

THE NON-EUROPEAN NATURE OF THE BULGARIAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC MODEL

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Abstract

The article looks at the contemporary socio-economic model in Bulgaria arguing that it does not correspond to the broad European tradition of being sensitive to the presence of significant social imbalances in the society. The author insists that this is one of the primary factors for the controversial economic outcomes and the existence of deepening social problems in the country. The argumentation goes through evaluation of the formation process of the new socio-economic model in Bulgaria after 1989 and the assessment of the economic and social outcomes for the period until 2022. On this basis it is concluded that maintaining the current policy in the medium-term will inevitably undermine not only the economic prospects, but also the quality and stability of Bulgarian democracy.

Keywords: inequalities, poverty, Bulgaria, social policy, social justice, European tradition

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The study argues that the contemporary socio-economic model in Bulgaria is “not social enough”. It is not recommendable for a researcher in the field of social policy to use such a formulation, but nevertheless, in the context of Bulgarian reality it may be acceptable. Despite relative positive outcomes the development of the country in the last decades is also marked by continuous accumulation of disbalances. They give reasons for concerns not only regarding our middle and long-term prospects but also threaten to undermine and make meaningless all that we have achieved as a society until now. It is worth from this perspective us to ask and search for the reasons of this situation. This leads me to my principled conviction. It refers to the overall philosophy and logic which was built (deliberately or not) into the bases of the new Bulgarian socio-economic model. Here, there is a need of a very important clarification. I have no intention to defend the past or to display any kind of nostalgia to it! Neither do I intend to become a part of the classic in the Bulgarian politicizing polemics – the comparison between “socialist past” and “democratic present”¹. To me, and I truly believe, for most of the Bulgarian citizens the choice we have made about 30 years ago could not be a subject of any discussions or contestations. However, this does not mean that we must accept without any criticism and with endless patience all the shortcomings and problems in our contemporary development. On the contrary: I am convinced that such kind of conduct is in a deep contradiction with the values we have chosen.

It could be argued that what I am recognizing as one of the leading problems of the new socio-economic model in Bulgaria is only a detail, a footnote under the line of our inevitable way to the progress. But in my opinion the choice we have made 30 years ago and the chances for change we have missed in the time after do already have their strong footprint in our present. The contemporary shortcomings and problems in our society are not (at least not predominantly) far-reaching effects from our socialist past – they are results and function of the present socio-economic model of development in Bulgaria. This model is lacking value-based and political sensibility toward existence of excessive social imbalances or social injustice, sensibility which is typically inherent for the broad European tradition.²

¹ In 1989 I was 14 years old. I do not remember whether “the cheese was cheaper” than today or whether the life was harder because “there was nothing to buy for your money”, or because “you were not allowed to express freely your opinion”. First and foremost, to me, the period before 1989 is a romantic one – just because with the years it seems to me that my childhood was one of the happiest periods in my life. This however is not connected to the reality in the past or with any attempt to give an evaluation of that time or to compare it with the present one. It is just and simple my personal subjectivity.

² We should look at the evolution of the European states and societies in the last 100 years. Those are the same states which are our allies in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). If we do so, we will be able to realize the following: Each of the European societies, regardless of

In the following section I will try to clarify the arguments for my opinion by starting with the context and the factors which influenced the formation of the contemporary model of development in Bulgaria.

One of the leading factors was the specific timing and context of the transition to democracy and market economy. We must bear in mind that the end of the 80s of the 20th century was not only the period when the socialist block collapsed. At the same time appeared a significant change into the development of the consolidated market democracies. After a short period of crisis³ the Keynesian model of market economy was pushed out by the neoliberal doctrine which was recognized as the new “recipe” for recovery of the lost economic growth. The implementation of the neoliberal concept has had different impact over the consolidated market democracies and the Central and Eastern Europe countries (CEEC) which started at that time their transition from socialism. Nevertheless, the common denominator of the new doctrine was the preference of the free from state interventions and control market forces and processes on national and global level which were expected to generate stable economic growth. Ideologically the intervention into the functioning of the free market, including interventions striving to ensure more balanced (than the market-produced one) distribution of wealth and chances started to be seen as a distortion of the just and natural market-produced inequalities and as a moral corruption which are coming from the failed ideology and practice of the real Soviet socialism. The growing influence of the neoliberal paradigm in the following decades has led to a partly discreditation of the idea for social balanced distribution of wealth. Parallel to this “ideological” discreditation the globalization processes and the formation of post-national environment pose additional challenges for the practical implementation and maintenance of such kind of wealth distribution. The consolidated market democracies in Europe have kept their principal commitment with the idea of balanced economic and social development. But in doing this they can step on a shrinking social support and have at their disposal much more limited political instruments for mitigating the social inequalities.

which political ideology dominated its development (socialism, conservatism, liberalism or Christian-democracy) have cultivated this value-based and political sensibility towards extreme social imbalances. Each of the European societies have formulated its own answer and policy for correction and mitigation of those imbalances and for reaching of some form of social justice. In practice this is the appearance and development of the social policy or the subordination of the public policy to some common social goals and responsibilities.

³ Low levels of economic growth, growing unemployment and public budgetary deficits etc.

Concerning the CEEC this influence was transferred through the leading international organizations and institutions like International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Bank (WB), The Organization for Economic cooperation and development (OECD) and others. Exactly those organizations have bound their work with the mission to implement worldwide the neoliberal concept. By delivering broad spectrum of support for the CEEC they strongly influenced the ideational basis of democratization process and of the reforms in all the sectors of their public policy (Deacon, 1992; 2000). The concrete dimension of this process for Bulgaria was the entrance into the policy matrix of IMF and WB which supported financially and by expert technical advice all the countries in transition according to the principle “help in exchange of reforms”. The unique situation of the transition in the CEEC gave the chance for much broader and more complete implementation of all the core elements form the neoliberal concept. In this way the first stage of the transition in Bulgaria was dominated by a “values and policies transfer process” strongly influenced by the existing at that time variant of the neoliberal concept. The main elements of this concept transformed into practical policies were the following one: strict discipline of the public finances; maximum restrain of the state interventions into the market; limitation of public responsibilities toward the social risks to the maintenance of the so called “minimal social security net”. In addition, considering the specific processes in the CEEC there was a strong emphasize on foreign direct investments (FDI) which were supposed to be attracted on the ground of the existing relative competition advantages possessed by the CEEC, like cheap and qualified labour. It was expected that this “recipe” will in a middle-term lead to a stable economic growth, corresponding increase of national wealth and automatic growth of living conditions for a major part of the citizens. In my opinion exactly this specific context and path of the transition process has played a decisive role. In this line of thinking it is possible to be argued that to a certain degree the Bulgarian choice of a new socio – economic model was “persuaded” or even “imposed” one.

There were expectations that the preparation of the country for membership into the European Union (EU) will lead to some upgrade of this minimal social model. But the impact of the EU didn't impose a transformational influence concerning the overall philosophy and ideological basis that were already built into the new Bulgarian model. By no means the implementation of the EU, *acquis communautaire* and the common EU-policies has broadened the list with the goals supposed to be in the focus of the countries public policy. But the question about how and to what extend should the public policy be engaged with

these goals was left open. There is nothing surprising in this, just because this important and principled decisions are left predominantly in the competencies of the member-states and their citizens will.

It is more than logical us to ask the general question about outcomes in Bulgarian economic and social development and try to compare them with the presupposed expectations. By doing this, the study does not aim to give a comprehensive picture of the Bulgarian development in all the possible dimensions. The focus here is on the question to what extent the above-described development philosophy has led to the desired results regarding the growth of the national wealth and its distribution to all Bulgarian citizens. The general measurement-indicators in this respect are more than firm and above all indicative according to the steady nature of some development-trends.

The economic outcomes of Bulgaria after 1989 could be described as relative positive. After the collapse in the period 1990 – 97, starting in year 2000, the country is in a phase of stable economic recovery. Since 2000 the average annual growth of Bulgaria's GDP is higher than the European one. This led to national wealth growth, as in 2004 Bulgaria reached its GDP level from 1989. In comparison to year 2000 when the GDP per capita of Bulgaria was 29% form the medium of the EU, in 2019 this indicator reached about 53% and at the end of 2021 – 55% (Eurostat, 2022a). However, in a comparative plan the economic development of Bulgaria should be evaluated as weak to medium. For the period 2000 – 2021 Bulgaria has managed to “make up” for about 26% form the medium level of EU. In contrast the same indicator for other CEEC like Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia is between 36 and 46 % (Eurostat, 2022a; own callualctions). No surprise that despite relative positive results in 2021 Bulgaria is the less economic developed member-state of the EU and the country with the lowest standards of living in the union. Nevertheless, there is a slow process of wealth growth in Bulgaria - conclusion that leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

The ambiguous economic development is just one possible dimension of evaluation. A second one is to answer the question whether the Bulgarian citizens do accumulate advantages form the wealth increase. Here the data are even more straight and alarming. Bulgaria is the member-state with the highest level of income inequalities and overall distribution of wealth in the EU. This negative trend is stable and does not correlate and change significant within periods of higher economic growth. For the whole period after 1989 the Bulgarian Gini coefficient is increasing steadily from 21.00 (Hristov, 2009, p. 24) to

39.6 in 2018 and 40.00 in 2020 (Eurostat, 2022b). Same, even more significant is the increase in the income inequalities between the 20% of the richest citizens and the other 80% of the population. At the beginning of the transition this ratio was 3.7 in 2017 it reached its absolute maximum of 8.23 and moves between 8.10 in 2019 and 7.46 in 2021 (Eurostat, 2022c). In view of this data there is no surprise that Bulgaria is the EU – member state with the highest share of its population living at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In the last years this share is dropping slowly: in 2015 almost the halve of the Bulgarians (43%) were living in risk of poverty and in 2021 the share dropped to about 31% (Eurostat, 2022d). Nevertheless, data show that the country is far from the medium levels for the EU (21% for 2021). Even more dramatical is the living situation of a specific groups: the people over 65 years old, 37% of which lived at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021 and people in the age range of 15 to 24 years old with 35.6% in 2020 (Eurostat, 2022e; Eurostat, 2022f).

There is more to be said about the social situation in Bulgaria, but this is not the main goal of the study. These data were given only with the aim to support the main thesis in the text. However, it is worth to scrutinize one more time the view that Bulgarian socio-economic model does lack of a strong connection to the values and goals of the broad European tradition. It is typical for this tradition to bear the understanding that the economic development should be committed with a broad and balanced distribution of wealth or politically operationalized concept for social justice. The broad European tradition in the field of social justice does not incorporate the view that everyone should be “equal” (in everything) or that everyone should get an “equal part of the wealth”. In the European tradition I am referring to, there are two main elements. The first one is a society and model of development which do all the possible to eradicate or mitigate the poverty that threatens the pure physical survival of the individuum. The second goal is the same model to be “inclusive” one. It means: to create such kind of conditions that a maximum share of citizens can gain equal access to the needed resources and chances allowing them to develop their potential and became wholesome participants into the societal life. The ideational and value bases of this concept could be addresses to the works of John Rawls and Amartya Sen (Rawls, 1999; Sen, 2009).

Without any further comments about the philosophic and political dimensions of these concepts for social justice I must repeat my conviction that the present Bulgarian social and economic model does not incorporate and fulfil neither of these two goals. The above-

described trends of development in Bulgaria could be taken as first step evidence: that such kind of goals are not present into the main priorities of the country's governance. In this context it is logical to think about one problem which is very hard to be analysed. It seems that the official Bulgarian public policy and long-term development strategy (it is questionable if such a strategy does exist) have not been changed and enriched (in value and ideational senesce) since the beginning of transition. It is somehow paradoxical that the neoliberal "recipe," itself has undergo some very important changes. Since the beginning of the 21st century the outcomes of this recipe-implementation started to be evaluate as controversial one. The main reason was that in a middle-term the expectation for "automatic" decrease of poverty and social inequalities was not confirmed. In fact, by many of the "patients" the levels of this indicators rose to a such extent that they started to undermine the economic growth and social stability (Cingano, 2014, pp. 14-19). Especially after the financial collapse in 2008 the question about the negative impact of poverty and social inequalities over the economic development started to gain importance into the main strategies and documents of the IMF, WB and OECD. It is even more indicative that exactly the global poverty and inequalities have been pointed out as one of the leading problems by the United Nations Organization (UNO, 2020). By mentioning this I am not making an insinuation that there is already a solution of this problem on a global or European policy-level. On the contrary – the increase of poverty and inequalities is still going on in almost all world regions. Therefore, after more than two decades of neglecting this problem returned to a leading position in the global political agenda.

The paramount question here is why we continue to neglect this problem – especially when its impact over Bulgarian development is of such a magnitude. The Bulgarian policy looks like "frozen" in the ideational frames and unfinished reforms from the period about year 2000. On one principal level it is still following the logic that the economic growth, which is inevitable to come, will as well as inevitable bring a decline of the significant inequalities. This believe was already abandoned not only by IMF and WB but also by all the solid researchers in the field in favour of public policies addressing the inequalities. Besides, even if we can reach a catch-up economic effect this will not mean we have overcome the existence and structure of the inequalities in the country. On the contrary: In this scenario the inequalities are going to increase because the Bulgarian public policy does not incorporate mechanisms of inclusive economic growth and broader distribution or redistribution of wealth. It is obvious that we are still under the domination of the twisted believe that such

kind of policies are in deep contradiction with the prerequisites for economic growth and not a systematic and important factor favouring balanced social and economic development. It is even more concerning that there is no sign of political will for breaking this status quo. It is enough to point out the ongoing denial of reforms which could help the Bulgarian social policy start fulfil at least its minimal goals. In fact, exactly the situation of Bulgarian social model is my second argument. Its functioning is inefficient, incoherent and faulty because of inherited problems and unfinished reforms. Putted as short as possible: the present system of social policy in the country is not able to cope even with minimal goals like guarantee of a basic social security and preservation of poverty.

Among the leading problems is the crisis in the health sector. I will try just to summarize: Low level of funding - about 8,1% of GDP, where 4.4% are public finances, compared with 9.8% GDP public funding medium for EU; High level of direct payments which in 2017 reached 46.6% of all health costs, compared to 15,8% in EU (OECD, 2019, pp. 10-11); Unfinished reforms in the hospital healthcare where there is a growing financial deficit, worsening quality of the healthcare services and increasing lack of qualified personnel (Minkov, 2022, p. 119); Last but not least is to be mentioned the lack of access to healthcare – at the end of 2019 there were between 520 and 670 thousand Bulgarian citizens without healthcare-insurance rights (Ananiev, 2020).

The second accent which summarizes a whole complex of chronic and systematic problems is connected to the level of incomes in the country – from labour and incomes coming as social transfers. At the end of 2020 more than 690 thousand Bulgarian retirees “enjoyed” the monthly rent of 250 while the official poverty line in 2020 was 369 leva (Natzionalen Osiguritelni Institut 2020, p. 133). The example with the system for social help which is supposed to be the main instrument for poverty prevention is even more telling. In fact, the whole system does not correspond to its main role of primary social security net against poverty. The best illustration here is the lack of any systematic and logical link between the levels of guaranteed social help-transfers and the official poverty line or the gross minimum wage (GMW) in the country. According to the social regulations the maximal amount of the guaranteed social help in 2021 was 123.75 BGN (about 63 EUR) but the official poverty line was 369 BGN (about 190 EUR). Even if we choose not to discuss how and according to what methodology the official poverty line is set, the reality speaks for itself. The guarantee social help transfer is supposed to cover the basic needs which means to be at

least of equal amount with the poverty line. In fact, the guaranteed social help in the country is set on administrative basis and without any idea to be an effective fence against poverty. And this is a long-lasting policy because in 2007 the relative share of the so called guaranteed minimal income (GMI) was about 36% from the poverty line and dropped to about 20% in 2021. Furthermore, the relative share of GMI from the GMW in 2007 was about 30%, but in 2021 dropped to 11.5% (Natzionalna mreza za detzsa, 2021). In this context it must be noted that a major part of the existing social transfers (i.e. invalidity pensions, social pensions) are also not set in any functional dependence with the poverty line, GMW or with the gross average wage (GAW).

The situation concerning the levels of employment benefits is similar. For almost the whole period after 1989 Bulgarian governments have abandoned the idea and the practical implementation of a structured policy in this field. The national GMW introduced at the beginning of the transition was capped on an irrelevant to the economic and price dynamic level until year 2014 (340 BGN in 2014). For the period 1990 – 2014 its relative share from the GAW moved between the maximum of 52.1% in 1991, to its minimum of 26.5% in 1997 – 98 (Ivanov, 2015). The measures for step-by-step increase of the GMW undertaken after 2015 have had a positive effect over the labour incomes. However, the change of GMW was set again on an administrative basis without any clear methodology which connects its level with the poverty line or other criteria, like productivity of labour or the amount of GAW. As a result, according to the Bulgarian trade unions, in 2021 the labour incomes in the country are clearly lagging to the dynamic of the consumer-prices. A study from 2021 by the Confederation of independent trade unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) shows that the consumer-prices in Bulgaria are as twice as lower than the medium for the EU, but the labour incomes of the Bulgarians are as four as lower than the medium level in EU (KNSB, 2021). As a result, in the moment the inequalities in the country have reached such a level that are already starting to endanger and undermine in manifold ways all achieved in the last decades.

The presented data are more than firm. The Bulgarian social model is not able to fulfil even the goal to eliminate and mitigate the poverty. Although important, this problem presents only one side of the coin. Just as an example we can ask the following rhetorical question: Is the guarantee of mere physical survival of the individuum enough to ensure its wholesome inclusion into the social life? I do not believe that, for example the contemporary labour market, the modern society and the logic of the progress do need only people which

have enough food and water and are save from death. The elimination of poverty is a basic obligation but does not help enough the balanced development of the society. We must strive to mitigate and balance the inequalities. Just because the income inequalities tend to transform into inequalities of the chances. On their turn the inequalities of chances, especially when there are no policy mechanisms for their reasonable correction inevitably transform again to income inequalities. If these inequalities are significant and even grow with time they result into different kinds and levels of social exclusion. Even if this exclusion does not present the so-called absolute poverty (danger for the physical survival), it has other important and harmful consequences not only for the economy. The contemporary inequalities are manifold and do affect negatively different dimension of the individual and social life (standard of living, chances for realization i.e.). Exactly the refusal to recognize this accumulating with the time negative effects of the significant inequalities and the lack of political measures for addressing them do not correspond with our “European choice”.

All pointed out above brings me back to my constatation that Bulgaria must reassess its present socio-economic model in favour of including into public policy more comprehensive social goals. I will only sketch the most paramount challenges before us in case we stay on the same development path.

In respect of economy, the significant inequalities and their deepening will continue to undermine growth chances – just because more and more Bulgarian citizens will lack access to needed resources and chances for wholesome participation into the social life. As a result, one growing part of the counties so-called social capital, which by the way is already shrinking, will be placed in a losing position to meet the steady growing requirements for labour market participation and inclusion. And this effect will not change by itself. On the contrary. Without proper policy measures the children (at least a major part of them) of those living in poverty and social exclusion will probably follow the same life-path close to social marginalization. I will leave the experts to answer the question if there is a chance for stable economic growth under such conditions.

The second and often neglected challenge concerns the stability, legitimacy and quality of democracy in the country. Probably, many would be surprised by such a correlation, but it is a well-known dimension of democracy studies. If we realize the relative “young age” of Bulgarian democracy, the question how could the continuing of the resent development trends influence it, is more than relevant. In this respect it will be reasonable

us to recall that the survival of any political system, even of democratic one, steps on its acceptance as legitim. And legitimacy is available when at least two preconditions are fulfilled – broad support and recognition of the leading values imposed by the political regime, and satisfactory (for the citizens) outcomes from the regime government. In this respect the theory and the study of democracy give enough reasons to think about the “Bulgarian case”. For instance, it was Lipset who first formulated the now-classical relation between socio-economic development, poverty and democracy. In his own words: “The more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chance that it will sustain democracy” (Lipset, 1981, p. 31). Besides pointing out the crucial role of prosperity, Lipset maintains that only in affluent societies, where relatively few people live in real poverty, could there be a situation where the majority of the population can participate intelligently in politics, having developed the mechanisms to resist the appeals of irresponsible demagogues (Lipset, 1981, p. 31). In this case, Lipset views high levels of prosperity and low levels of poverty not as essential elements of democracy, but as important prerequisites for its stability and sustainability in the face of radical political ideas and/or destabilizing class conflicts. Further, we must not forget that the functioning of democracy presupposes not only the mere legal establishment of civil and political rights but also real chances for the citizens to make use of them in an active and informed way. Inequalities which exclude significant groups of citizens from the social life, limit and even exclude in manifold ways these citizens from the chance to make use of their civil and political rights – and this undermines the correct functioning of democracy and/or its complete establishment (Myer, 2011, p. 13; Rueschemeyer, 2004, pp. 76-90). I am convinced we need to start a discussion about these problems and challenges in our society. It would be wise to remember Steven Friedman’s warning: ‘For the present, citizens of new democracies do seem to have concluded that freedom is preferable to bondage, even if it widens the gulf between those who have and those who do not. But it is at least possible that this has much to do with recent memories of authoritarianism and that, if current trends in the distribution of resources, opportunities and capabilities continue, or even if they are not significantly reversed, the next generation may find continued or growing inequality less tolerable than an authoritarianism that they have ever experienced.’ (Friedman, 2002, pp.15-16).

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