastern European average and in most cases lower than in the Central European countries. This implies that popular support has been mostly concentrated on a few political formations. The

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number of parliamentary parties and the effective number of parliamentary parties in Bulgaria are similarly low – with the latter values between 2.41 (in 1991) and 2.92 (in 2001), the Bulgarian Parliament is among the least fragmented in Eastern Europe or even Central Europe.

The specifics of Bulgarian party system development provide mixed support for the link between individual party organization and fractionalization of the party system as a whole. While the organizational hurdle might be high enough to make it difficult for newcomers to challenge the established parties seriously, it does not prevent their entry into the system. Indeed, the share of the vote that went to 'new' parties increased substantially in 2001; most of it went to the NDSV, but several other new parties also did well (and the ENEP rose to 4.54). The subsequent fragmentation of two of the big players in the system – the SDS and the NDSV (with both parties experiencing major splits in their parliamentary groups by late 2003) – might also contribute to dramatically changed dynamics of party competition in the next round of elections.

Moreover, organizational development does not appear to prevent splinters and the multiplication of ideologically similar parties. Two illustrative examples are the BZNS and the SDS. Of the 303 registered parties in Bulgaria, 21 are different 'BZNS' parties with basically identical ideologies and appeals. Of these, nine contested local elections in 1999 separately from each other, obviously splitting the agrarian vote many ways (OMDA, 2000). There were also five different BZNS parties competing in the 2001 national elections.

Similarly, the SDS has experienced at least nine major splits since 1989, each leading to the creation of a new party. Four of these splits happened after the 2001 elections, and resulted in the creation of ideologically almost identical formations. Internal fractionalization thus seems to be at the root of the growing number of politically active parties, further complicating the relationships between party organization and party system stability.

Conclusion

Overall, the Bulgarian political parties exhibit a higher level of organizational development than parties in the more commonly studied systems of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. Bulgarian parties have higher membership figures, more extensive structures, lower levels of professionalization, and their leaders show more positive attitudes towards building organization as an election-winning strategy. This study has suggested two reasons for this Bulgarian exception to the general trend of post-communist party development: the bigger role played by the 'successor' party in Bulgarian politics and the sequence of local and national elections.

Also examined in the article has been the effect the organizational development of individual parties has had on the development of the Bulgarian party

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system. It has been quite mixed and in some ways contrary to the established expectations. While better organized than their Central European counterparts, Bulgarian parties do not seem to be able to prevent entry by new contestants, resulting in a higher absolute number of competitors in the system. However, the number of 'effective' parties – both electoral and parliamentary – is lower than in the rest of the region, indicating that stronger organization might prevent *successful* entry by new parties. Clearly, these findings suggest that a deeper investigation of the conceptual relationship between party organization and fragmentation of the party system is necessary.

Notes

1 The term 'successor' party/ies is used throughout this study as meaning the party or parties that succeeded the communist party in each system. The term was introduced by John Ishiyama in his extensive studies of development, electoral fates and features of the revamped communist parties in the post-communist region. See, among others, Bozoki and Ishiyama (2002).

2 BEL is a political party formed by people who left the BSP in 1997 and by politicians who belonged to various social-democratic formations (Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999: 118). It won 5.6 percent of the popular vote in the 1997 parliamentary elections and elected representatives to the 38th Bulgarian National Assembly (1997–2001). During that period it was considered part of the so-called 'reformist majority' because it supported the government of the SDS. Partly because of this, it suffered from the backlash to the SDS and failed to surpass the 4 percent threshold needed to enter parliament in 2001 (Harper, 2003: 337).

BZNS is the legal successor of the 103-year-old agrarian party in Bulgaria. However, at present it is only one of the 21 registered 'BSNS' parties, albeit among the three 'BZNS' parties that matter on the Bulgarian political scene. The others use variations of the name BZNS (Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999: 125). Based on the 1999 local elections, BZNS was the second most popular of the agrarian parties (OMDA, 2000). It had representation in the pre-2001 National Assemblies but none in the 2001 Assembly.

CPB is a party founded in 1995 by people who believed that Marxist ideas were not well represented by the BSP or the other left formations in Bulgaria. It is a 'hard line' Marxist party which boasts a very active membership, publishes a newspaper and is currently represented in Parliament through a coalition with the BSP (Vanev, 2003).

DPS was founded officially in early 1990. Although it does not have an openly stated ethnic platform and included ethnic Bulgarians in both its membership and its leadership, it is widely perceived as representing the interests of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. It has gained a consistent share of the vote (around 7–8 percent) throughout the 1990s and has been present in all legislatures (Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999: 134). Its support was considered instrumental for the change of governments during 1991–94 and since 2001 has been an official coalition partner in the Bulgarian government (Harper, 2003: 339).

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The Democratic Party is one of the 'historical' parties in Bulgaria. A Christian democratic party, it was resurrected in late 1989 and was among the founding members of the SDS (Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999: 134). It survived the first period of fragmentation of the Union in 1991 but left the coalition in 1993 after disagreements between the DP leaders and the SDS leadership. The DP is the most successful of the SDS splinters – it formed a coalition with BZNS for the 1994 elections (NS, National Union) and has been represented in Parliament ever since either through that or a larger coalition with the SDS (ODS, in 1997 and 2001).

The Green Party is another of the founding members of the SDS and as such had 20 MPs in the first democratically elected National Assembly (1990–91). A party concerned with the protection of the environment, it left the SDS during the constitutional debate of 1991 and formed a splinter formation, the SDS–Liberals. But it failed to gain representation in the 1991 and the 1994 elections, effectively putting an end to the SDS–Liberals. The Green Party ran as part of a DPS-led coalition in 1997, elected 2 MPs to the 1997–2001 legislature, but failed to obtain seats in the 2001 elections. However, it plays a relatively active role in the Bulgarian political scene (Dzudzev, 2003; Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999, 137).

The RDP is another of the historical parties in Bulgaria. Resurrected in late 1989, it advocates a liberal platform and was among the founding members of the SDS. It left the SDS after the 1997 elections and did not contest elections in 2001 due to legal technicalities (Kumanov and Nikolova, 1999: 152).

SSD was established in 2001 by politicians who split from the SDS after its defeat in 2001. It is the youngest of the political parties surveyed, but has the potential for a strong presence in the political centre. Built around the personality of Stefan Sofianksi, who has been a major political figure in Bulgaria (and is 'an institution in himself'), it has a moderate right of centre ideology (Milanov, 2003). VMRO is a political force connected to the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization that has had a long history in Bulgaria. Moderately nationalist by ideology, it has only been present in the system as a political party since 1997. It had representation in parliament through a coalition with the SDS during 1997–2001, but chose to run in a different coalition in 2001, and subsequently failed to gain representation in the current Parliament (Harper, 2003: 337; Murdzhov, 2003).

3 The literature on this subject is voluminous. For a good discussion of this topic, see Cover (1985) and Campbell (1987, 1991).

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