

EVALUATION OF POLITICAL REGIMES, PERSONAL PREDISPOSITIONS, AND POLITICAL INFORMATION PROCESSING (THE CASE OF BULGARIA)

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ABSTRACT

The paper is focused on the micro level processes of democratisation, namely the perception of political information and the consequent perception and evaluation of the political regimes of the past and the present. Illustrated by the case of Bulgaria, it reveals mechanisms that can be observed in other transition countries as well. The study examines the influence of party affiliation and political socialisation on how people process political information and evaluate political regimes, both present and past. The data, collected by quasi-experimental focus groups and analysed by employing quantitative content analysis, provides evidence that people with different political affiliations and with different political socialisation vary not only in their evaluation of the political regimes, but also in the way they reach their evaluations. This is mostly due to their attachment to one of the regimes and the cognitive closure effect. As a whole, the new liberal democratic regime is embraced. However, there are certain aspects of the regime perception and evaluation that raise concerns about the sustainability of this support.

KEY WORDS

democratisation – political information perception – regime evaluation – post-communism – socialisation – party affiliation – Bulgaria – Central and Eastern Europe

1. Political information and regime support in a democratic society

Audiences' perception and making sense of political information happens within the local cultural and political context. This context is important as a setting in which media and other information sources operate; and arguably even more important in influencing the way in which the audience or the public is politically socialised and builds its cognitive skills and schemes (Zaller 1987; Petty et al. 2009). Thus the cultural and political context influences the audiences' construction and operationalisation of political cognitions that they subsequently use to perceive and process political information. Therefore, the formation of political knowledge depends on the societal space and on the information exchanged there (Habermas 1989). In this paper, I address the impact of two different political contexts – the totalitarian communist regime and the democratic consolidation that followed – within the same cultural context of Bulgaria.

The access to political information as well as its actual reception and understanding are crucial for the functioning of a democratic society in principle, even if we consider only

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the minimal type of democracy, based only on free elections (Barber 1988; Mouffe 2009; O'Neill 2012). The normative democratic theories demand well-informed, engaged and proactive citizens who can and would make their informed political choices. Therefore, there are at least two pillars of the normatively prescribed citizen – the political knowledge/sophistication (Converse 1964; Mutz and Martin 2001; Sapiro 2004; Sigel and Hoskin 1977), which constitutes a well-informed citizen, and regime support/evaluation (Sigel and Hoskin 1977), which determines the constructive active engagement with the political regime as well as its internalisation as a norm. The success and sustainability of a democratic system thus depends on the rationality-activist model (Almond and Verba 1989; Putnam et al. 1993). These normatively demanded high levels of political knowledge, skills, value internalisation, and support need to be valid for and shared by a critical mass in the society – by the majority of citizens – in order to secure the legitimacy and sustainability of the political regime. Therefore, the effective and legitimate functioning of democracy demands not only an acceptance, but also active support for and engagement with the political regime, especially if we consider definitions of democracy that reach beyond the existence of voting procedures. The term regime here refers to a political system, order and a set of rules that construct the political context in which people behave. In the case of Bulgaria, the regime in the period before 1989 was a variation of the Soviet type of communism, and the period after 1989 is characterised by consolidation towards EU norms of liberal democracy.

These two pillars – the knowledge and the support – are the central interest of this study, in particular in the context of democratic consolidation with its micro level phenomena such as political attitudes, perception and processing of political information and cognitive schemes. The current support for the new regime in many of the post-communist countries cannot be taken for granted. The transition rarely happened in a context of general political consensus and the case of the transition in Bulgaria demonstrates exactly such a situation, with a lack of political consensus and even clarity about the basic principles of the new political system. There are several types of reasoning behind regime support in post-communist states, namely comparison with the old regime (used mostly during the initial transition stages), economic performance of the new regime (used in later stages), and political performance (perceived overall as more relevant) (Mishler and Rose 1997). All these types of reasoning can be seen in the Bulgarian case.

This article explores the complex nature of the relation and influence of personal predispositions, namely political socialisation and party affiliation, on the citizens' evaluation and support of the regime, in particular on their processing and evaluation of political information. Setting the article in the context of the micro-political behaviour research, it demonstrates the relation between the personal predispositions and regime support. It focuses in particular on the personal predispositions as predetermined or influenced by the individuals' political socialisation under the communist past.

2. Political regimes as objects of evaluation and contexts of socialisation

In transition societies, the political regime is built on two ideological and value systems. In the post-communist countries, in this instance, it includes elements of both the current democratic political regime as well as the previous totalitarian one. These two regimes

function as mutual frames of comparison in relation to citizens' perception and evaluation of either of them, particularly in terms of their evaluation of the regimes' principles, effectiveness in delivering results for the society as a whole, or for them personally. Importantly, both regimes, current or past, have a role as the context of political socialisation.

The changing social context of transition has a different political socialisation impact on the different generations. The older generation has socialisation impact from both regimes at different stages of their lives, and they are the active agent in building and shaping the new political regime as well. The younger generation has been socialised only under the new regime. But how exactly do the regimes influence both generations? Research on socialisation proves that the early stages of political and general socialisation constitute "formative years", i.e. the crucial period in which the information processing skills and schemes related to political involvement and decision making are constructed (Sapiro 2004; Dalton and Wattenberg 1993). Thus it is the regime under which one is socialised that has a profound effect on the person's value system and social reference frame; the subsequent personal development and social impact do have an impact in their own right, but it is only secondary compared to the formative years. Therefore, people socialised under the totalitarian regime have internalised its values and the new democratic regime has only a secondary socialising impact on them.

The younger generation has been politically socialised under the (transitional or consolidating) democratic regime. Therefore, this generation does not have any direct experience with the totalitarian regime. The knowledge about the previous regime is indirect and mostly informed through collective memory shared within the society. The intensity and the bias of this memory sharing and the perception of it are inevitably dependent on the ideological bias of the person and her/his immediate surrounding. Thus, the image of the previous regime is present in the political thinking of the younger generation, but it does not have a formative influence on their political socialisation. The literature on the socialising effects of the major political events and changes is rather limited (Valentino and Sears 1998), including the one on the effect of post-communist transition. It is indeed difficult to carry out systematic research on the impact of often hardly predictable events. The current study addresses the issue of the relative socialisation impact of both regimes from the particular perspective of information processing skills and schemes, especially in relevance to the regime evaluation.

In the case of post-communist countries, the social context changed dramatically during the late 1980s and most of all during the early 1990s. Free space for exchange of information was rapidly constructed as part of, and also as a facilitating element of democratisation (Mickiewicz 1999). The very sudden social and political change of 1989 created unique societies, in which the generation gap overlaps with a gap between political systems. In these societies, political knowledge and political choice are influenced both by memories of heavily censored and propagandist information of the past and by the novelty of present free exchange of information. This is also the description of the political scene in Bulgaria where the genesis of free competition of political ideas in the 1990s was based on the clash between the ideologies of the old regime (left wing) and the anti-communist opposition (right wing), and their supporters. For long time, the heterogeneity of the right wing was heavily overshadowed by its ideological focus on the rejection of the old regime and its principles. The opposition between these two camps dominated

both the ideological discussions and the party configuration of Bulgarian political life in the 1990s. The major left-wing party (Bulgarian Socialist Party – the former Communist Party) has managed to keep a near monopoly of the left-wing ideology as well as its stable and significant presence in political life. Thus, all the other parties aspired to distinguish themselves from this univocal left that was associated with the past regime and ideology, and identified themselves by proclaiming somewhat differing versions of right-wing ideology. This predominant mechanism of party identification preserved the left-right ideological opposition and political talk despite the very fragmented and volatile party system. During the 2000s, the diversity of voices within the right wing and in particular the emergence of the populist and extreme-right parties, led to fragmentation and diversification of the right wing and hence to the end of the overwhelmingly two-party system.

The case of post-communist Bulgaria provides the required social and political structure that is suitable for the research objectives of this study. Unlike the Visegrad countries, in Bulgaria, the period before 1989 was characterised by almost a complete lack of access to non-communist media – no existing free or private media in the country and strong oppressive policing, making Samizdat¹ literature almost impossible to spread and jamming radio signals coming from abroad². Despite the current partial problems related to freedom of speech, Bulgaria has managed to become a consolidated democracy with intense political competition. This dramatic difference between the political contexts of the periods before and after 1989 creates very clear boundaries for generations with distinctly different political socialisations.

3. Research questions and method

This study is focused on the character of regime evaluation and subsequent regime support expressed by people with different political leanings and experience. In order to explore in detail the patterns of regime perception and evaluation by groups with different political socialisation and party affiliation, I conducted a series of quasi-experimental focus groups. Focus groups are arguably the most appropriate method to observe information processing as it evolves, and therefore, they are the method employed in the present research. The quasi-experimental aspect of the focus group discussions – providing participants with a “press review³” text (stimulus) to read and discuss – creates a situation of political information perception and the generated discussion reveals the cognitive schemes and frames used, as well as the manifestation of political attitudes. Being unaware of the aim to observe their cognitive schemes, participants behave rather genuinely and feel unrestricted, relaxed and not self-conscious about the issues under observation. The provided “press review” text is researcher generated, but perceived by all participants as a genuine press clipping without any doubts⁴. In order to ensure lively discussion and rich-

1 Underground self-made literature distributed by hand by and to dissidents.

2 Radio stations transmitting in Bulgarian such as Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle and Voice of America were almost impossible to hear.

3 A popular type of text used by TV or radio stations to briefly summarise and present the content of the newspapers of the day.

4 The credibility of the stimulus can be seen in participants' comments such as the following: “Well, this text could be coming from many newspapers, because many newspapers look like ‘Duma’ [the newspaper of the Socialist party]” (right-wing supporter), or, “I personally see these texts as clichés, which, just as you [the moderator] said, are taken from the media. And I think that Bulgarian media are overusing and abusing them” (left-wing supporter).

ness of the research data, the provided text was explicitly biased, opposing the views of the participants. The text had two perfectly mirroring versions with a left- or right-wing bias to be used in the respective opposing groups. Texts were identical in length, following the same content elements and flow and demonstrating equal bias with the opposing political leaning, which secured the comparability between the focus groups. The stimulus text includes two topics in order to avoid topical bias and to encompass the major relevant issues in the political debate, namely “nationalism” / national interests and “social vs. market” / welfare state vs. market economy. These topics do not correspond to a clear-cut division of opinion in society or even party attachment. Nationalism is not part of the mainstream parties, but geopolitical orientation (East/left vs. West/right) and internal relations with the Turkish minority party are politically sensitive issues, but the main parties avoid taking clear and open stands on them. On the second topic, the left-wing party provides unclear messages mixing authentic leftist ideas with attempts to distance itself from the clearly leftist previous regime. The right-wing parties provide a different set of unclear messages mixing emerging and fuzzy rightist ideas with attempts not to disappoint and discourage the electorate with unpopular and painful policies. Therefore, people are not expected to enter the discussion with ready-to-use party slogans on either of the topics, despite the politicised nature of the topics. This topical distribution also allows the research data to be analysed on the level of regime evaluation rather than positions on particular topics.

3.1. Participants

The relatively rare and novel method of quasi-experimental focus groups also provides the opportunity to combine the benefits of direct observation of relatively natural communication processes with the possibility to control the context in which they occur. People socialised under the old and new regime, and people affiliated with left-wing and right-wing parties are included in separate groups. Thus, each focus group constitutes a particular combination of political socialisation and party affiliation, i.e. presented socio-political groups with very distinct political experiences and approaches to politics who cohabit in the same social, political, cultural and economic space, namely Bulgaria.

The sample of participants analysed here comprises of four focus groups. Random sampling was used, screening the recruited participants according to two main selection criteria. All 4 focus groups, of 8 to ten participants, were conducted in Sofia and have equal distribution of men and women within each group. Each focus group represents a particular combination of the relevant personal predispositions, namely type of initial political socialisation and party affiliation.

Figure 1. Sampling criteria of focus groups

	Long-term right-wing parties' supporters	Long-term former Communist Party supporters
Political socialisation after 1989	POST R	POST L
Political socialisation before 1989	PRE R	PRE L

The sampling criteria have been operationalized as follows

- Party affiliation as self-declaration of long-term left- or right-wing party supporters (not necessarily party members). The respective labels for signifying these groups throughout the paper are L (left-wing) and R (right-wing). The respective political parties that formed and maintained a bi-polar (left-right) political system in Bulgaria (especially vivid in the 1990s) are the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which is the former Communist Party, and the several fractions of the split Union of Democratic Forces – the only big anti-communist party/coalition of the 1990s. Therefore, the understanding of left and right in Bulgaria does not overlap fully with the widespread definition of left or liberal – supporting change and progress; right or conservative – preserving tradition (Conover and Feldman 1981). The general definition that is used as more appropriate to this research is that left relates to community values and right relates to individualism (Bobbio 1996). In Bulgaria, the right wing emerges as an agent of political, economic and social change and therefore, it is associated with liberal stands on both economic and social dimensions. The left wing, bearing the totalitarian heritage can hardly be associated with liberal values on any dimension, although it has slowly started to shift towards liberal social values in recent years.
- Period and therefore type of formative political socialisation. Respondents socialised during post-communism and thus being between 1 and 9 years old in 1989 are identified further in the text as POST; and those socialised before the collapse of the system and therefore being at least 25 years old in 1989, are identified as PRE.

The first age group or POST cohort consists of people who had not had experience of political socialisation during the old regime and could be considered politically mature at the time of conducting the research (of voting age). The second group or PRE cohort includes people who reached adulthood by 1989 and hence can be expected to have established clear political views before the collapse of the regime. The research takes into account political affiliations of respondents in order to explore the separate as well as joint impact of party affiliation and political socialisation on political cognition, sophistication and reasoning, and regime perception and evaluation.

Each group lasted between 1,5–2 hours, but their intensity varied (see Figure 2 below). For the purposes of reliable comparisons, the data is weighted depending on the length of the discussion in each focus group, making the weight of each group's utterances equal.

Figure 2. Number of participants, statements and utterances

Focus group	No. of participants	No. of statements	No. of utterances
POST L	10	245	391
POST R	9	746	1056
PRE L	8	226	414
PRE R	8	538	753

3.2 Hypotheses

According to the first hypothesis, the party affiliation as an independent variable is expected to define different types of evaluation of the previous and current political regimes as the dependent variables – participants with a left-wing affiliation being somewhat close to the previous regime and right wing being very supportive of the current regime. Although they have their attachment rooted in the past, the left-wing participants are expected to experience a high level of external pressure to abide by the new system, which is generally presented as more or less a “right-wing order”, and to distance themselves from the left-wing ideas, often presented as a “proven failed” ideology related to the collapsed communist regime. This pressure is expected to diminish the attachment to the previous regime, in particular amongst the left-wing POST generation, because it has never experienced a supportive political context, but only opposing generalised social pressure. Due to that, the older generation left-wing supporters are expected to show some (if weak) support for the new regime, and the younger generation is expected to demonstrate moderate support for the new regime.

The second hypothesis examines the period of political socialisation as a single independent variable and outlines it as another factor leading to differentiated regime support. The evaluations of the regimes are expected to differ – the PRE generation builds their evaluations of both regimes on real experience and the POST generation evaluates without being able to make a direct comparison between the two regimes. The younger generations are expected to support the current democratic system more strongly than the older generation and to have a less sophisticated/multifaceted way of evaluating the political regimes (or more coherent attitudes), due to their socialisation exclusively in the context of this political system.

The third hypothesis is that political socialisation as an independent variable will have a considerable combined effect on the political information processing, political sophistication, and consequently on the regime perception and evaluation. The older generation is expected to demonstrate techniques of processing and decoding political information that are not fully adapted to the complex and often confusing current flow of information. They are expected to simplify the perceived information and apply intensively the mechanisms of selective exposure. This expectation is based on the early age socialisation with heavily censored and one-sided information flow, which is the opposite of the intensive, diverse, contradictory and confrontational political information flow, typical of the current times.

3.3. Data analysis

The data is analysed using quantitative content analysis in order to allow for concise comparisons and reliable conclusions. Each meaningful utterance is coded according to the research variables. The coding scheme developed for this study includes a set of variables that measure cognitive and social mechanisms and processes, rather than the topical content of communication, unlike the more common content analysis. The analysis focuses on the patterns, mechanisms and complexity of information perception, processing and argumentation. The perception and evaluation of democracy is analysed in comparison to the perception and evaluation of the previous regime. Making a distinction between the variables Evaluation of the political regime in principle, referring to expressions of approval and/or support for the political system in question, and Evaluation of the political

regime as performance, referring to the expression of approval and/or support for the performance and achievements of the political system in question, allows for better evaluation of the participants' political values in their relation with, and in contrast to the regime's performance and their immediate living conditions. Other variables included Vocabulary, Level of political knowledge, Complexity of argumentation, Justification, Appreciation of trade-offs and Evaluation (see Figure 3). All variables are coded on a 5-point scale, where 1 being the most positive, appreciative or highest intensity of the variable and 5 being the most negative, the lowest intensity of or the absence of the variable.

For the purposes of data synthesis and simplification, especially when groups are compared, some of the variables are clustered in a single (or combined) variable. These are variables that share conceptual closeness and can be clustered in a single concept.

Figure 3. Explored variables

Combined variable	Included variables
Evaluation of political regime and its performance PRE/POST	Evaluation of the regime in principle (as ideology) PRE/POST
	Evaluation of the performance of the system PRE/POST
Political sophistication	Vocabulary
	Level of political knowledge
Cognitive sophistication	Complexity of argumentation
	Justification
	Appreciation of trade-offs

In addition to the descriptive analysis, the main comparative statistical analyses used here are the t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Despite its clear benefits, the focus group method also has limitations and the one we observe here is the relatively small number of respondents. Due to that, the research tests the data only in relation to the hypothesis reflected by the sampling criteria (party affiliation and type of socialisation) and has too few cases to analyse the data against different hypotheses.

4. Results: Evaluation of the Past and the Present Political Regimes

Figure 4. Regime evaluations – descriptive statistics (5-point scale: from very positive (1) to very negative (5))

		PRE L	PRE R	POST L	POST R
Evaluation of the political regime in principle PRE	N	22	27	24	41
	\bar{x}	1.68	4.04	3.13	3.90
	σ	0.48	0.81	0.99	0.80
Evaluation of the political regime in principle POST	N	56	51	62	106
	\bar{x}	2.91	2.06	2.15	1.98
	σ	0.96	0.31	0.47	0.24
Evaluation of the performance of the political system PRE	N	39	29	23	39
	\bar{x}	1.82	4.00	3.30	3.97
	σ	0.60	0.96	0.97	0.67
Evaluation of the performance of the political system POST	N	234	363	155	372
	\bar{x}	4.11	3.48	3.77	3.63
	σ	0.92	1.05	0.85	0.99
Evaluation of the PRE regime and performance	N	41	39	35	56
	\bar{x}	1.85	4.03	3.26	3.94
	σ	0.56	0.87	0.95	0.67
Evaluation of the POST regime and performance ⁵	N	262	389	191	427
	\bar{x}	3.95	3.36	3.38	3.35
	σ	0.99	1.08	1.03	1.06

With regard to the evaluation of the political regimes, the PRE R and the POST R groups have almost fully overlapping profiles (Figure 4): very negative evaluation of the previous regime and its performance, very positive one of the current regime, most unanimous evaluation with regard to the current regime in principle, and statistically different evaluation of the current regime and of its performance⁶. These groups present the younger generation as an ideological extension of the older generation within the right wing.

As expected, the PRE L group demonstrates strong attachment to the previous regime: very positive and rather consensual evaluation of the previous regime. They either refuse to face the deficiencies of the performance of the previous regime and romanticise that period, or simply they do not consider any of those as deficiencies. Unlike their lack of a critical approach to the previous regime, the PRE L group evaluates the performance of the current regime significantly lower than the regime in principle⁷. Nevertheless, this discrepancy between the evaluations can still be seen as a sign of a certain level of embracing of the new system in principle. This conclusion is reinforced by the considerably stronger difference between the evaluation of the performances of the two political systems ($t(20) = -8.74, p < .01$), than the difference between the evaluation of the two sys-

5 This variable presents the combined values of Evaluation of the political regime in principle and Evaluation of the performance of the political system

6 $t(24) = -5.32, p < .01$ for the PRE R group and $t(50) = -7.35, p < .01$ for the POST R group

7 $t(27) = -3.22, p < .01$

tems in principle ($t(6) = -3.87, p < .01$). This is a clear sign that democracy is not strongly opposed as such, but rather the way in which it is applied.

The POST L group makes almost no distinction between the evaluation of the previous regime and its performance, which can be considered logical due to the lack of living memories and direct experience of the performance of that regime. However, it is interesting that this lack of real life memories does not lead to considerable romanticising of the past. Regarding both the regime and its performance, the evaluations of the POST L group are slightly leaning towards the negative. The evaluations of the current regime and its performance however are quite distinct ($t(25) = -4.20, p < .01$). The democratic regime in principle is evaluated firmly positively ($\sigma = 0.47$, which makes this the most unanimous evaluation of this group) and its performance is evaluated negatively.

4.1. Analysis: Party affiliation and regime support⁸

Looking at the regime support in relation to respondents' party affiliation only, the comparison between the left and the right-wing participants shows a clear and statistically significant difference, supporting the hypothesis of the left wing being much more attached to the past and the right wing attached to the present. The left wing evaluates the previous regime and its performance more positively than the right wing⁹. In addition, the right wing evaluates the current regime and its performance more positively than the left wing¹⁰.

The data also shows that both left- and right-wing supporters do not distinguish between their evaluations of the previous regime in principle and its performance, which indicates that the performance of the previous regime is by all respondents evaluated through their ideological stands; i.e. through the prism of the ideologically tainted perception of the left-wing supporters, the previous regime is perceived or remembered as a representation of the social principles and equality in the left-wing ideology and not necessarily as a representation of non-democratic rule. In the case of the evaluations of the current regime though, both political camps distinguish between the regime in principle and its performance¹¹. In fact, both political camps evaluate the current regime positively, although to a different extent, which means that the left-wing supporters as a whole had somewhat embraced the democratic rule as such.

Nevertheless, the negative perception of performance of the current regime by the PRE L group could still be considered a threat to acceptance of the new regime. The hostility of the PRE L group towards the new regime could also be seen as reinforced by being an economic and social "net loser" of the transition and especially by not perceiving any hope for this to be changed. The one thing that seems to show a quite unsettling lack of support for democracy is the fact that the differences between the left wing's evaluations of the previous and current regimes in principle are not statistically significant. However, both evaluations are positive and although the previous regime is evaluated more positively and people obviously have not lost their attachments to it, the current democra-

8 Unless otherwise stated, all data in this section concerns party affiliation groups of both age groups, the average of the weighted scores of both age groups.

9 Respectively $L\bar{x} = 2.45$ and $R\bar{x} = 3.94$; $t(152) = -11.69, p < .01$ about the regime in principle and $L\bar{x} = 2.55$ and $R\bar{x} = 3.90$; $t(354) = -14.14, p < .01$ about its performance

10 Respectively $L\bar{x} = 2.77$ and $R\bar{x} = 1.98$; $t(211) = 10.09, p < .01$ about the regime in principle and $L\bar{x} = 3.87$ and $R\bar{x} = 3.59$; $t(2695) = 8.16, p < .01$ about its performance

11 Respectively $t(109) = -7.32, p < .01$ for the left wing and $t(168) = -13.50, p < .01$ for the right wing

tic regime is also evaluated positively.

It needs to be emphasised that within the left wing, there is a clear generational difference in the regime evaluations, especially in the relation to the old regime. Therefore, the data supports the hypothesis that the current social pressure has a stronger impact on the POST L group in relation to their evaluation of the old regime, due to their weaker attachment to the regime. The fact that the POST L group demonstrates internalisation of the democratic regime in principle is indicative of a profound ideological transition within the left wing. PRE and POST generations in the left wing mirror each other with POST L evaluating the previous regime in principle slightly negatively and the current regime in principle positively while PRE L evaluates vice versa (respectively $\bar{x} = 3.13$ and $\bar{x} = 2.15$ POST L and $\bar{x} = 1.68$ and $\bar{x} = 2.91$ PRE L).

There is another aspect of the data that raises concerns about the stability of the endorsement of the democratic regime. All participants evaluate the performance of the current democratic regime negatively, although left- and right-wing groups do that to different degrees. The common negative evaluation of the performance of the current regime is mostly related to two reasons: the actual imperfections of the young democratic institutions and processes, and also the extremely high price of the transition that the society pays. There is no consistent data available to demonstrate that the right-wing citizens pay a lower transition price than the left-wing citizens. The overwhelming public perception is that, if anything, it is split according to the generations: the younger generation is the winner and the older generation is the loser. According to different studies, voters in Central and Eastern Europe do not vote or affiliate to a party due to economic self-interest, but due to value choices (Toka 1997). That explains also why right-wing citizens are strongly attached to the current regime and strongly support it in principle, despite the fact that very often it is against their immediate economic interests. This overwhelming disappointment with the performance of the current regime within the right wing can be seen in the lack of significant difference between the evaluations of the performance of the previous and current regimes¹². The lack of significant difference here is yet another warning sign of the fragility of the current regime's support even amongst its most devoted allies.

Some claim that with the advance of time, the democratic regime is increasingly evaluated on the basis of its own achievements and decreasingly in comparison to the old regime (Sapiro 2004). Hence, as the evaluation of the performance of the current regime is very low across all the four groups, the support for the current regime should be also quite low across all the four groups. However, that is not what the data analysis, here, shows. The widely shared opinion or hope in Bulgaria is that the current regime needs more time to deliver its results. Therefore, that hypothesis could hold in the future, but not currently; and the current disappointment with the regime's performance does not erode significantly the endorsement of the regime right now. Nevertheless, if the trend of increasing perception of the regime's lack of efficiency continues, this can have an even stronger effect on increasing anti-democratic tendencies.

4.2. Analysis: Periods of socialisation and regime support¹³

As demonstrated so far, groups with the same party affiliation can be rather heterogene-

12 Performance of the current regime is still evaluated higher, but not to a statistically significant degree.

13 Unless otherwise stated, all data in this section concerns political socialization/age groups of both political camps, and the average of the weighted scores of both party affiliation groups.

ous internally. Within the political camps, there are significant generational differences, more important in the left wing, as a result of their different political socialisation. A further comparison of the generational groups sheds more light on the specifics of political information processing and regime evaluation.

The major generational difference is the internal group (in)coherence of the regime evaluations. There is very little diversity in the regime evaluations of the POST generation and rather significant diversity in the regime evaluations of the PRE generation. In line with the preliminary hypothesis, having first-hand experience both before and after 1989 makes the PRE generation evaluate both regimes more pragmatically and with a variety of perspectives. Consequently, this results in multi-faceted opinions and a high level of standard deviation in the results. The lack of such multiple-regime experience makes the POST generation evaluate the regimes and their performances, especially the previous totalitarian one, based only on their ideological leanings and on second-hand impressions. They also lack a comparative framework for evaluating the current regime in the context of the past and this makes even the directly observed current political regime evaluated in less diverse ways than the PRE generation.

Psychological research accepts that with age, people become less likely to change their attitudes. However, this is not an absolute trend and when it happens, it is mostly due to the closure effect. This is the phenomenon of not perceiving new information about issues that are already considered clear, settled-down or decided (Neuman et al. 1992), especially if they are elaborated as clear or unquestionable during people's youth (Zaller 1987). In other words, the closure effect is maintaining already established political views without re-examining them according to the on-going political life, and without perceiving or considering alternative political ideas. Therefore, it is only valid for the attitudes that were intensively elaborated during people's youth and not for all political attitudes per se. Political attitudes that were not elaborated during someone's youth do not become part of the primary political socialisation. Therefore, they lack the deep-rootedness related to this kind of political socialisation (Dobreva 2008). This idea is also supported by the data of this research. The closure effect as a naturally occurring process would have been expected in the case of the older generation, but this is not necessarily the case in a transition society.

Out of all regime evaluations, the only ones that do not demonstrate generational difference are those that concern the evaluation of the performance of the current regime. Unlike the heavy totalitarian propaganda of the previous regime, there was no public debate of the day-to-day performance of the regime before 1989. Any critical elaboration would have been censored and therefore, it never appeared in public. If we look at the standard deviations of the data on regime evaluations, we see that on all occasions, with the exception of the evaluation of the performance of the current regime, the two political affiliations of the PRE generation indeed demonstrate much more incoherent opinions. This is especially strongly expressed in the data on evaluations of both regimes in principle¹⁴ and the performance of the previous regime¹⁵.

The POST generation makes a clear differentiation between both regimes in principle

14 Previous regime $\sigma = 1.28$ PRE generation and $\sigma = 0.84$ POST generation; current regime $\sigma = 1.02$ PRE generation and $\sigma = 0.34$ POST generation

15 $\sigma = 1.15$ PRE generation and $\sigma = 0.77$ POST generation

with much more positive evaluation of the current regime¹⁶. However, it hardly differentiates between the evaluations of the performance of both regimes. Apart from the endorsement of the current regime per se, even considering the high price of transition, the POST generation clearly sees the deficiencies of the performance of the new regime. Nevertheless, due to its better adaptability, the younger generation in Bulgaria is seen as better off and deals with the transition in a more successful way than the older one.

Both generations do not distinguish their evaluations of the previous regime in principle from its performance, which is probably also an effect of the distance in time from the regime. It is interesting that regarding the current regime, the POST generation differentiates much more between regime and performance¹⁷ than the PRE generation¹⁸. Such differentiation demands better experience in abstract political thinking, which the POST generation has to a larger extent than the PRE generation.

5. Results: The Mechanisms of Regime Perception

This section of the study presents the analysis of the data coded according to variables related to cognitive processes of perception and elaboration of political information. There is no reason to believe that any of the groups should systematically differ from the rest in their level of intelligence. The sampling also emphasised the recruitment of people with a relatively equal educational level in each group, as a proxy of general cognitive skills. Therefore, the measurements of general cognitive sophistication are used only in relation to political sophistication and to analyse the level of difference between these two. Both the cognitive and political sophistication variables are combined variables, including the scores of their relevant variables (as shown in Figure 3).

5.1. Analysis: Cognitive mechanisms of regime evaluation and their relation with political socialisation

There is no distinction related to the pure cognitive variables amongst the PRE and POST generations. The largest differences in the mechanisms of information processing are related to variables closer to political cognition, such as political vocabulary ($\bar{x} = 4.04$ PRE generation and $\bar{x} = 3.89$ POST generation; $t(6015) = 5.48, p < .01$) and appreciation of trade-offs ($\bar{x} = 2.97$ PRE generation and $\bar{x} = 2.74$ POST generation; $t(2695) = 4.50, p < .01$). Since the demonstrated general cognitive abilities of both groups are equal, it is clear that the lower level of political sophistication of the PRE generation is affected only by the skills and experience related to dealing with political information, i.e. the independent variable of political socialisation has an effect on political sophistication. The difference between political and cognitive sophistication is larger in the PRE generation than in the POST generation¹⁹.

Therefore, the data supports the hypothesis that the skills inherited by the PRE generation from their experience of decoding propaganda messages are not particularly useful and helpful in dealing with the current political information. The sophisticated skills applicable to the past seem to be less applicable to the current information flow character-

16 $\bar{x} = 3.76$ previous regime and $\bar{x} = 2.01$ current regime; $t(30) = 7.74, p < .01$

17 $\bar{x} = 2.01$ regime in principle and $\bar{x} = 3.67$ regime performance; $t(146) = -12.37, p < .01$

18 $\bar{x} = 2.60$ regime in principle and $\bar{x} = 3.73$ regime performance; $t(86) = -7.09, p < .01$

19 PRE generation $\bar{x} = 3.88$ political sophistication and $\bar{x} = 3.18$ cognitive sophistication; $t(2953) = 43.05, p < .01$; POST generation $\bar{x} = 3.76$ political sophistication and $\bar{x} = 3.18$ cognitive sophistication; $t(3052) = 38.51, p < .01$

rised by much less explicit influence, where it is constantly changing, often unclear, full of novelty and a variety of political messages.

This finding seriously undermines and questions the widely accepted assumption of the transfer of political values from the older generation to the younger one, or from parents to children. This study provides strong support to the idea that parents in a post-communist context cannot be confidently considered authorities or experts on political topics compared to their children. Therefore, the usual transfer of political knowledge and values from parents to children can hardly take place and such an effect could also be expected in other transitional societies, especially in the context of a dramatically changing environment. Young people socialise within a much broader and contested political context than those bringing them up, and they consciously or subconsciously choose their reference group depending on whom they see as qualified and successful enough to be a role model (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997; Neuman 1986; Valentino and Sears 1998).

Additionally, the two political camps differ to the extent to which they are willing to pass on their political knowledge (Siemienska 2002). The left wing demonstrates a much larger difference between the political sophistication of the PRE and POST generations. This distinction is aligned with the generalised social pressure and dominant public discourse presenting the ideas of the PRE L group as “historically proven wrong”.

5.2. Analysis: Combined effect of party affiliation and political socialisation

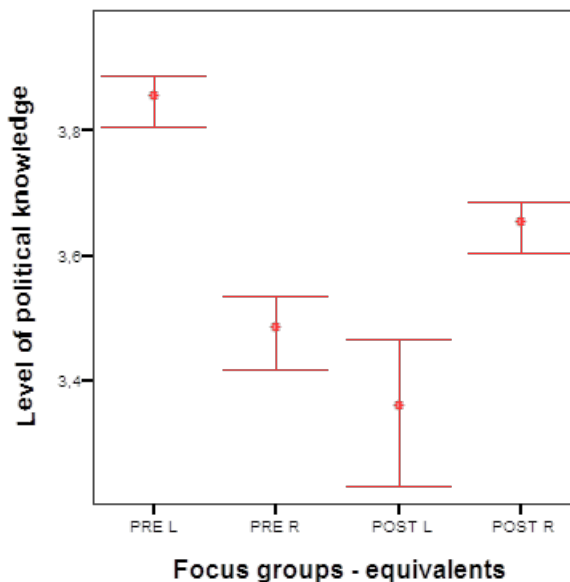
Figure 5. Political and cognitive sophistication – descriptive statistics (5-point scale)²⁰

		PRE L	PRE R	POST L	POST R
Vocabulary - political aspect	N	406	741	377	1050
	\bar{x}	3.72	3.99	3.34	3.96
	σ	1.32	1.12	1.46	1.13
Level of political knowledge	N	405	736	389	1031
	\bar{x}	3.53	3.50	3.17	3.73
	σ	1.08	1.03	1.31	1.08
Political sophistication	N	410	745	389	1054
	\bar{x}	3.64	3.76	3.27	3.86
	σ	1.11	0.97	1.31	1.03
Complexity of argument	N	381	678	358	983
	\bar{x}	2.80	3.09	2.59	3.07
	σ	1.41	1.19	1.32	1.22
Justification	N	381	678	358	983
	\bar{x}	2.91	3.06	2.63	3.35
	σ	1.52	1.31	1.59	1.45
Appreciation of trade-offs	N	235	389	197	377
	\bar{x}	2.72	2.70	2.14	2.82
	σ	1.40	1.21	1.36	1.28
Cognitive sophistication	N	408	743	389	1046
	\bar{x}	3.01	3.15	2.75	3.33
	σ	1.23	1.07	1.32	1.14

Looking in further detail at the data and exploring the combined effect of both independent variables (party affiliation and political socialisation), we see an even more interesting pattern. It is mostly the right-wing POST generation and the left-wing PRE generation that demonstrate lower political sophistication. Strangely enough, the ideologically most distant groups share the same political cognition patterns. The explanation is the already mentioned closure effect. However, the closure effect is stronger in the case of the PRE L group than in the case of the POST R group; this difference in the intensity can easily be attributed to age, which naturally leads to inclination towards cognitive closures.

The PRE L group had been politically socialised in a time when a particular understanding of the left-wing ideology had been widely presented as the unquestionable truth and they had accepted it as such. Due to their unwillingness to accept the new regime, they avoid involvement in processing and elaborating new political information. Consequently, this leads to a closure effect and lower political sophistication. Despite the lack of censorship, the POST R group had also been politically socialised in a context in which their preferred ideological leaning has been widely presented as unquestionable truth. Within a heterogeneous information environment, they still perceive and accept their ideological affiliation as absolute and therefore, they are not motivated to engage in any profound cognitive elaboration of it. Consequently, the POST R group demonstrates very low scores on all sophistication related variables and the largest difference between the levels of cognitive and political sophistication ($t(1043) = 21.37, p < .01$).

Figure 6. Level of political knowledge²¹



20 All variables in this table are measured on a 5-point scale with 1 being a high intensity of the variable (e.g. excellent political knowledge, very complex argument, multiple justification, etc.) and 5 being a low intensity of the variable.

21 The graph demonstrates the range of variation of the level of political knowledge of the separate groups. The scale of political knowledge is from 1 (excellent political knowledge) to 5 (lack of political knowledge)

Looking at this data from a normative democratic point of view, the concerns mentioned earlier in the text are relit again. As already demonstrated, the PRE L group has the lowest level of democratic regime endorsement. Here we see the mechanism behind it. The closure effect here is based not only on the formative political socialisation in the context of unquestioned ideology, but also on the natural age-related tendency of the closure effect (Neuman et al. 1992). The combination of both factors and in addition the high price of transition to the new regime (e.g. loss of social, economic, political and other stability and security, loss of social benefits, and for many in the older generation, severe deterioration in their standard of living), makes the closure effect a rather stable obstacle for democracy endorsement. The way to surpass such a barrier demands clear and intensive elaboration and framing of the left-wing ideology as a pillar of the democratic society.

To a large extent, the POST L group employs such a framing, but their voice is rather weak in the general public domain and even within the left-wing party. The POST L group has the most outstanding profile regarding information processing. It demonstrates the highest level of sophistication according to both political sophistication and level of abstraction. The POST L group also demonstrates the smallest difference between cognitive sophistication and political sophistication ($t(386) = 11.52, p < .01$). Therefore, they are the most experienced or ready to get involved in political information processing and employ their full cognitive sophistication in it.

The other group with concerning levels of closure effect is the POST R group. This group is also the one most likely to demonstrate extreme political views (Dobrevva 2008). Despite their declaration of democratic regime endorsement, their actual endorsement and internalising of democratic values such as tolerance are not fully convincing. Simplified political perception and framing often leads to stereotyping, prejudices and extremity. More profound political education and understanding of the democratic values could be helpful in guaranteeing full internalisation and therefore sustainability of the declared democracy endorsement of this group.

Looking at the other side of the closure effect, we see that the POST L group does not experience any aspect of it – neither the generational/aging related effect, nor current closure due to social pressure aligned with political preferences. Thus, this group is forced into much more elaboration of any political information and consequently develops and demonstrates a higher level of political sophistication. This is again evidence of the same mechanism, but showing the other side of the coin.

6. Conclusion

The overall results of the study demonstrate the general acceptance of liberal democracy as a political system. The variation in the magnitude of this acceptance among the groups with different party affiliations provides support for the hypothesis that party affiliation has an impact as an independent variable. It also raises some concerns about certain resistance to the democratic system in the left wing. An important and curious finding here is that within the left wing, there is significant difference in the regime support of the PRE and POST generations. That demonstrates an important evolution and transformation of the concept of left-wing ideology in Bulgaria and its gradual detachment from the political inheritance of the past.

Despite the support for the democratic regime in principle, the data also indicates the potential threat of erosion of this support because of the intensive dissatisfaction with the regime's performance amongst all groups. Most Bulgarian citizens welcomed the democratic regime with overwhelming enthusiasm, but since this honeymoon relation is waning, the performance evaluation becomes increasingly important. Consequently, different attitudes towards the democratic system deteriorate and the current slipping back on numerous democracy-related indexes in Bulgaria (but also throughout Central and Eastern Europe) can be seen as a clear indication of such a trend. The positive evaluation (and romanticisation of memories) of the previous regime by some groups provides additional bases for such developments on the political scene.

Approximately twenty years after the collapse of the communist regime, we see the long-term effect of political transition. The research also supported the initial hypothesis that the political socialisation of the PRE generation is detrimental to their abilities to deal efficiently with the current flow and type of political information. Apart from the general concern about the full capacity of the political behaviour of this generation, the findings also set a considerable challenge to the established theories of transfer of political values from the older to the younger generations. This phenomenon deserves further exploration in a variety of transition societies, for its impact on generational political interaction.

The types of political socialisation and party affiliation as independent variables have clearly demonstrated their joint impact on the current patterns of political information perception and regime evaluation. Therefore, the research shows how understanding the mechanisms of perception of political information and of the political regime as a whole depend on the citizens' specific experiences and developed cognitive tools. The interaction between the ways of thinking and the distinctive relation of each ideology with the past and the present is reflected in the lower level of political sophistication of the PRE L and the POST R groups. The mechanism of the closure effect makes people from these very different groups being unmotivated to perceive and process new political information, especially any that contradicts the views that they internalised as unquestionable during their early political socialisation. The finding of the important role of this political cognition mechanism outlines the necessities of particular efforts targeting such groups with information that builds tolerance about the political Other.

The human aspect of transition is often left in the background and is under-researched. The approach of the present study emphasises the human factor in the flow of political information and the consequent perception, evaluation and support for the political regime – both the current and previous one. It demonstrates how the influence of the same political information depends on the complex nature of a transitional society. Therefore, future transition and democratisation research needs to incorporate communications and micro-level processes more systematically in order to draw a more profound understanding of the fulfilment of normative expectations towards the citizens in a democratic society.

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