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## ELECTORAL PROCESS FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN BULGARIA: PATRON-CLIENTELISTIC RELATIONS, KINSHIP NETWORKS AND IMITATION OF DEMOCRACY

### Abstract

*Bulgaria is among the countries of the former communist bloc, which after its collapse are making an accelerated vertical attempt to democratization and economic liberalization in order to be gradually integrated into the structures of the European Union. Through the method of participatory observation this article reveals the logic and specifics of the electoral process in a small municipality in Bulgaria and in particular the shortcomings in the functioning of local democracy in all its aspects: election commissions, political participants, and voters' behaviour. The conclusions reached in the article are that on a superficial level there is only an imitation of democracy, skilfully undermined by the well-established networks of kinship and patron-clientelistic dependencies. Their parasitism on the public resource destroys the social frame and makes the process of democratization practically incomplete in an endless period of time.*

**Keywords:** *Electoral Process; Kinship; Clientelism; Democracy; Bulgaria*

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## Introduction

Not without reason, the term ‘Bulgarian elections’ acquires a pejorative meaning in the context of the Bulgarian political transition. Numerous falsifications of the elections over the years, vote buying, the presence of ‘dead souls’ on the voter lists and the close involvement of political parties with ‘hoop of companies’<sup>2</sup> contribute to it. Although defined as ‘second order elections’<sup>3</sup>, local elections in Bulgaria have a different charge, and contrary to the tendencies for lower voter turnout in elections of the same type in Western Europe and USA<sup>4</sup>, since the country’s accession to the EU in 2007, their activity has been increasing.<sup>5</sup>

This article is based on a study conducted by the method of the participatory observation of the election process in a small municipality in Southern Bulgaria. It takes place in the period September - November 2019 and is expressed in the participation of the author in the Municipal Election Commission (MEC). According to the method used, the names of the candidates for elected positions, the name of the municipality, and the names of the other settlements are anonymized<sup>6</sup>. The article will stress on the main problems in the electoral process in the local elections with a focus on the election for mayor; the participants in the pre-election competition will be reviewed: biographical notes, party affiliation, pre-election messages, tools to carry out the campaign; their results will also be interpreted.

The thesis defended in the study is that at first glance the organization of the election process and the election campaign are carried out according to democratic procedures and practices, but in depth there are significant deficits that undermine its foundations and affect the election results: poorly prepared election administration, patron-clientelistic relations, family dependencies and religious affiliations.

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2 A term used by the chairman of the ethnic party DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), Ahmed Dogan, in an evening talk show in 2005 to describe the affiliation of Bulgarian political parties with companies and corporations.

3 Anthony Heath et al., “Between first and second order: A comparison of voting behaviour in European and local elections in Britain”, *European Journal of Political Research* 35, 1999

4 Hester M. van de Bovenkamp and Hans Vollaard, “Strengthening the local representative system: the importance of electoral and non-electoral representation”, *Local Government Studies*, 45(2), 2019; Christopher Warshaw 2019, “Local Elections and Representation in the United States”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, 2019

5 Antony Todorov, “Politicheski izbori i demokratsia”. In: Kanev, D. and Todorov, A. (eds.) *Kachestvo na demokratsiata v Balgaria* (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2014), p. 192

6 Alexey Pamporov, “Saper vedere: The Observation as a Method of Data Collection in the Sociology”, *Sociological problems*, 2007

The research interest in the specific municipality is dictated by two inter-related factors: 1. Since 1999, it has been governed by the member of the EPP right wing party SDS (Union of Democratic Forces) – the party-symbol of Bulgarian democracy and transition, which to date has become a boutique organization with less than 1% electoral support at the national level. In this sense, the long-standing electoral victories of the SDS in the municipality represent a precedent that requires mandatory explanation; 2. The studied municipality is entirely rural, including fifteen settlements and a population of 10,518.<sup>7</sup> The structural sectors of the local economy are agriculture, food, woodworking, furniture and clothing.<sup>8</sup> At the end of 2018, the working population in the municipality has a share of 50.67% and unemployment is 6.42%. In terms of age, the share of residents over 64 is over 30%.<sup>9</sup> Data on the educational level show that 6.2% of the inhabitants have higher education, 38.3% have secondary education, 36.7% have presecondary school education, 12% have primary education, and 6.6% have no education at all.<sup>10</sup> The socio-economic structure of the population from a sociological point of view provokes interest, as the political processes that take place inside are an indicator of the modernization development and the quality of democracy in this geographical zone of the EU.

### ***Design and Operation of Municipal Election Commission (MEC)***

According to Huntington, the collapse of communism and the democratic transitions of the countries of Eastern Europe and some former Soviet Republics are the culmination of the third wave of democratization.<sup>11</sup> As part of this process, Bulgaria is among the first post-communist countries to implement political, administrative and financial decentralization, and since 1991 has provided citizens with the opportunity to independently elect their representatives in local self-government.<sup>12</sup> However, transplanting democratic procedures does not always mean adequate representation. The local government elections held in 2019 show the shortcomings of Bulgarian democracy, defined

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7 National Statistic Institute, NSI

8 District Development Strategy 2014-2020

9 Youth Plan 2019

10 NSI, Census 2011

11 Samuel Huntington, *“The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century”* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991)

12 Garry Bland, “Elections and the Development of Democratic Local Governance”. *RTI International*, 2006; Pawel Swianiewicz, “An Empirical Typology of Local Government Systems in Eastern Europe”, *Local Government Studies*, 40(2), 2014

by social scientists as ‘defective’<sup>13</sup>, ‘captured’<sup>14</sup>, ‘arrested’<sup>15</sup>, and the government of the state as ‘autocratizing regime’<sup>16</sup>.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) defines election administration bodies as ‘the primary guarantor of the integrity and purity of the electoral process’<sup>17</sup>, while Todorov considers them the ‘most important actor in the elections’<sup>18</sup>. In Bulgaria, their construction and functions are regulated in the Electoral Code, adopted in 2013. According to him, during local elections, a MEC is appointed for a term of four years. Each member is nominated by a party represented in parliament or by a party that has representatives in the European Parliament. They receive quotas depending on their electoral weight. The total number of the population of the surveyed municipality predetermines the composition of the MEC to be a minimum of 11 and a maximum of 13 members. The exact number, as well as the staff of the commission, should be specified at a working meeting of all interested parties with the current mayor of the municipality. If it is not possible to reach a consensus between the parties, the MEC is appointed by the Central Election Commission (CEC). The studied case is such. This is where the first breakthrough in the mechanism occurs. The CEC appoints MECs without a regulation or procedure for determining the commission governing persons, but only on the basis of the name and education of the proposed persons. In the studied case, the local leadership of the ruling GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) party attempted to lobby for the CEC’s decision by sending a list of the names of the members of the commission governing body that suited it. The result is that half of the proposals of the local leadership receive support from CEC.

The requirement to all members of the commissions is to have higher education, and if possible to be a Degree in Law. The composition of the MEC

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13 Atanas Slavov, “Ten Years of European Membership: Defective Democracy, Dependent Institutions”, *Sociological problems* 1-2, 2017

14 Antoaneta Dimitrova, “The uncertain road to sustainable democracy: elite coalitions, citizen protests and the prospects of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe”, *East European Politics*, 34(3), 2018; Andrey Nonchev, “State Capture of the Post-Socialist State: Challenges to European Integration”, *Research Papers of UNWE* 3, 2019

15 Ben Stanley, “Backsliding Away? The Quality of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe”, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 15(4), 2019, p. 350

16 Anna Luhrmann et al., “*Democracy Facing Global Challenges: V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2019*”, University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2019, p. 11

17 Cited in: Joo-Cheong Tham, “Deliberative Democracy and Electoral Management Bodies: The Case of Australian Electoral Commissions”, *Election Law Journal*, 12(4), 2013, p. 386

18 Antoniy Todorov, *op. cit.*, p. 151

(13 members) covers the requirement only in its mandatory part. The professional fields of the members are very diverse: two lawyers; two nurses; three accountants; two retired teachers; sociologist; office assistant; air-conditioner installer; CCTV installer. The division by gender is eight women and five men. A total of seven of the members have experience in holding previous elections, which is close to the finding of Killesteyn, that even in countries with established democracies such as the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, every second election official is inexperienced<sup>19</sup>. The CEC's decision effectively puts on the four governing body positions a lawyer, a CCTV installer, an office assistant, and a retired teacher, two of whom have no election experience.

The EC prohibits MEC members from being of the same family, as well as a member of their families from being a candidate for an elected position. However, the Electoral Code does not prohibit other family ties, which in practice leads to a precedent - the MEC secretary is a sister of one of the candidates for mayor of the municipality, and one deputy chairman is the nephew of a candidate for municipal councillor. Throughout the whole period of the study, this kinship did not manifest itself in any way in the work of individual members, but nevertheless, the existence of such an opportunity is a weak point in the EC and in certain circumstances would be a reason to compromise the electoral process.

The work of the MEC is managed entirely by the Electoral Code, and the decisions of the CEC. It mainly consists of daily shifts, regular and extraordinary meetings for reviewing documents for registration of candidates, complaints and signals of violations of the Electoral Code and decision-making on them, announcing the election results. MEC members undergo voluntary training, which is organized by the CEC for an hour. The work of the MEC is supported by two technical assistants, and an expert. They are also appointed on unclear criteria, depending on who has a close relationship with the current mayor, or the MEC chairperson. Thus, at the insistence of the party that has run the Municipality for the last 20 years, the two appointed technical assistants are employees of the municipal administration, and the expert, who is also inexperienced, is appointed at the insistence of the MEC chairperson.

Another feature that manifests itself in the case under study is that, although nominated by political parties, there are no strong party affiliations

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19 Ed Killesteyn, "Polling Officials: The Strength and Weakness of Democratic Systems", *Election Law Journal*, 14(4), 2015

among MEC members. These weak links with the political parties are also present in the recruitment and appointment of members of sectional election commissions. Again, on a non-compulsory basis, some SEC members go through one-hour training organized by the MEC, which is extremely insufficient to familiarize themselves with the election legislation, their functions on election day, the counting of votes, and the recording of the results in the election protocols.

These gaps in the activities of local election administrations testify to their relatively poor training<sup>20</sup>, to their imperfect recruitment, appointment and actions, and instead of being the 'backbone of the theatre of democracy'<sup>21</sup>, they rather generate distrust in relation to the overall organization of the election process. Their structuring, work and staffing are far from the ideal type of rational bureaucracy of Weber<sup>22</sup>, but in the case studied their actions do not have a decisive impact on the election result.

### ***The Election competition***

#### *Registrations and Profile of the Candidates*

According to the Law on Local Self-Government and Local Administration, the mayor of the municipality is an executive body, i.e. his or her functions and actions are guided by the decisions of the municipal council. Tsoneva and Georgiev see in the structure of local government a systemic problem, as on the one hand the mayor is elected by the population to implement his or her election program, but on the other hand the council is the one that determines whether this will happen depending on its support or lack of support.<sup>23</sup> Due to this problem, after taking office, mayors embark on the search and provision of the majority they need, based not on 'principles and management programs, but on thin balances and the satisfaction of various economic demands'<sup>24</sup>.

The registration of the parties for participation in the elections and of their candidate lists is carried out not later than 32 days before the elections and this process has a special charge for all participants in them, including the

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20 Antony Todorov, *op. cit.*, p. 224

21 Ed Killesteyn, *op. cit.*

22 Max Weber, "Sociologia na gospodstvoto. Sociologia na religiyata" (Sofia: UI "Sv. Kliment Ohridski", 1992)

23 Antoaneta Tsoneva and Svetoslav Georgiev, "Kmetove na lizing (Sofia: Fondatsia RiskMonitor", 2008), p. 20

24 *Ibidem*, p. 21

MEC. Incomplete set of documents, lack of signatures, false signatures, lack of stamps, wrong names are just some of the main problems that accompany registration and which exacerbate relations in the commission and provoke scandals about the admissibility and legality of such documents.

The size of the population determines the mandates of the municipal councillors who must be elected - for the surveyed municipality, these are 17 people. Six parties and one local coalition have registered a total of 81 candidates to run for municipal elections.

Elections for a local mayor are also being held in eight of the settlements. A total of 26 candidates are taking part in this competition. In the other villages (with a population of less than 350 people) the mayors are appointed by the municipal council on the proposal of the mayor of the municipality.

A precedent is one of the settlements with a population of less than 350 people. A few months before the presidential decree for carrying out elections the current mayor managed to 'make sure' to provide the minimum required number of the population by persuading his relatives, acquaintances and a group of Roma people to change their address registration. The goal is, as he puts it, 'for the village to democratically elect a mayor, not someone to appoint the mayor'.

In the competition for mayor of the municipality, three parties and a local coalition registered four candidates:

- Candidate 1: a 42-year-old man, married, with one child. He has a university degree in law and theology and works as an expert in public administration. He is running for mayor of the municipality for the fourth time. He was nominated by the patriotic party NFSB (National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria), of which he is the municipal chairman. His political experience consists of two terms as a municipal councillor from various political parties. He lives in the municipal centre and professes Eastern Orthodoxy.
- Candidate 2: a 39-year-old man, married, with two children. He has a university degree in agronomy and develops his own business in the field of trade in plant protection products. He is a candidate for mayor of the municipality for the first time, nominated by the right-wing party GERB. Candidate 2 is not a member of GERB party and has no political experience. He has recently started living in the municipal centre, a native of a settlement outside the municipality. He professes Eastern Orthodoxy. His candidacy is also supported by the Volya (Will) party.
- Candidate 3: a 64-year-old man, married, with two children. He has a secondary education and works as a manceiple in an farm cooperative. He

is a candidate for mayor of the municipality for the second time, nominated by the left-wing BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party). Candidate 3 is the chairman of the municipal organization of the party that nominates him. He has two terms as a municipal councillor from the same party. He lives in the municipal centre and professes Eastern Orthodoxy.

- Candidate 4: a 39-year-old man, married, with two children. He has a higher pedagogical education. In the period 2015-2019 he is mayor of the municipality. Candidate 4 is a long-time member of the right-wing SDS party. In the 2019 elections, the SDS is running in a local coalition with the BDC (Bulgarian Democratic Centre) party, which has no structures in the municipality. He lives in a small village and he professes Catholicism.

As can be seen from the profiles of the mayor candidates in the case under study, these are mostly young people. Another distinctive feature of them is that only one of the four has changed his party affiliation several times, a circumstance that is not an isolated case either inside or outside the EU<sup>25</sup>. However, the party nomadism is strongly expressed among the candidates for municipal councillors.

### *Pre-election Campaign and Violations of the Electoral Code*

The Electoral Code envisages the pre-election campaigns to be held within 30 days and to be terminated the day before the elections. In the studied municipality it is carried out mainly by putting up posters, distributing campaign materials, theatre performances, concerts, organizing fairs and meetings with voters. The channels through which the pre-election messages reach the citizens are the social network Facebook, creation and broadcasting of videos on Youtube, as well as paid publications in regional media.

Spreading all kinds of rumours and misinformation is also one of the ways to conduct an election campaign.<sup>26</sup> Ivanova even claims that this non-standard agitation has a greater effect, as well as that 'in every municipality that does not include a big city, mainly rumours' are used.<sup>27</sup> This type of campaign between Candidate 2 and Candidate 4 is particularly acute. The rumours concern the

25 Antonio Costabile and Antonella Coco, Social actors and social ties in multiple modernity: Familism and social change in the South of Italy, *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 4(1), 2017

26 Satendra Kumar, "Uttar Pradesh local elections 2015: money, muscle and manipulation in a village", *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 2019

27 Evgeniya Ivanova, "Local Elections 2003 – ethnic or political vote? Kirkovo Municipality, Kardzhali Area", *Sociological problems 1-2*, 2004, p. 379

biography, family or company affiliations of the candidates, the distribution of public procurements and appointments in the structures of the municipal administration, and the mayoralties in each settlement. The arsenal of this type of 'technique' includes mutual accusations of drug, alcohol and gambling addictions of candidates and members of their families; of corruption and secret connections with oligarchic circles. An active role in this campaign is played by the marital partners and the closest relatives and friends of the candidates for the mayor's post, but also employees in the municipal administration, former mayors, and municipal councillors.

In the standard campaign, Candidate 1 organized three public events, at which he presented his candidacy for mayor, as well as the list of municipal councillors and candidates for mayors of some of the settlements. His presentations focus more on clarifying the structure of the municipal administration, the functions of local self-government bodies and the potential opportunities for applying for various EU operational programs. Candidate 1 is also actively involved in the opening of a playground in the municipal centre, which is rumoured that he has personally lobbied for its construction by his contacts with the upper echelons of power in Bulgaria. The other method that Candidate 1 uses is a door-to-door campaign.

Candidate 2's campaign is focused on organizing public events in larger settlements, along with holding three concerts with famous Bulgarian artists. The main highlights of his election program are the renewal of the old water supply network; completion of the sewerage system; organizing own separate garbage collection and garbage removal; modernization and reconstruction of schools, kindergartens and gyms; expanding the activity of the medical teams; priority of local private companies in announcing public procurements.

Candidate 3 does not rely on a broad campaign, but rather on individual and collective meetings with a narrow circle of voters. He holds two public events, one of which is attended by the President of the Party of European Socialists. The candidate's messages are mostly related to honesty, openness and commitment to the introduction of free kindergartens and nurseries. The other tool of his campaign is to put up posters, distribute leaflets and posts on the social network Facebook to party members and supporters.

Candidate 4 uses a variety of channels to disseminate election messages: posters, leaflets, booklets covering the past four years and a program for the next term. His pre-election arsenal also includes Facebook calls for support, paid media publications, organized and spontaneous meetings with voters, as well as holding two public events - a theatrical performance and a concert. The pre-election commitments of Candidate 4 are: reduction of unemployment

and promotion of employment; establishment of a secondary school in the municipality; construction of a system for video surveillance in schools, kindergartens and the entrance-exit arteries in each settlement; completion of sewerage and water supply in larger settlements; reconstruction of sports facilities; introduction of family composting, independent garbage collection and garbage disposal; attracting foreign investment; giving priority to local private companies in conducting tenders for small public procurements.

Kera and Hysa defend the thesis that ‘free and fair elections constitute an important pillar of democracy. A fair political competition needs transparency of campaign finances and in general of money in politics.’<sup>28</sup> The financial resources used by the candidates in the surveyed municipality are not transparent. Basically, these are donations from companies close to the raised candidate, personal funds and a small part come from the party. This means that the one who raises more funds will be better positioned in the campaign. Linking some of the candidates with a ‘circle of companies’ is a prerequisite for dependence and the formation of patron-clientelistic chains, especially thriving after Bulgaria’s accession to the EU.<sup>29</sup> The reason for the increased interest of the private sector in the local elections and the support of certain candidates is that in the words of the former chairman of the Supreme Administrative Court and former ombudsman of Bulgaria Konstantin Penchev, ‘if there is anything further to plunder, it is in the municipalities. Even more, elections will be decided on the basis of principles such as “supply - demand”<sup>30</sup>. In the twelfth year of Bulgaria’s accession to the EU, this pattern still exists. It is noteworthy, for example, that in order to respond to the gift they receive from local businesses, two of the candidates in their campaign messages declare a commitment to prioritize local companies in public procurement, a tactic that is incompatible with the principles of neoliberal market economy and free competition.

During the election campaign, the MEC received three signals of violations of the Electoral Code, expressed in the distribution of campaign materials on Facebook, which lacked the mandatory caption ‘Buying and selling votes is a crime’ and containing the Bulgarian flag, as well as unregulated posting of posters on public buildings. Regarding one of the signals the MEC established that no violation had been committed. In the other two it confirmed the violation on the basis of the evidence provided by the applicant, but

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28 Gentiana Kera and Armanda Hysa, “Influencing votes, winning elections: clientelist practices and private funding of electoral campaigns in Albania”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2020, p. 13

29 Antoaneta Tsoneva and Svetoslav Georgiev, *op. cit.*; Antony Todorov, *op. cit.*;

30 Cited in: Antoaneta Tsoneva and Svetoslav Georgiev, *op. cit.*

did not draw up an act, as at the time of the official inspection the violations had been eliminated. The removal itself is preceded by a telephone call from a member of the commission, usually from the same political quota, which in practice constitutes a leak and compromises any further action. Another reason for the lack of will to impose fines is the relatively high amounts for the Bulgarian standards provided in the EC, as well as the prevailing conformist opinion among MEC members that ‘in a small municipality everyone knows each other and it is better not to spoil relations’. In other words, *de jure* democratic institutions are present, but *de facto* their democratic functioning is not developed.<sup>31</sup>

### *Round 1*

Bland asserts the opinion that the three components of any electoral system are the size of the constituency, the structure of the ballot-paper, and the electoral formula.<sup>32</sup> On the election day, voters have separate ballot-papers for each election: for a mayor of a municipality who is elected by a majority electoral system; for municipal councillors who are elected by a proportional electoral system with the possibility of rearranging the lists by preferential vote in a formula for calculating the result by the method of Herr-Niemeyer; for local mayors (where such election takes place), who is elected by the majority electoral system.

The Election Day was characterised by tension and problems - absentee members of the sectional election commissions, power supply failures in three of the sections for two hours and blocking of the voting process, signals of violations of the EC. Two of the signals of violations are related to unregulated campaigning in front of the polling stations. No violations were found during the inspection, but as in the election campaign, violators were notified in advance that an inspection was pending. Similar to Stockemer’s findings about the electoral violations in North Macedonia,<sup>33</sup> in the observed municipality during the Election Day, regular monitoring of the polling stations reveals other problems such as gatherings of large groups of people in front of the polling stations, who meet and persuade the arriving citizens to vote in a certain way. Some of the people in the groups also perform control functions - to monitor

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31 Daniela Pastarmadzhieva and Yliyana Yarkova, “Electoral Behavior and Citizen Participation: A View from the Bulgarian Villages”, *Balkanistic Forum* 1, 2020, p. 206

32 Garry Bland, *op. cit.*

33 Daniel Stockemer, “Gender equality and electoral corruption: some insights from the local elections in Macedonia”, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 2018

and check whether ‘their people’ have voted and if not to invite them to do so, and if necessary to transport them to the polling stations. Unlike established democracies, such as the United Kingdom, where crowding in front of sections is rather the exception,<sup>34</sup> this practice in Bulgaria has become a regularity and does not impress either the election administrations or the police bodies that guard the election premises.

During the Election Day, two more signals for violations of the Electoral Code were received: for unregulated collection of personal data from the ID cards of voters by members of one of the polling stations and for adding a group of voters to the voter lists, declaring an address where in fact there is no residential building. In both cases, the MEC does not carry out an inspection, but forwards the signals to the competence of the Commission for Personal Data Protection and to the acting mayor of the municipality, respectively.

The EC provides an opportunity for citizens to vote at the current address with a certificate issued in advance by the relevant civil registration office. These citizens are not present in the official voter lists and are therefore registered on the Election Day. This is another practice in the Bulgarian election process, known as ‘election tourism’, which practically predetermines many elections. This paradox reaches the point that in one of the settlements the ballot-papers are not enough, as almost 50% more voters appear in front of the polling station than the actual number of residents entitled to vote at a permanent address. Such a registration is present in each of the sections in the municipality and for the most part they are organized in advance by the current mayors with the participation of the municipal administration. The vote count becomes ‘genuinely social process’,<sup>35</sup> in which, according to the EC, in the polling station, in addition to the members of the SEC, may also be present members of the MEC, advocates and representatives of political parties, NGO observers, the candidates themselves, media representatives. Gathering many people on the one hand gives publicity to the election process, but on the other hand the gathering of many people in the sections predetermines tension and scandals, and hence errors in counting and errors in reporting the results. All of them became known later when the protocols were reported to the MEC. The most common mistakes are the wrong sum of the results of the individual candidates, unreported and lost ballot-papers, multiple strikeouts and corrections.

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34 Toby James and Alistair Clark, “Electoral integrity, voter fraud and voter ID in polling stations: lessons from English local elections”, *Policy Studies*, 2019

35 Achim Goerres and Evelyn Funk, “Who Counts, Counts: An Exploratory Analysis of How Local Authorities Organise the Electoral Count in Germany’s Most Populous State”, *German Politics*, 2018, p. 6

The MEC has the power to request a recount of the ballot-papers only when gross factual violations are established. Such an option usually does not occur due to the desire of most of the MEC members to end their work sooner.

After the reporting of the last protocol from the polling stations in the MEC, the results are summarized by computer processing. The first round ended with a turnout of 62.9%. The summarized data from the election for mayor of a municipality show that Candidate 1 collects 12.17%, Candidate 2 receives 33.84%, Candidate 3 receives 12.86%, and Candidate 4 wins 38.7%. The ballot-paper also provides a place for a protest vote, where voters can indicate that they do not support any of the candidates. 2.43% of the citizens exercised this right. The total number of invalid votes in this type of election is 4.07%. With these results, Candidate 2 and Candidate 4 were determined to participate in a second round, scheduled for one week later.

The results of the elections for municipal councillors show that the NFSB party garnered the support of 11.09% of voters and won 2 seats; GERB won 23.46% and received 4 seats; Volya collected the vote of 11.53% of the citizens and received 2 seats; BSP won 16.63% and received 3 seats; The local SDS-BDC coalition won 36.26% and gained 6 seats. The preferential threshold for rearranging the candidate lists is 7% of the total number of voters for the party. These preferences practically rearrange the lists of each of the parties and the coalition, but in reality three candidates manage to rearrange the lists of their party so as to secure a place in the Municipal Council. 3.45% of voters exercise their right not to support anyone, and the invalid ballots in this type of election are 24.9%. One of the natural explanations for the high share of invalid ballot-papers is their design.<sup>36</sup> The complexity of the ballot-paper for the election of municipal councillors is that in addition to ticking the preferred party or coalition, there is also the possibility of a preferential vote. But preferential voting has been introduced in Bulgaria since 2014 and is nothing new for Bulgarian voters. In addition, the invalid votes in the surveyed municipality for the same type of election in 2015 was 20.1%, i.e. instead of the voter demonstrating getting used to and understanding the way he or should vote, an inverse correlation is observed. Todorov makes another hypothesis. He acknowledges that in local elections the number of invalid ballot-papers is relatively higher and suggests that behind this lies the mobilization of specific groups of the population, often marginalized, who are more likely to make a mistake in voting.<sup>37</sup> Although it sounds plausible, it is partly true. In one of

36 Michal Pierzgalinski et al. "Ballot Paper Design and Vote Spoiling at Polish Local Elections of 2014: Establishing a Causal Link", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 2019, p. 22

37 Antoniy Todorov, *op. cit.*, p. 210

the sections in the municipality where an ethnically homogeneous population votes, the invalid votes are 15.8%, while in a section of a mixed constituency, where a large part of the Roma population is included, they reach 27.2%. The difference is obvious, but the percentage in the first section is also high enough, especially when compared to the invalid votes in the local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, where this percentage varies from 0.35% - 2.7%.<sup>38</sup> The authors of this study believe that the share of invalid votes depends on the ways of organizing the electoral process.<sup>39</sup> Obviously, in the studied case the high part of invalid votes is caused by a set of factors: the complexity of the ballot-paper, poor preparation and training of election commissions, errors or manipulation in counting votes, pressure groups in front of polling stations, low political culture of citizens, poorly educated social groups, high percentage (11%) of Roma population<sup>40</sup>.

The professional fields of the newly elected municipal councillors are: three businessmen; three farmers; two accountants; two nurses; a general practitioner; two secretaries of GP; a manciple in a consumer cooperative; a principal of a presecondary school; general practitioner, an engineer. Most municipal councillors have more than one mandate, and only three of them have no political experience.

In the elections for a local mayor in five of the settlements a mayor was elected in the first round, and in the other three a second round was scheduled. The citizens who have chosen not to support any of the mentioned candidates in the respective settlements vary from 0.73%-4.38%, and the invalid votes are from 0.83% -5%. Three of the election winners remain in office. One of them was nominated by GERB party, and two by SDS party, one of which is with imposed and enforced 'probation' sentence for beating a football referee. In the other two settlements, the newly elected mayors were nominated by BSP party, have no previous political experience and come from the fire brigade and the military professions. There are no mayors with higher education among those elected in the first round.

### *Round II*

There are no official events as part of the election campaign between the two rounds. Both candidates are rely first on negotiations with the defeated ones. Candidate 1 officially stands behind Candidate 4, and part of their

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38 Achim Goerres and Evelyn Funk, *op. cit.*, p. 9

39 *Ibidem*, p. 16

40 NSI, Cencus 2011

agreement includes Candidate 1 to receive the position of Deputy Mayor of the municipality in case of victory of Candidate 4. This pre-election coalition relies on individual meetings with voters, local businessmen and pressure on employees in the municipal administration to activate their close family and friends, as well as pressure on dropped candidates for local mayors to provide support.

Candidate 2 is officially backed by part of BSP structure, while the other part of this party calls voters to vote by conscience. Candidate 2 is also backed by the former mayor of the municipality, who in fact stands against his party. For some SDS voters, this is considered as treason.

Rumours are also part of the pre-election arsenal, this time related to mutual accusations of vote buying and new attacks between them on the social network Facebook. There was no evidence of vote-buying, but police patrols were sent to the largest Roma neighbourhood in the municipality 48 hours before the second round as a respecting and preventive measure.

Election Day passes without the tension typical of the first round. For the entire day, the MEC receives only one signal for unregulated campaigning, but as in the cases of the first round, the leakage of information predetermines the outcome of the inspection. Despite the weaker interest in the elections, the characteristic concentration in front of the polling stations in some of the settlements remains.

The Election Day ended with a lower turnout than the first round of 55.55%. The election headquarters of the political parties conducted a parallel counting according to the data from the protocols from the polling stations and on this basis about an hour after the end of the Election Day a bell from an Orthodox church announces the victory of the Catholic candidate. Official data show that 42.14% voted for Candidate 2 and 56.45% for Candidate 4. 1.4% of the voters exercised a protest vote 'I do not support anyone', and the invalid ballot-papers were 19.74%, i.e. again a high share in a simplified ballot-paper containing only two names.

In the three settlements where elections for local mayor were held, two are newly elected mayors nominated by SDS, and the third raised by GERB keeps his post. The newly elected mayors are respectively a farmer and a bus driver. They also do not hold higher education.

### ***Interpretation of the results***

For Brusaporci, 'the local authorities represent the first and primary link in the chain of multi-level governance which ultimately leads to the European Union'<sup>41</sup>. In fact, the direction of the processes in the case under study is exactly the opposite, and instead of moving towards the core of the EU, local authorities are pushing the country towards the third world. What do I mean?

From 1999 to 2015, the election for a mayor in the surveyed municipality was won by the same SDS candidate in the first round, but the ruling majority is always a coalition. In 2015, the elections were won again by SDS, but by another candidate, who until that moment had been in the team of the former mayor. In 2019, he won his second mandate again. Against this background, at the national level, in the last elections in which the SDS participated independently in 2013, it received 1.37%. From then until 2019, its participation in elections took place in various coalitions and the maximum result it reached with them was 8.88%.

Evans postulates that 'fair, democratic elections are key to decision-makers' legitimacy in the eyes of the public.'<sup>42</sup> Despite the numerous gaps in the electoral legislation, 'electoral tourism', violations of the EC and poorly prepared election commissions, the study showed that formally on the surface the electoral process is carried out according to democratic procedures. Beneath the surface, however, processes are revealed that are deeply entwined in the social fabric and erode the already fragile democratic foundations.

The electoral victory of SDS party in 2019 in the studied municipality is due to the strictly established network of patron-clientelistic relations. Scott considers them 'a special case of a two-person relationship involving friendship in which an individual from a higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for people who are of lower status (clients) reciprocate by offering support and assistance, including personal services or protection',<sup>43</sup> i.e. 'patronage or clientelism is a concept of power that is born from an unbalanced relationship between patrons in one party and the client on the other'.<sup>44</sup> It is based on the

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41 Gianfranco Brusaporci, "The impact of EU multi-level regionalism strategy on Bulgarian local authorities: qualitative comparative analysis among nine border areas", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2016, p. 6

42 Matt Evans, "Democracy, Legitimacy and Local Government Electoral Reform", *Local Government Studies*, 40(1), 2014, p. 44

43 James Scott, "*Comparative Political Corruption*" (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 92

44 Robi Kurniawan, "The Pattern of Clientelism in Lampung Local Election", *MIMBAR*, 34(2), 2018, p. 285

principle of mutual benefit. The patron receives political support, and the resources he distributes can be money, goods, services, facilitated access to social benefits, political appointments in the structures of the administration, protection against dismissal, access to public funds for business and public procurement.<sup>45</sup>

In this regard, SDS's strategy unfolds in several scenarios. In the first place, several large families are involved, from which candidates for mayors and municipal councillors are nominated. The newly elected mayor of the municipality comes from a large Catholic family from the third largest settlement in the municipality. Similarly, his wife comes from such a family, and she is from the same village. However, both of them live in the neighbouring small also Catholic village, where the mayor's father is from. To strengthen this connection, his first cousin was included at the top of the list of municipal councillors.

The candidate for mayor of the third largest settlement with a homogeneous Catholic population is of another large family, and a representative of the same family is placed at the top of the list of municipal councillors. In the neighbouring settlement with mainly Catholic population, the same formula applies, i.e. a candidate for a local mayor comes from a large family with a Catholic religion. The two settlements with a Catholic population provide 31% of the votes of Candidate 2, while Candidate 4 manages to accumulate only 14.3% of their votes there.

In general, religion has a peripheral function in Bulgarian public life, but this is not the case with the Catholic community, whose number in Bulgaria is 0.85% of the total population, and in the studied municipality it is approximately 30% of the total population.<sup>46</sup> 'Catholicism in fact considers the family as a value in itself and as a specific model around which to organise social life. The Catholic religion penetrates society, including its public and political dimensions, through its models of family education and of socialisation.'<sup>47</sup> Hence, the purely primary motivation of voters to support the 'cousin' becomes a very personal and intimate act. Within the framework of this strategy, two more large families are included, but this time from the circle of Eastern Orthodox

45 Charles Tilly, "Trust and Rule", *Theory and Society*, 33(1), 2004; Francis Fukuyama, "The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution" (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroud), 2011; Herbert Kitschelt, "Divergent Paths of Postcommunist Democracies", In: Diamond, L. and Gunther, R. (eds.). *Political Parties and Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 2001; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Luis Roniger, "Patrons, clients and friends: Interpersonal relations and the structure of trust in society" (Cambridge University Press, 1984)

46 NSI, Census 2011

47 Antonio Costabile and Antonella Coco, *op. cit.*, p. 92

Christians from the municipal centre, who manage to nominate one of their representatives among the municipal councillors. The only obstacle that this line gives is the attempt for ethnic opposition by raising the candidacy of a young woman of Roma origin as mayor in one of the smaller settlements. Although in many democracies this is a common practice,<sup>48</sup> in Bulgaria there is still a special sensitivity on this issue. In the competition with the other three candidates, she managed to win in the first round, but in the second round, the consolidation of the Bulgarian vote deprived her of success.

The kinship model for political participation and adaptation of family ties in the political body is characteristic of societies of 'low trust', such as Greece and southern Italy, in which the family is the basis for social cooperation, i.e. where informal groups and associations are absent between the family and the state<sup>49</sup> or in societies such as India, where local elections are used by privileged castes to create shadow states as a means of controlling the local and regional economy<sup>50</sup>. Obviously, three decades since the beginning of the Bulgarian transition, family ties and their use can still be a 'strategic resource for political and electoral success'<sup>51</sup>. At the same time, the result shows that public relations in Bulgaria are at the pre-modern level, typical of Western European societies until the middle of the 19th century, when traditional family ties still shaped political parties and local politics<sup>52</sup>.

The second scenario is the bureaucratic vote. Under pressure from local party leaders, municipal administration officials, in the town halls run by SDS mayors, and staff in kindergartens and schools, are actively campaigning among their families, relatives and friends with the main goal of keeping their jobs. In addition, some of the jobs in the administration are also reserved for relatives of the patron, the mayor and the councillors.

The model, also known as 'party patronage', is based on the "politicization of the civil service"<sup>53</sup> and the ability of political parties to distribute and control

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48 Timothy Krebs, "Local Campaigns and Elections", In: Haider-Markel, D. (ed.). *Oxford Handbook of State and Local Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 246-266

49 Francis Fukuyama, "Political Order and Political Decay" (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroud), 2014

50 Satendra Kumar, *op. cit.*, 2019

51 Antonio Costabile and Antonella Coco, *op. cit.*, p. 78

52 Carola Lipp, "Kinship Networks, Local Government, and Elections in a Town in Southwest Germany, 1800-1850", *Journal of Family History*, 30(4), 2005, p. 362

53 Guy Peters and Jon Pierre, "Politicization of the Civil Service. Concepts, Causes, Consequences", In: Peters, G. and Pierre, J. (eds.). *Politicization of the civil service in comparative perspective: The quest for control* (London: Routledge, 2004)

appointments in the public sector<sup>54</sup>. Ivanova claims that this is natural, as most of the jobs are provided by the municipality<sup>55</sup>. But, naturally it is only where the vertical attempt for modernization and democratization has not reached its zenith, i.e. where we do not have the social prerequisites and basis for the creation of free, independent and critical thinking individuals, for the development of civil society and institutionalized forms of genuine political participation. It is in such a context and environment that local democracy takes place. This predetermines that the majority of voters are primarily interested in their own well-being<sup>56</sup> and especially in small settlements where job opportunities are limited. This manner of self-sufficiency or settling one's own situation has become the norm throughout the Bulgarian transition. Many Bulgarians do not maintain social ties outside their own family, relatives or close circle of friends. They are not members of NGOs, political parties, voluntary associations, etc., or if they do, it is in exchange for some personal interest. Thus, here we find the pursue and implementation of the first two steps of the Maslow hierarchy<sup>57</sup>, forming human behaviour, related primarily to the satisfaction of physiological needs such as feeding, drinking and sleeping, and secondly to the satisfaction of safety, which includes work, health and property security. 'The countries that are late in the process of economic development and modernization, or the relatively poorer people of these countries give primacy not to the quality of life, self-expression, freedom, or a better environment, but, in accordance with the hierarchy of needs related to physiological and safety requirements, attach more importance to economic profit, working conditions, avoiding risk/uncertainty, and achieving material success.'<sup>58</sup> Therefore in this vote we cannot highlight the classical understanding of rational choice, guided by goal-oriented political behaviour, through which the rational citizen examines the policies and platforms of political parties to assess their value and on this basis to make informed choices.<sup>59</sup> In this context, there are no post-materialist values, no educated class, no civil society,<sup>60</sup> no NGOs for the sole reason

54 Petr Kopecký et al., "Party patronage in contemporary democracies: Results from an expert survey in 22 countries from five regions", *European Journal of Political Research* 55, 2016

55 Evgeniya Ivanova, *op. cit.*, p. 385

56 Zeynep Uslu et al. "The Factors Affecting Voter Behaviour in Local Elections Kocaeli Sample", *Turkish Studies*, 12(3), 2017

57 Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation", *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 1943

58 Zeynep Uslu et al., *op. cit.*, p. 5

59 Betty Dobratz et al. "Power, Politics, and Society: An Introduction to Political Sociology" (London: Routledge, 2016)

60 Kathleen Dowley, "Local Government Transparency in East Central Europe", *Local Government Studies*, 32(5), 2006

that the social development in the studied municipality at this stage has not reached the maturity to make them possible. In societies with huge poor masses and poorly educated voters, the easiest form of electoral mobilization is the provision of individual benefits such as public sector jobs, handouts or political services<sup>61</sup>. That is why physiological choice is in itself the rational choice for the clients. They are not interested in any promises for the distant future, in the development of any ideas or in the observance of certain political principles. They live here and now, and for them it is the choice that gives them some security, some stability, albeit to the detriment of democracy.

At the top of the network of complex dependencies is SDS mayor, a 50-year-old man with a secondary school education, an Eastern Orthodox man who owns a construction repair company. His political experience is six mandates as a municipal councillor from SDS. All appointments in the municipal administration must go through his sanction. His company is supported mainly by the implementation of small public procurements within the municipality, related to the repair of kindergartens, schools, public buildings owned by the municipality, sidewalks, parks and playgrounds. According to Art. 20, para. 4 of the Public Procurement Act, the contracting authority may award a public procurement directly for construction activities with an estimated value of up to BGN 50,000 without a tender procedure. Often, over the years, large construction repairs, exceeding the minimum, are deliberately cut into separate activities so that the SDS mayor's company can obtain them without a competitive element and without publicity. According to him, in a private conversation with the author of the article, what he has built for so many years in the municipality resembles the 'structure of the Sicilian mafia'. This is the third line of focus here, i.e. the network of complex patron-client interactions. As part of it, companies from BSP's long-time coalition partners also receive a share of public procurement.

The last fourth line that enters the 'local election machine' of SDS is the constant work with marginalized groups – Roma people, socially disadvantaged, and lonely pensioners. It is being carried out again under the leadership of the SDS municipal chairman in close liaison with key municipal officials, the mayor of the municipality, and the mayors of the settlements. These include facilitated access to social benefits, legalization of illegal property, and buildings of the Roma population, provision of transport for disabled and lonely pensioners to public institutions or hospitals, appointment of social assistants for those in need. What they receive in return is political support on Election Day.

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61 Francis Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 456

Warsaw believes that in local elections, parties are of secondary importance and many of the elections are technically non-partisan<sup>62</sup>. The study practically confirms the validity of this statement by showing that behind the SDS party there are no principles, ideas and values characteristic of the right-wing parties, as there is no social base for their development. Accordingly, the party serves mainly as a legal tool for participation in local elections, through which to realize personal, economic and career interests - taking mayor's post, achieving appointment or keeping the job at the administration, or the use of public resources without rules and without obstacles. The conclusion is in line with Hristov's more general statement that Bulgarian political parties, without exception, are power groups that do not meet the basic requirement of being political organizations, namely to represent a separate, known legitimate group interest having its own bearers.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

The start of Bulgarian democracy after the collapse of the USSR was implemented 'vertically',<sup>64</sup> i.e. democratic procedures and mechanisms have been introduced and adapted to the Bulgarian social reality. This vertical attempt at democratization and Europeanization, respectively, leads to various side effects and mistakes, and the analysis of the local government election process outlines some of them.

On the surface, the electoral process is carried out according to all democratic procedures, but underneath there are serious defects such as gaps in the Electoral Code, poorly prepared election commissions, 'election tourism', a high proportion of invalid votes, unintentional and deliberate errors in counting and reporting results. To these should be added the slender network of patron-clientelistic dependencies built around the local political leadership of the ruling party on the basis of parasitism on public financial resources, and the penetration of family and kinship relations in the depths of local politics and administration.

In a community with high levels of marginalized, poorly educated and elderly people, in which access to jobs is limited, physiological survival becomes an end in itself for many voters. It passes through the instrument of patronage that SDS party has been able to provide for two decades.

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62 Christopher Warsaw, *op. cit.*

63 Ivo Hristov, "Pred pepelishteto na nestanaloto balgarsko obshtestvo" (Sofia: Zahariy Stoyanov, 2017), p. 67

64 Antoaneta Dimitrova, *op. cit.*, p. 258

In opposition to the statement that ‘the disintegration of democracies today begins with the ballot box’<sup>65</sup>, the article shows that this process does not start with the ballot box, but long before it. Therefore, in the thirtieth year since the beginning of the transition, there is an imitation product of democracy<sup>66</sup>, with no prospects in the foreseeable future for its full-fledged infiltration into the social fabric.

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65 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “*Kak umirat demokratiite*” (Sofia: Siela, 2018), p. 11

66 Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, “*The Light That Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*” ( New York: Pegasus Books, 2019)

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