



## Article

# Right-Wing Leftists, Left-Wing Rightists, and Traditionalist Liberals: Core Political Values and Ideological Inconsistency at the Party-Elite Level in Bulgaria

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**Abstract:** The growth of heterodox ideological configurations, or ideological inconsistencies, among the electorate of Western countries, has been offered as one explanation for recent momentous political events, such as Brexit or the election of Donald Trump as US President. Previous research, however, suggests that ideological inconsistency has been typical for Central and Eastern European (CEE) states for the past thirty years after the fall of the Socialist regimes there. Based on a survey of 102 active members of local and national party structures in Bulgaria, followed by in-depth interviews with the same respondents, I develop a conceptual and methodological approach aimed at objectively measuring Bulgarians' political values and ideological orientations. Building on previous research on the statistical independence of the social and economic dimensions of ideology, this study identifies three main models of ideological inconsistency at the party-elite level in Bulgaria, offering evidence of the "homogeneity in ideological inconsistency" in this post-Socialist country, with party elites and electorate following the same patterns of inconsistency. The existence of a conservative value complex, integrating traditionalist, statist, and nationalist attitudes regarding the social sphere, is another major finding of the study. I discuss the specific historical and socio-cultural background contributing to ideological inconsistency in Bulgaria and potential implications for the wider CEE region.

**Keywords:** ideological inconsistency; political values; political orientation; ideological dimensions; left-right ideological schema; Central and East European states; Bulgaria



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## 1. Introduction

Since the French Revolution, ideological positions have most often been classified along a left-right dimension that basically reflects the social division between preferences for maintaining the status quo vs. social change. Although the model of operationalizing ideology, by default, as a bipolar continuum between left and right, has its advantages, a growing body of research shows that the unidimensional left-right conceptual model represents an insufficient basis for the study of political ideology and is likely unable to account for significant aspects, largely ignoring the heterogeneity in citizens' understanding of politics (Rokeach 1973; Feldman and Johnston 2014). Recently, such arguments have received robust support from empirical evidence attesting to an increase in heterodox ideological configurations in Western countries. For example, a "Democracy Fund" study after the 2016 US presidential election found that about 29% of the US electorate could be characterized as "populists" with liberal economic views and conservative beliefs on socio-cultural issues such as immigration. At the same time, only 23% of voters fall in the "traditionally conservative" category with right-wing economic and conservative social views (Drutman 2017). Researchers argue convincingly that Trump's shocking 2016 presidential election victory is best explained by his appeal to this large electorate (Carmines et al. 2016). The "wave of global illiberal populism" (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2021) is thus a phenomenon that could be linked to ideological inconsistency. It is important to note, however, that in the USA, the process of ideological heterogenization occurs only among

the general public, while the conflict space of American party elites is still arrayed along a single dominant left–right ideological dimension (McCarty et al. 2006).

And if ideological heterodoxy is a relatively new phenomenon in the West, it has been the norm rather than the exception from the very beginning of multi-party pluralist political systems in Central and Eastern European (CEE) states. After the fall of State Socialism, starting in 1990, the newly-fledged CEE democracies have provided unorthodox ideological configurations that have captured the attention of political scientists and called for new theoretical and empirical approaches to account for such ideological diversity. Thus, the roots of ideological inconsistency observed today in post-Socialist CEE states can be traced back to the years of one-party rule and the specificities of democratic transition in the region.

In the early nineties, liberal democracy and market capitalism were the legitimating ideologies of the new political elites in most CEE countries, with basic democratic and market institutions beginning to emerge. A multi-party political system, reasonably free elections, and media were becoming the norm in the region. Paradigms that were influential at the time, like “Transitology” (Rustow 1970; Schmitter 2014), the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1991), and “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992), acknowledged that consolidation of democracy might take a long time, but assumed that deviations in early stages of transition to liberal democracy are only temporary. Sooner or later, all societies would eventually arrive at the final destination: liberal democracy.

By the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, however, the previously widely accepted doctrine of “democratic teleology” (Carothers 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002) and the ideal of liberal democracy are under considerable strain (Kelemen 2017). Populist, ideologically heterogeneous, and outright anti-liberal ideas are flourishing in some CEE states. Authors use a variety of political terms to describe the emergent quasi-liberal or outright illiberal post-communist political and economic systems in the region: “electoral or competitive autocracies” (Shevtsova 2000; Levitsky and Way 2010), “electoral authoritarianism” (Schedler 2013) “managed democracies” (Anderson 2007), “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria 1997), “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff and Tansel 2019), “populist constitutionalism” (Buzogany 2017), “crony capitalism” (Sharafutdinova 2011), “neo-patrimonialism” or “neo-prebendalism” (King and Szelenyi 2005), among others. Political processes going on in several CEE states (including Bulgaria), whereby some elements of democracy are kept intact while others have eroded (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Way 2015; Luhrmann et al. 2018), have been conceptualized from different perspectives as “hollowing and backsliding of democracy” (Greskovits 2015), “executive aggrandizement” (Bermeo 2016; Cianetti et al. 2018), “democratic deconsolidation”, “de-Europeanization” (Gürkan and Tomini 2020), “democratic involution” (Buzogany 2017), etc.

Whether ideological inconsistency plays a part in these processes and what, if any, is the causal relation between CEE citizens’ political attitudes and the quality of democracy in the region is very much up for debate. Still, the processes of democratic backsliding, currently going on in some of the former Socialist countries of Europe, cannot be viewed separately from the issue of individuals’ and social groups’ political culture and political values. Thus, the study of inconsistent ideological patterns could provide relevant insights into the mechanisms causing democracies in the region to retreat.

In the past decade, a growing body of research has focused on the ideological inconsistencies and the differing meanings of “Left” and “Right” in CEE states (Thorisdottir et al. 2007; Radkiewicz 2017). It is now well established that the political orientation of citizens in post-Socialist states does not match the traditional Western ideological template. Apparently, CEE citizens’ ideological orientation does not fit the traditional Western left–right schema, and the concept of left–right political identification cannot be transferred mechanically from Western to Eastern Europe (Wójcik et al. 2021).

In Bulgaria, this discrepancy is particularly evident. In this article, I use Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner’s (Carmines et al. 2012, 2016) terminology, whereby “libertarians” are voters who hold conservative positions on economic issues but liberal positions on social

issues, while citizens who match liberal economic views and conservative positions in the social sphere are labeled as “populists” or “communitarians.” Bulgaria is a notable case of ideological inconsistency at the political-elite level, with left-wing parties increasingly espousing conservative and nationalistic values (Rone 2021) and right-wing ones traditionally upholding socially liberal and progressive views. This ideological heterodoxy is the norm among the general electorate as well, with a “populist” majority and a “libertarian” minority (predominantly consisting of well-educated dwellers of the big cities). Thus, the Bulgarian case is particularly noteworthy and might provide relevant insights for the wider CEE region.

Considerable progress has thus far been made as regards establishing the differences in the meaning of left and right between Eastern and Western Europe and developing an understanding of the psychological underpinnings of ideological orientation in EE societies. However, the investigation of the concrete political value categories that provide the motivational content of the four large ideological categories or dimensions (left and right economic views; Liberal and Conservative socio-cultural ones) in the region is yet at an early stage. Moreover, most research on ideological orientation in CEE states relies on political self-identification, and self-reported ideology is a notoriously imperfect predictor of individual issue preferences (Converse 1964; Jacoby 1995; Goren 2005; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Deppe et al. 2015).

Based on a survey of 102 active members of left-wing, right-wing, liberal and nationalist political party structures at both central (based in the capital city Sofia) and local (seven regional central cities, one municipality) party-elite levels in Bulgaria, followed by in-depth interviews with the same respondents, the present study aims to address these lacunae and suggest possible answers to my main research question, i.e., which political values build each of the four ideological dimensions in Bulgaria, and how to measure political and ideological orientation objectively? The proposed political values-based approach does not rely on ideological self-placement, thus avoiding declarative measurement of ideological orientation. The latter is a commonly used method in social research, but it comes with a serious methodological liability: its subjective approach to measurement scales (Enelow and Hinich 1984). Instead, the study’s empirical tool derives the sets of core political values (from this point on referred to interchangeably as CPVs or “political values”), which build each of the four ideological categories in the Bulgarian context through a broad set of indicators of specific political attitudes.

The present research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it provides empirical evidence of the salience of CPVs for the study of political attitudes and ideological orientation in Bulgaria.

Second, the proposed conceptual and methodological approach to identifying and measuring the sets of core political values building each of the four ideological dimensions in Bulgaria allows for objective identification of citizens’ ideological positions without relying on self-placement and for precise visualization of the individual’s ideological views within the coordinate system consisting of the aforementioned bipolar dimensions.

Finally, it argues in favor of the necessity for the introduction of a core political value—Statism. My findings demonstrate that, in contrast with the West, where Statism is predominantly seen as a left/liberal stance, among the Bulgarian party elite, its content is conservative in both its motivational substructure and discursive superstructure. Thus, statist beliefs could provide one key for the analysis of ideological inconsistencies in the Bulgarian and wider CEE context.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Eastern European Challenges to the “Classical” Left and Right

Research in social and political psychology has demonstrated that right-wing ideologies in the United States and most Western countries share a common set of conservative beliefs characterized by resistance to change (Traditionalism) and acceptance of inequality (Duckitt 2001; Jost et al. 2003; Thorisdottir et al. 2007). In turn, left-wing orientation in

the Western world is associated with liberal attitudes such as open-mindedness, mental flexibility, and both socially and economically egalitarian beliefs (Jost et al. 2003). However, in societies with different historical paths, the dependencies and relationships between resistance to change, acceptance of inequality, and left- or right-wing political orientation often differ significantly from Western countries (Greenberg and Jonas 2003). In Bulgaria, for example, acceptance of inequality correlates with right-wing orientation, yet resistance to change is associated with left-wing orientation (Aspelund et al. 2013). Similar studies confirm Zaller's (1992) observation on the statistical independence of the social and economic dimensions of ideology, as well as the existence of cultural (social) and economic forms of Conservatism and Liberalism (Johnson and Tamney 2001; Van Hiel et al. 2004). Recent research conducted in 99 countries testifies not only that the classical "left-right" organization of attitudes occurs rarely but also that, most often, social (cultural) and economic attitudes correlate negatively with each other (Malka et al. 2019).

The idea of the need for multidimensional models allowing for a more detailed understanding of the structure of citizens' political attitudes is not new (Conover and Feldman 1981; Kerlinger 1984; Peffley and Hurwitz 1985). A growing number of authors agree that at least two dimensions are needed—economic and social ideology—to account for the wide range of citizens' beliefs, as attitudes on social issues show little correlation with those on economic ones (Duckitt et al. 2002; Evans et al. 1996; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Layman and Carsey 2002; Stenner 2005). The main weakness of the concept of a single coherent left-right ideological dimension is thus the underlying assumption of a close connection between a plethora of disparate socio-cultural and economic views that justifies their ordering on a linear continuum of political views.

Events like the Brexit referendum and the rise of new anti-immigration and anti-EU parties in both Western and Eastern Europe provide convincing evidence that the traditional economic left-right dimension is becoming increasingly insufficient, if not irrelevant. Recent literature has argued that "culture wars," or the contestation over social/cultural issues of transnational integration versus national sovereignty, pro- versus anti-immigration, "somewhere versus anywhere" (Goodhart 2017), etc., has become central to political debate in many Western countries (Clark and Rohrschneider 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2018). One solution to the methodological problem of measuring attitudes related to this relatively new cleavage, offered as early as 2002, is the addition of a GAL-TAN cultural dimension (Hooghe et al. 2002). A third dimension relating to European integration was proposed in 2012 (Bakker et al. 2012). Although these models received empirical support and may adequately describe the supply side of politics (i.e., political parties), their comprehensive testing on the demand side (i.e., the orientations of individual voters) shows that what is labeled as GAL-TAN dimension does not form a coherent scale in any European country (Wheatley and Mendez 2019), and therefore, remains outside the scope of the present article, as the latter focuses on individual orientations.

At the same time, a methodological problem arises in comparing post-1990 ideological configurations in CEE states with a "frozen" political cleavage (see Lipset and Rokkan (1967) for the "classic law" on "the freezing of party systems") like the traditional left-right division that is, however, currently undergoing "thawing" under the pressures of the processes mentioned above. Therefore, a stipulation needs to be made that the ideological inconsistencies in Bulgaria, the subject of the present study, are defined against the "classical" left-right schema and not against emerging modern ideological patterns in the West that could themselves be labeled "inconsistent."

Although most studies conducted in the USA and Western Europe at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century attest to a relative coherence of left-wing and right-wing orientation regarding cultural and economic facets (Knight 1999; Wójcik and Cislak 2012; Aspelund et al. 2013), research in the early 1990s and recent studies in CEE societies provide evidence of alternative ideological patterns (Thorisdottir et al. 2007; Radkiewicz 2017; Malka et al. 2019; Wenzel and Żerkowska-Balas 2020; Wójcik et al. 2021). Such findings emphasize the salience of the longstanding problem of the left-right

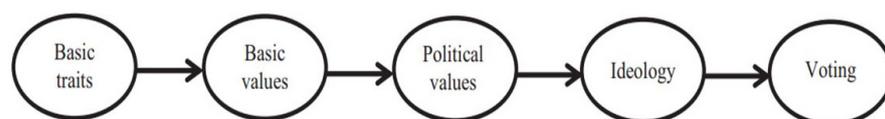
distinction's universality as one of the most important subjects of debate in research on ideology. Thus, the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe provide an attractive ground for the discovery of nonstandard ideological configurations (Todosijevic 2008).

Recent research on ideology in the region has highlighted many of its specificities: ideologically-motivated attitudes to democratic backsliding (Bellamy et al. 2022); welfare chauvinism focused on restricting the welfare rights of internal minorities, unlike that in Western Europe, where it is aimed at immigrants (Savage 2022); cultural liberal and conservative mobilizing potential and political participation in post-Socialist countries (Pospieszna and Vráblíková 2022); the use by Poland's governing party of right-wing cultural narratives for reinforcement of political narratives (Bill 2022). Other researchers have attempted a values-based explanation of ideological inconsistencies in CEE states from a motivational perspective and have directly challenged the validity of a single left–right dimension for the region (Wójcik et al. 2021). Many of these studies confirm the utility of Jost et al.'s (2003) sociopsychological approach to political identification (as motivated social cognition) for the study of political orientation in CEE states and provide empirical evidence that ideological views in the region reflect deep-seated psychological needs. Some authors go even further by positing that incoherence at the ideological level (characteristic of CEE societies) can be construed as a product of coherence of preferences for values at the deeper psychological level (Radkiewicz 2017).

## 2.2. Core political Values

This body of research has made a significant contribution to the study of the motivational substructure of ideological orientation in the region. Yet, it stops short of identifying relevant core political values for post-Socialist countries. Often thought of as the expression of basic personal values in the domain of politics (Schwartz et al. 2010), CPVs represent comprehensive normative principles and beliefs regarding the governance of the state and the rights and obligations of citizens. They facilitate taking positions on specific political issues and serve as generalized starting points in the otherwise complex and confusing sphere of politics and ideology (McCann 2008). Similar is the view of Converse, for whom political values are "...a kind of glue that binds together a large number of specific attitudes and beliefs" (Converse 1964, p. 211) and, to some extent, gives them structure, coherence, and consistency (Feldman 2003). Therefore, the study of core political values is critical to our understanding of the content and structure of the two bipolar dimensions, especially in ideological inconsistency-prone new democracies. What makes such research difficult, however, is that literature at this stage lacks a unified theoretical framework for political values and consensus on the issue of their number and content (Schwartz et al. 2010), with authors indicating different numbers of CPVs with somewhat overlapping scope and content.

Figure 1 illustrates the strain of theory that views political values as mediators in relation to basic psychological traits and values to ideological orientation and, ultimately, voting (Schwartz et al. 2010; Schwartz 2012; Caprara and Vecchione 2018). Following this paradigm, the present study attempts to derive a relevant set of political values for the Bulgarian context that could provide a useful conceptual and methodological starting point for larger-scale research on political values and ideological heterodoxy, utilizing representative population samples for Bulgaria and other CEE states.



**Figure 1.** Personality predictors of ideology and voting. Source: (Caprara and Vecchione 2018).

### 2.3. Political Values-Based Approach to Measuring Political Attitudes and Ideological Orientation in Bulgaria

In order to account for the differing socio-political trajectories and attitudes in a post-Socialist state, Bulgaria, a political values-based approach to measuring political attitudes and ideological orientation in this country has been developed. In the proposed conceptualization, each of the four ideological dimensions, or categories (Left, Right, Liberalism, and Conservatism), includes political values characterized by opposite motivational content and socio-political goals vis-à-vis their antagonists within the two bipolar dimensions: left/right in the economic sphere and Liberalism/Conservatism in the social sphere (Figure 2).

DOMAIN	SOCIAL						ECONOMIC	
IDEOLOGICAL CATEGORY	CONSERVATISM			LIBERALISM			LEFT	RIGHT
POLITICAL VALUE	Security, law and order	Statism	Nationalism	Traditionalism	Civil rights and freedoms	Social progressivism	Equality	Free enterprise

**Figure 2.** Political values-based model of ideological orientation in Bulgaria (Konstantinov 2022).

Using the strict distinction drawn between the political values relating to each of the two spheres, this approach not only avoids stereotypical, hence inaccurate, ideological definitions but also allows for precise visualization of the individual's ideological views within the coordinate system consisting of the aforementioned bipolar dimensions.

To test the validity of a set of political values providing the motivational content of ideological categories in Bulgaria, I use the set of six political values proposed by Schwartz, Caprara, and Vecchione (Schwartz et al. 2010) with some modifications in their number and scope, imposed by Bulgarian specificities. Thus, the Blind Patriotism political value category is modified into (Ethnic) Nationalism due to ample empirical evidence that the majority of Bulgarian citizens perceive their national identity in ethno-cultural rather than civic terms (Kabakchieva 2019; Karamelska 2019); Traditional morality is modified into Traditionalism to avoid limiting its scope only to the morality domain; a new political value category of Statism is added, and the Civil Liberties category is split into two separate categories. Schwartz, Caprara, and Vecchione (Schwartz et al. 2010) operationalize Liberalism through a single political value of Civil Liberties. I propose its replacement with two separate value categories of Social Progressivism, relating to the cultural aspects of Liberalism and Civil Rights that have only the institutional, political, and normative aspects of the democratic form of government within its scope. In this conceptualization, Social Progressivism's content is roughly opposite to that of the Traditionalism value category, with its emphasis on individual freedom from the binding norms of religion and tradition, support for non-traditional family forms, unequivocal support for abortion, etc.

In the theoretical model of the present study, the content of Statism as a political value is approximately opposite to liberal individualism in the context of the more general opposition between the model of highly centralized government (as in Russia) and the model of the liberal Western state. At the same time, the economic aspects of Statism cannot be ignored, and, in the study model, leftist attitudes overlap with statist beliefs in the field of economics. This overlap is based on the assumption, to be investigated in the course of the study, that in Bulgaria, the preference for greater control over the economy by the state correlates with conservative attitudes in social terms. Thus, the view that the state should provide free health care and education for all its citizens can be seen as economically left-wing and statist at the same time.

The motivation for the inclusion of Statism as a political value in the present conceptualization is the empirical evidence of the "vitality of the statist syndrome" in Bulgaria (Nedelcheva 2012). This syndrome is objectified through paternalistic sentiments related to the expectations that the state should play a key role in the functioning of the economy

and society and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens. Analyzing data from the European Values Study (EVS Database 2008), Nedelcheva (2012) provides an example of Bulgarians' over-expectations of the state—the majority of EVS 2008 Bulgarian respondents believe that high quality of life is not associated with personal activity, market skills, and entrepreneurial spirit, but with the effective functioning of state structures. Such attitudes persisted in Bulgarian society a decade later, with EVS Database (2017) data demonstrating that statist attitudes were widespread among young Bulgarians, who, somewhat paradoxically, expect the democratic Bulgarian state to impose law and order with a strong hand while redistributing wealth and taking care of the poor and unemployed (Alexandrov 2019).

Based on the existent empirical data on ideologically inconsistent ideo-political attitudes among Bulgarian citizens, I hypothesize the existence of three main models of ideological inconsistency among members of the four ideological types of political parties in Bulgaria (left-wing, right-wing, liberal, and nationalist):

- Inconsistency model 1: Right-wing leftists. In contrast to the West, in Bulgaria, leftists are more likely to be socially conservative and hold traditionalist, statist, and nationalistic beliefs;
- Inconsistency model 2: Left-wing rightists. Social Liberalism in Bulgaria is typical for people voting for right-wing parties;
- Inconsistency model 3: Traditionalist liberals. Due to their minority origin and Muslim faith, respondents belonging to the Bulgarian liberal party MRF deviate from their liberal ideological label by their traditionalist conservative views in the social sphere.

#### 2.4. Methodology

The focus of this research is CPVs, a theoretical construct that has not yet received enough scholarly attention in Bulgaria, the study of which thus requires in-depth insight into the motives and arguments of the participants for their attitudes toward both specific policy issues and broader ideological concepts. This, along with the specific limitations of the study discussed at the end of this chapter, predetermines my choice of research strategy to a significant degree. I adopt a modification of the mixed-methods approach using a standardized survey questionnaire, followed by in-depth discussions on the questionnaire topics with the same respondents. The answers of each respondent are filled in the standard questionnaire form by the interviewer. The respondent is then asked to elaborate on and provide arguments for her/his choice of answers.

Empirical information obtained through the survey lends itself to statistical processing, and the inclusion of a qualitative research module in the study design allows for a deeper understanding of participants' motives and arguments for their attitudes to specific policy issues and platforms. Aimed at enriching the perceptions of the research object, emphasizing the nuances, and enabling discussions to deepen the insight into the motivational bases of each respondent's political attitudes, in-depth interviews are uniquely well-suited for studies focused on "meaning-making" and understanding views on specific issues (Bellamy et al. 2022). Thus, the employment of a combination of a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews seems pertinent for the present study, given its goal of collecting as much detailed high-quality empirical data as possible and constructing the conceptual model of political values and ideological orientation in Bulgaria that will be tested by a large-scale, representative of Bulgarian population, empirical study during the next stage of research (The nationwide representative study that was to test the validity of the proposed model was planned for 2021, but its implementation was postponed due to pandemic restrictions. A provisional date for the beginning of fieldwork is the second half of 2024).

The sample consists of members of local Bulgarian political-party structures who were willing to participate. The choice of political-party members and activists for the study of political values and ideological orientation was motivated by the fact that they are more knowledgeable on politics and are more likely to think in ideological terms than other citizens (Barber and Pope 2018). The empirical sociological survey was con-

ducted in seven Bulgarian regional capital cities (Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Stara Zagora, Kardzhali, Pazardzhik, Haskovo, and Smolyan) and one municipality (Kazanlak) in the period February 2018–February 2019. All are Southern Bulgarian regions, selected for reasons related to ensuring higher levels of participation and representation of regional party structures' members and logistics. Two different sampling methods were used. The first one is two-stage purposive sampling (Etikan et al. 2015) whereby in the first stage, contact was made with the central leaderships of all major political parties representing the four distinct ideological types present in Bulgarian politics: left-wing, right-wing, liberal, and nationalist. Of them, only four parties agreed to participate: Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, left-wing), Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB, right-wing), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF, liberal), and "Vazrazhdane" (Revival, nationalist). At the second stage, those four parties' local structures disseminated the information for the planned survey, and a total of 81 members volunteered to participate. As all of the other political parties I contacted initially ignored the invitation, I used a second sampling technique, namely, respondent-driven sampling or snowball sampling (Noy 2008). Thus, via personal contacts, I managed to obtain agreement from 21 more members of other parties belonging to the 4 ideological types (see details below).

Assistance was provided by local party structures in all 8 cities. The in-depth interviews were conducted after respondents had filled in the survey questionnaire in locations chosen by the respondents themselves (most often the local party headquarters). A total of 102 members of political parties were surveyed, as follows:

- A total of 23 members of right-wing Bulgarian parties: 16 DSB party members, 4 Yes, Bulgaria! (YB) party members, and 3 Gerb party members;
- A total of 34 left-wing party members: 29 BSP members and 5 Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABR) members;
- A total of 28 members of nationalist or patriotic parties: 19 with "Vazrazhdane" (Revival) party members, 6 "Ataka" (Attack) party members, and 3 "VMRO-Bulgarian National Movement" (VMRO-BND) party members;
- A total of 17 members of the MRF liberal party.

In the majority of party organizations, the party elite volunteered for the study (depending on the individual parties, their positions vary: chairman/deputy chairman of regional/city party council; regional chairman/deputy chairman; regional/city secretary; regional/city organizational secretary; members of national party councils; regional Communications coordinator, leaders of youth party organizations, etc.). Members who did not report any official party position constituted less than 25% of all respondents.

Two important stipulations need to be made regarding the ideological positioning of the parties. First, I use the above parties' official self-labeling. Thus, when mention is made below of "rightists," "leftists," "nationalists," and "liberals," I refer only to the ideology their respective parties officially espouse and not the respondents' actual ideological orientation that I am attempting to determine through this study. The MRF, for example, is a party that derives its electoral support and activist base predominantly among members of the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria (Cholakov 2018); its official ideology is Liberalism, and it has been a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) since 2003. DSB and YB label themselves as right-wing parties, often referred to (somewhat ironically) as the "city right" due to their popularity only in the biggest cities and their limited presence in smaller settlements. BSP and its splinter group ABR label themselves as left-wing, and Revival, Attack, VMRO-BND self-label as either patriotic or nationalist organizations (see, for example (Karasimeonov 2019; Lyubenov 2021) for discussions of Bulgarian political parties' ideology, structure, and organizational development).

Second, numerous studies have underlined the importance of elite intraparty heterogeneity, whereby policy preferences of members of the same party may differ substantially among one another and from official party positions as well (McGann 2002; Hazan 2006; Giannetti and Benoit 2008). While the study of party-level measures such as manifesto analysis, voters' placements, and experts' judgments, as well as citizen-level measures

such as voters’ perceptions of left–right party positions from mass surveys, can be useful for understanding the ideology of parties, these approaches suffer from a key limitation, i.e., they generally pertain to aspects of parties other than the preferences of their actual elite membership (Carroll and Kubo 2017). Thus, understanding inconsistency and heterogeneity as an internal ideological feature of parties requires a measure focused directly on politicians themselves.

### 2.4.1. Empirical Tool and Measures

A standardized questionnaire for measuring political values and political-ideological orientation was developed for the survey. I drew upon items proposed by Schwartz, Caprara and Vecchione (Schwartz et al. 2010), questions from different waves of the European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS) and World Values Survey (WVS), and context-specific surveys, representative of the Bulgarian population (AFIS 2019; Gallup International 2018; Globsec Trends 2017; Pew Research Center 2018; Trend 2017) to measure the core political values of Security, Traditionalism, Civil Rights, Equality and Free Enterprise. I wrote new items for Statism, Social Progressivism, and Ethnic Nationalism political values. Some of the borrowed questions were slightly paraphrased using language reflecting the terms of debate in Bulgarian political discourse, and the new ones were also formulated to be relevant to the Bulgarian socio-political context.

For most questions, respondents were asked to express their agreement with each of the statements in four degrees, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with no neutral answer provided.

Answers to the other two types of questions (1 multiple choice question on attitudes to abortion and 5 questions that ask respondents for their attitudes toward Russian president Vladimir Putin and relevant cultural issues, like same-sex marriages and adoption of children by homosexual partners) were coded in the same way as the majority of questions so as to ensure compatibility and internal consistency of the obtained results.

The questionnaire includes questions on all 4 ideological dimensions (Left, Right, Liberalism, and Conservatism) and 8 hypothesized political value categories. Due to empirical evidence showing that the GAL-TAN dimension does not form a coherent scale in any European country and fails to account for the political orientation of individual voters (Wheatley and Mendez 2019), I use the more general Liberalism–Conservatism bipolar dimension to measure the social/cultural aspects of individual political orientation in Bulgaria.

As one of the study’s aims is to research the correlation between political values in the country and support for political systems based on antagonistic political values like those of Western countries and Putin’s Russia, questions are also included asking for respondents’ attitudes on immigration and the rule of Russian president Putin (Table 1). As the scope of this paper is narrower than that of the study, results are presented only on the political values that exhibit ideological inconsistencies.

**Table 1.** Structure of the questionnaire and topics discussed during fieldwork.

Ideological Category	Political Value	Questions on Specific Issues
Conservatism	Security, law and order (Security)	Attitudes to: gun control; the death penalty; expansion of police powers to combat crime
	Statism	Attitudes to: national sovereignty; national security; redistribution; state-financed free education and healthcare
	Ethnic nationalism	Agreement with the statement “The Bulgarian state should prioritize ethnic Bulgarians to immigrants and Bulgarian citizens of minority origin in welfare, healthcare, education policies”
Liberalism	Traditionalism	Attitudes to: religion; traditional family, morality and culture
	Civil Rights	Attitudes to: minority rights; free speech; agreement with the statement “There is no better form of government than democracy”; Priority of individual rights over state interests, etc.
	Social Progressivism	Attitudes to: abortion, same-sex marriages, adoption of children by homosexual partners, etc.
Left	Equality	Approval of: higher taxes to the rich; free education and healthcare
Right	Free Enterprise/Minimal State	Approval of: privatization of state enterprises; smaller state—stricter limits to state interference in the economy
	Other questions	
	Attitude to refugees	Attitude to refugees and immigrants
	Attitude to Putin	Approval of Putin’s rule in Russia

#### 2.4.2. Limitations

Due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed, in the context of their party affiliation, the participants were given guarantees of complete anonymity and confidentiality. In order to prevent suspicious attitudes and worries about the goals of the study, no questions were asked about respondents' names or demographic parameters such as educational status, employment, income, etc. The aim was to provide maximum comfort to the respondents so as to obtain the best quality and sincere qualitative information. Still, the lack of data on some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as income status, is one of the limitations of this research.

A second limitation of the study is that it is not representative of the Bulgarian population. While the sample may not allow for generalization at the country level, it provides empirical material for statistical processing, and the obtained results could be used as a reliable gauge of the political orientation of party members of all four ideological types. The detailed qualitative data collected allow for the initial development of a model of ideological orientation in Bulgaria. The proposed model's validity for Bulgaria and other CEE countries is to be tested using a representative study during the next stage of research.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that fieldwork was carried out in 2018–2019, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Hence, the support for the "strong political leader," exemplified by Putin for many of the left-wing, nationalist, and liberal respondents, was their authentic political conviction, which would, however, most probably have been swayed to an extent, had the survey taken place after the invasion.

### 3. Results

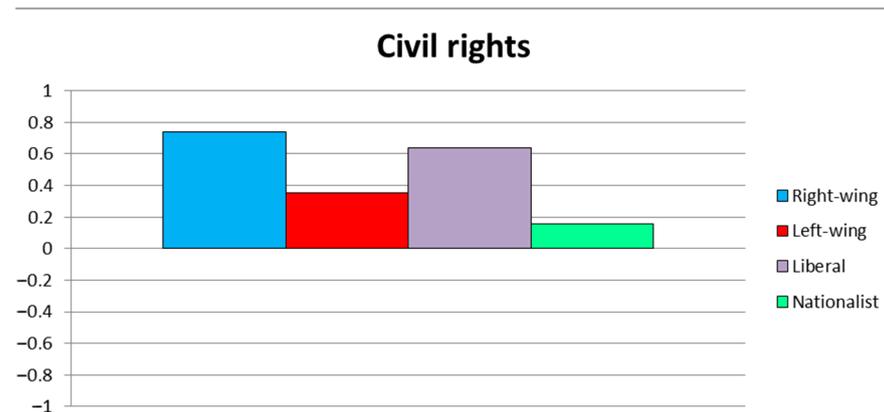
The adopted approach of strict differentiation between attitudes in the social and economic domains allows for the highlighting of ideological inconsistencies at the local party-elite level in Bulgaria. Taking as a starting point the parties' own ideological self-definition as left- or right-wing, I focus on results concerning ideological categories and political values in the social sphere. This is due to the fact that ideology in the economic sphere defines left- and right-wing parties' self-identification, i.e., both types of parties have been largely consistent in their respective economic policies and stances since their formation in the early 1990s and, generally, parties' issue positions conform to their economic labels. The inconsistencies, therefore, are the result of the "misalignment" of positions on social issues with the (economic) ideological labels that the parties have come to be known for. According to the findings, inconsistencies are overwhelmingly located within the two bipolar dimensions, formed by the Security, law and order/Nationalism/Statism—Civil Rights and Traditionalism—Social Progressivism political values.

#### 3.1. *Civil Rights vs. Security, Nationalism and Statism—A Matter of Right and Left*

Results for the Civil Rights political value are evidence of the grouping of parties into two main blocks according to their members' degree of commitment to liberal democracy and civil rights. The high scores of right-wing party members and liberals are in contrast with the much lower values of trust in democratic principles and their application in the country, characteristic of both leftists and nationalists (Figure 3). Although the values of the representatives of all parties participating in the study are positive, i.e., they more or less support the values accepted as fundamental in Western democratic societies, the representatives of right-wing parties stand out as the most prominent supporters of the principles of the liberal democratic state, followed by liberals.

At the same time, the low scores of Bulgarian leftists and nationalists are determined by their radical criticism of how these principles are applied in the country and rarely by explicit rejection of democratic values. Thus, when members of these two types of parties give a negative answer to the question of whether they agree with the statement that there is no better system of government than democracy, they express their doubts not so much about the form of government itself (although reservations about it among some nationalist and left-wing respondents cannot be ignored), but rather about the potential of societies

like Bulgaria to adapt to it and enjoy the benefits it provides. A Bulgarian Socialist Party member in his sixties put it succinctly: “Democracy is a good thing but it is not well-suited to us. We need to adapt it to us, and not adapt to it” (All text in quotation marks and italics are direct quotes of respondents’ statements. For the sake of brevity, and also when a phrase is used by several respondents, for some of the quotes, only the respondent’s political party type is indicated). Left-wing and nationalist party members’ mistrust of democracy reflects widespread attitudes among Bulgarian citizens, as evidenced by EVS 2008 and 2018 data and by surveys representative of the Bulgarian population (Globsec Trends 2017; Trend 2017; Pew Research Center 2018).



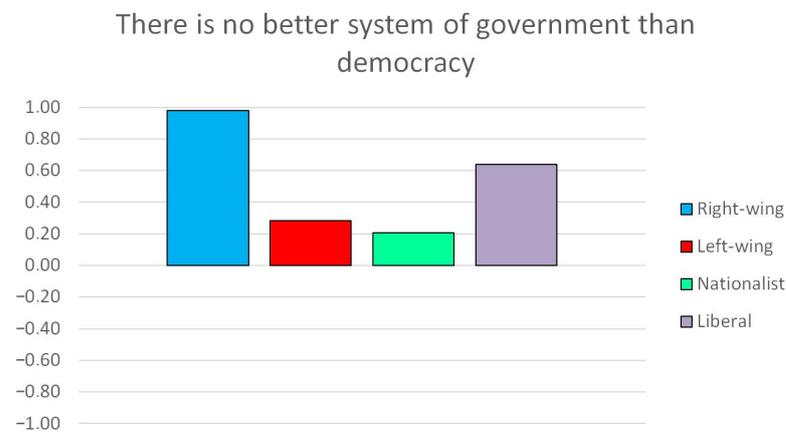
**Figure 3.** Results for the political value of Civil Rights.

All right-wing party members are confident that democratic government has no alternative (Figure 4), with some respondents asserting that the very assumption of the existence of alternatives to democracy testifies to anti-democratic, authoritarian attitudes and should be denounced. Compared with them, some liberals are more inclined to doubt the validity of this maxim. Distrust of democracy as the best system of government, however, is particularly pronounced among leftists and nationalists. It is obvious that the chairman of the Bulgarian Socialist Party/BSP/, Kornelia Ninova, voiced the thoughts of a large part of the supporters and members of the left-wing and nationalist parties when she uttered the now infamous statement “Democracy took much away from us,” which turns out to be the best summary of the mass disappointment of the leftists and nationalists with the transition to democracy and market economy in the country during the last 30 years. Apart from disapproval of the Bulgarian transition, it also refers to the nostalgia for the times of the rule of Todor Zhivkov, when, according to some leftists and nationalists, “. . . we had a normal state and order, and there were no unemployed and poor people”. (Todor Zhivkov was the de-facto head of state of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria from 1954 to 1989.) This is a view that is typical not only of left-wing and nationalist party members but also of large swathes of the Bulgarian population aged 55 and above.

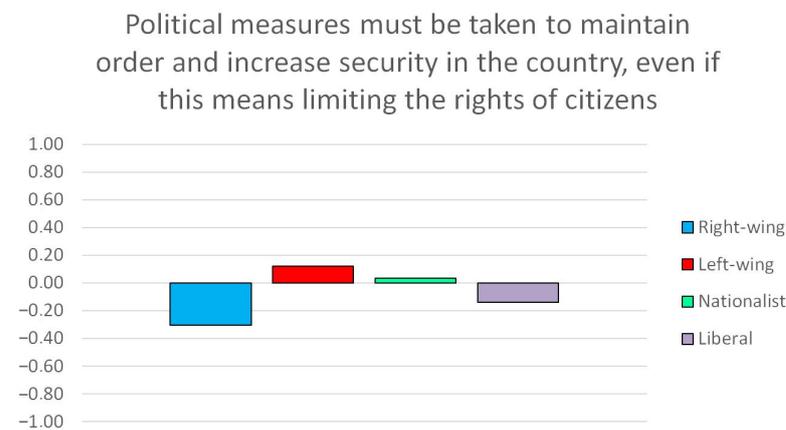
Security, a basic psychological need, forms part of the motivational substructure of conservative ideologies and, in the West, has been traditionally associated with a right-wing political orientation. As a political value, Security “translates” primal human motivational needs for Security into the institutionalized language of politics and prescribes concrete policies for the protection of the security of individuals and the nation. Our research results are in line with previous research findings regarding the association of needs for Security in Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, with a left-wing political orientation (Thorisdottir et al. 2007).

Left-wing party members stand out among all respondents in their willingness to trade Civil Rights for order and Security, as well as in their strong support for enhanced powers for law enforcement to combat crime (Figures 5 and 6). Thus, in Bulgaria, leftists are more inclined to opt for Security when faced with the proverbial “Security vs. freedom”

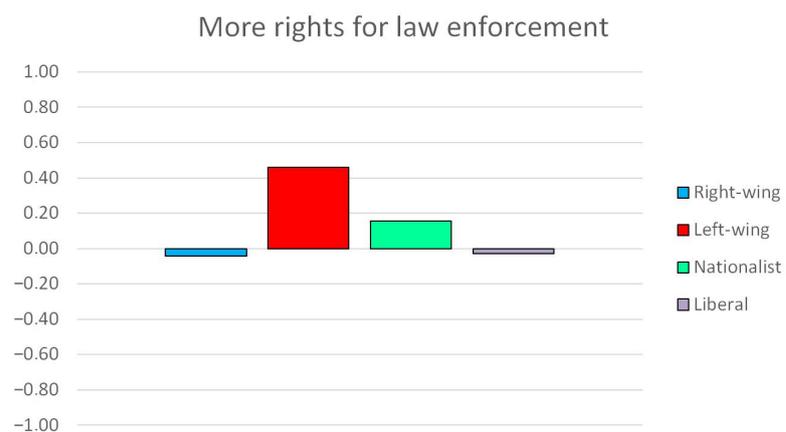
dilemma, while right-wing and liberal respondents are much less willing to trade Civil Rights for Security.



**Figure 4.** Agreement with the statement, “There is no better system of government than democracy”.



**Figure 5.** Agreement with the statement, “Political measures must be taken to maintain order and increase Security in the country...”.



**Figure 6.** Agreement with the statement, “The police should have more powers to better protect us from crime”.

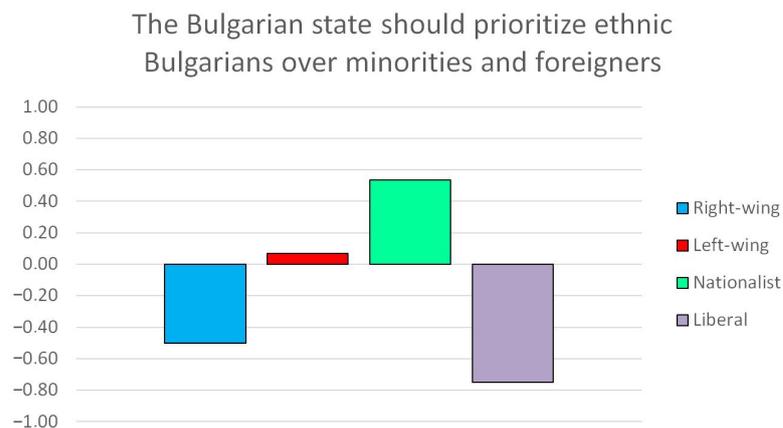
Left-wing party members also express support for the idea of a “strong-hand rule” in Bulgaria as the only viable option to address the demographic, social, and political crises (or “catastrophes,” according to the nationalist discourse) that have been plaguing the country—a position that is also supported in an equal measure by liberal respondents, and

adamantly rejected by right-wing democrats (Figure 7). Such extreme statist attitudes in support of a highly centralized and even authoritarian government—a “power vertical” similar to the political system of the Russian Federation, were freely discussed during in-depth interviews with nationalists, leftists, and liberals, which provided ample empirical material for the reconsideration of the application of ideological labels in Bulgaria.



**Figure 7.** Agreement with the statement, “In order for the situation in Bulgaria to improve, a “strong hand” rule is necessary”.

Regarding Ethnic Nationalism, the refusal by the majority of leftists to reject explicitly the openly discriminatory (yet common among Bulgarian nationalists) idea that the Bulgarian state should prioritize ethnic Bulgarians over minorities and immigrants (Figure 8) supports the initial hypothesis regarding the popularity of nationalist sentiments among left-wingers and confirms the usefulness of the political-values approach to measuring political attitudes and ideological orientation in Bulgaria for identifying the ensemble of conservative political values in the country.



**Figure 8.** Agreement with the statement, “The Bulgarian state should prioritize ethnic Bulgarians over minorities and foreigners”.

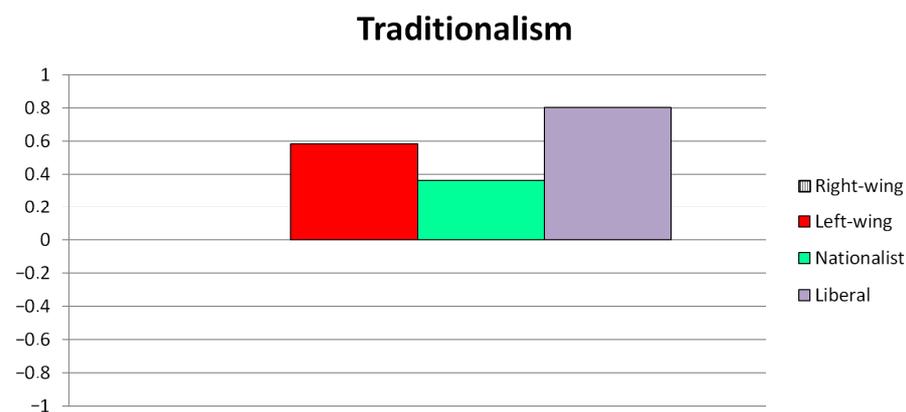
At this stage of research, results obtained regarding the political values of Civil Rights, Security, Nationalism, and Statism provide empirical support to Inconsistency models 1 and 2. Bulgarian left-wing party members express mistrust in Bulgarian democracy and are more likely to be socially conservative and hold traditionalist, statist, and nationalistic beliefs. At the same time, right-wing party members have low scores on Security, a conservative political value traditionally viewed as right-wing. Both findings demonstrate inconsistent ideological patterns and are in line with research on the political views of citizens of Bulgaria, Poland, Serbia, Hungary and other CEE states, demonstrating the

deviation of these views from established ideological models (Thorisdottir et al. 2007; Todosijevic 2008; Radkiewicz 2017; Malka et al. 2019; Wenzel and Żerkowska-Balas 2020; Wójcik et al. 2021).

### 3.2. Traditionalism vs. Social Progressivism—An Age-Old Battle in a New Ideological Context

The political values Traditionalism and Social Progressivism are jointly surveyed through a battery of questions focusing, on the one hand, on different aspects of tradition in general and, on the other hand, on non-traditional socio-cultural phenomena and forms of expression of human individuality that have the potential for radical change and redefinition of established norms. Results provide evidence of a Traditionalism–Progressivism cleavage at the Bulgarian local party-elite level, remarkable for its ideological inconsistency, with leftists almost unanimous in their defense of tradition from “the excesses of individualism” and right-wingers generally tolerating or supporting new social phenomena.

As with the other political values under study, the results reveal significant differences in Traditionalism scores between members of right-wing parties and those of all other participants. Right-wingers are the only group that, as a whole, does not view Traditionalism as a significant value priority (Figure 9). At the opposite pole are the representatives of the nationalists, whose results for this political value are close to the maximum, with left-wing party members and liberals also exhibiting a markedly traditionalist orientation.



**Figure 9.** Traditionalism results. Note: The score of right-wing party members is exactly 0.00 and is not visible in the figure.

Abortion, the stance that is one of the main indicators for labeling an individual as socially liberal or conservative in the USA and Western Europe, has been the subject of heated debate for decades. In Bulgaria, however, a public debate on this issue has not taken place yet. Nevertheless, the issue of abortion was included in the empirical research tool in order to add to the scientific understanding of the images of Bulgarian liberals and conservatives at the beginning of the 21st century. The most significant finding is liberals' extremely low levels of support for women's right to choose whether to terminate the pregnancy (Figure 10). And if the motives of most leftists and nationalists for the ban on abortions are informed by the demographic crisis in Bulgaria and not so much by religious motives, then for liberals, the leading reason for the opposition to abortions is the respect for the traditional religious values of the Muslim community in Bulgaria. Thus, ironically, members of the liberal MRF political party can best be described as traditionalists who do not hesitate to declare their opposition to easily accessible abortions.

Unlike the abortion issue, the question of the ratification of the 2011 Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (better known in Bulgaria as the “Istanbul Convention”) has generated an intense public debate in Bulgarian society (Darakchi 2019). Nationalist and leftist respondents fear that the document is a “double-bottomed suitcase” which, under the guise of protecting women from domestic violence, would impose the so-called “gender ideology,” aiming

to “legalize the third sex” and introduce “gender education” in schools, paving the way for the legalization of homosexual marriages in Bulgaria in the future. Opponents of the Convention consider it an extremely dangerous precedent that will not only deal a heavy blow against “traditional Bulgarian family and Orthodox values” but will also “corrupt our children” by introducing such ideology as mandatory in schools. All these concerns are widely shared by the representatives of the nationalist and left-wing parties, who express strong negative opinions on the document (Figure 11). As a middle-aged leftist put it, “. . .Nothing is more dangerous than gender ideology—it violates the natural order and the family”. According to nationalists and socialists, Bulgaria should follow the example of countries like Russia, which “. . .hold on to their Orthodox values” and should resolutely refuse to ratify it. A female left-wing activist in her fifties contends that the heated debate the Convention generated in the country is proof that “. . .the nation’s immune system is working”. Thus, the Convention played the role of a catalyst for intense conservative mobilization, serving as a sort of litmus test for an individual’s liberal or conservative ideological orientation in the social sphere and a dividing line in the emerging opposition between the two ideologies in Bulgarian society.

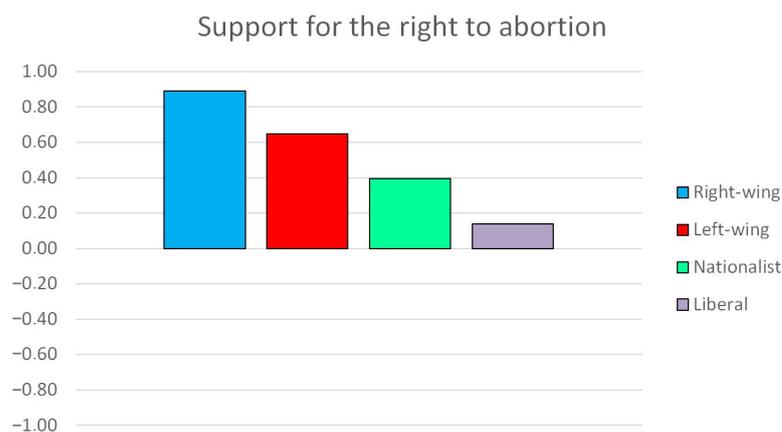


Figure 10. Support for the right to abortion.

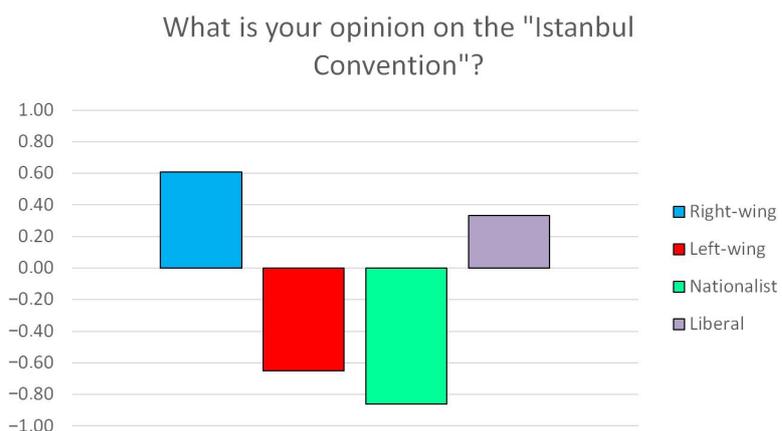


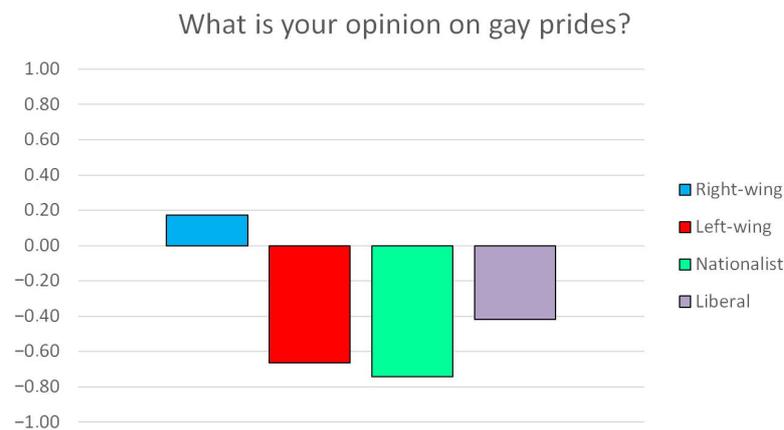
Figure 11. Answers to the question “What is your opinion on the “Istanbul Convention”?”

Right-wing respondents disagree resolutely with such, in the words of some respondents, “conspiracy theories” and indicate the purpose of the Convention is to provide mechanisms for the protection of women from domestic violence, a problem that has been the focus of attention in Bulgaria in recent years. MRF liberals’ attitudes range from neutral to positive, with only two respondents viewing the Convention as a social threat.

The above respondents’ opinions conform to the official positions of their respective parties, with the Bulgarian Socialist Party (left-wing) and Vazrazhdane (a nationalist party)

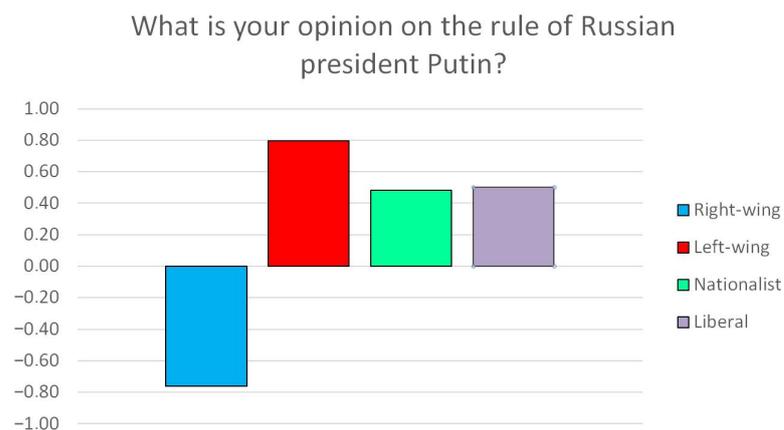
declaring firm opposition to the ratification and Democratic Bulgaria (right-wing) and the MRF supporting it. In 2018, the Convention was declared unconstitutional by the Bulgarian Constitutional Court. Thus, Bulgaria is one of the few EU states that have not ratified it.

Another extremely controversial issue in Bulgaria, gay pride, divides the respondents in an already familiar way—on one side are the right-wing democrats who express a positive attitude and defend them, albeit not as emphatically as they support the Istanbul Convention. On the other are the nationalists, leftists, and liberals, who oppose such demonstrations, with some even calling for banning them altogether in Bulgaria (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Answers to the question “What is your opinion on gay prides?”

Finally, results obtained through the question regarding the Bulgarian party-elite members’ attitude to Russian president Vladimir Putin provide evidence in support of social psychology theories on deep-seated psychological needs for order, Security, and affiliation to traditional social structures, forming the motivational basis of the support for conservative or authoritarian political regimes and leaders (Altemeyer 1981, 1996; Duckitt 2001; Napier and Jost 2008). Thus, supporters of Putin’s rule are found en masse among all three party types (left-wing, nationalist, and liberal) that also have high Traditionalism scores (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.** Respondents’ opinions of the rule of Russian Federation president Putin.

The above results demonstrate the main ideological cleavages in modern Bulgarian society—those between the values of Traditionalism and Social Progressivism and between political values of the Statism cluster and Civil Rights. The fact that the political values belonging to the Conservatism ideological category (Traditionalism, Security, Statism, and Nationalism) represent value priorities for the same groups of people (namely, left-wingers, liberals, and nationalists) confirms the existence of a conservative political value complex

that integrates attitudes in support of a traditional social order with strong statist beliefs, advocating for a centralized, even autocratic, state that can protect the interests of the majority against external and internal threats. As of 2019, Bulgarian left-wing, liberal, and nationalist party members viewed Putin's Russia as such a state.

This finding lends further empirical support for all three Inconsistency models, with left-wingers and liberals exhibiting varying but significant degrees of Traditionalism and support for Russia's statist political system and right-wingers either rejecting or expressing indifference to traditionalist values and vehemently opposing Putin's authoritarianism.

### 3.3. Statistical Processing of Data—Statistically Significant Relationships between Ideological and Political Categories

The software product IBM SPSS Statistics, version 23, was used for statistical processing of the empirical information. Two types of dependencies were studied—between party type and political values and among separate political values. Relationships with a  $p$ -value (Approximate significance)  $< 0.01$  were considered significant. Although the standard in the social sciences is to accept relationships with a  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  as significant, in recent years, a number of researchers, as well as the American Statistical Association, have recommended that this value be lowered due to the risk of misinterpretation and misuse of statistical tests (Wasserstein and Lazar 2016). In this regard, I adopt stricter criteria and ignore  $p$ -values higher than 0.01 in order to ensure the reliability and significance of the investigated relationships.

The left–right category and its constituent political values of Equality and Free Enterprise exhibit statistically significant relationships with a number of political categories in the social sphere. I use Cramer's V coefficient to measure the strength of the dependence between two nominal variables, and the nominal dependence coefficient  $\lambda$  (Lambda)—to establish the direction of the dependence. The results of the analysis of the strength of the relationships between the nominal variables show a robust relationship between the following pairs of variables:

- Conservatism—left/right ( $p$ -value = 0.000; Cramer's V = 0.673;  $\lambda$ : Conservatism = 0.267, left/right = 0.375).
- Security—Equality ( $p$ -value = 0.000; Cramer's V = 0.460).
- Statism—left/right ( $p$ -value = 0.000; Cramer's V = 0.590;  $\lambda$ : Statism = 0.297, left/right = 0.250).
- Traditionalism—left/right ( $p$ -value = 0.000; Cramer's V = 0.577;  $\lambda$ : Traditionalism = 0.261, left/right = 0.229).
- Attitude toward Putin—left/right ( $p$ -value = 0.000; Cramer's V = 0.633;  $\lambda$ : Putin = 0.471, left/right = 0.104).

Conservatism exhibits a strong correlation with Equality, and, as evident from the scatterplot, the correlation is linear, i.e., the higher the values for the economic category Equality, the more socially conservative the individual is (Figure 14).

Equality is also in a significant linear correlation with Security, Statism, and Traditionalism, confirming the initial hypothesis of a link between left-wing economic orientation and the need for Security in Bulgaria. In a similar vein, Conservatism exhibits a very strong linear correlation with Statism (Figure 15).

In summary, data processing results suggest that party members with left-wing economic attitudes (in all parties) are more likely to hold socially conservative, traditionalist, and statist beliefs and to approve of Russian president Putin's rule, while those with right-wing beliefs are more likely to espouse liberal views in the social sphere, largely opposite to their leftist counterparts. As a whole, the statistical processing findings of this study confirm the utility of the employed approach, based on the clear distinction between political values in the social and those in the economic sphere.

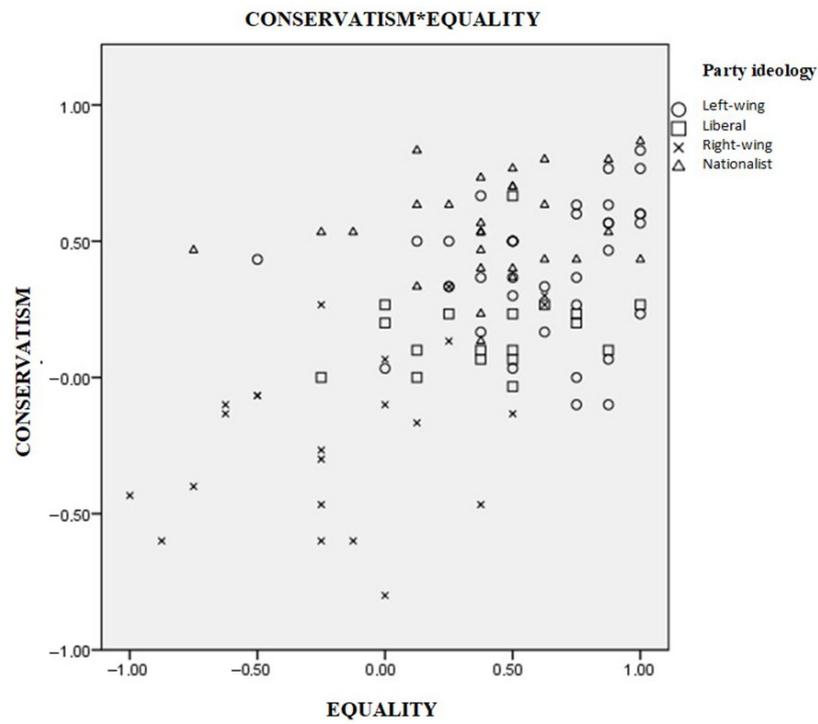


Figure 14. Conservatism \* Equality scatterplot.

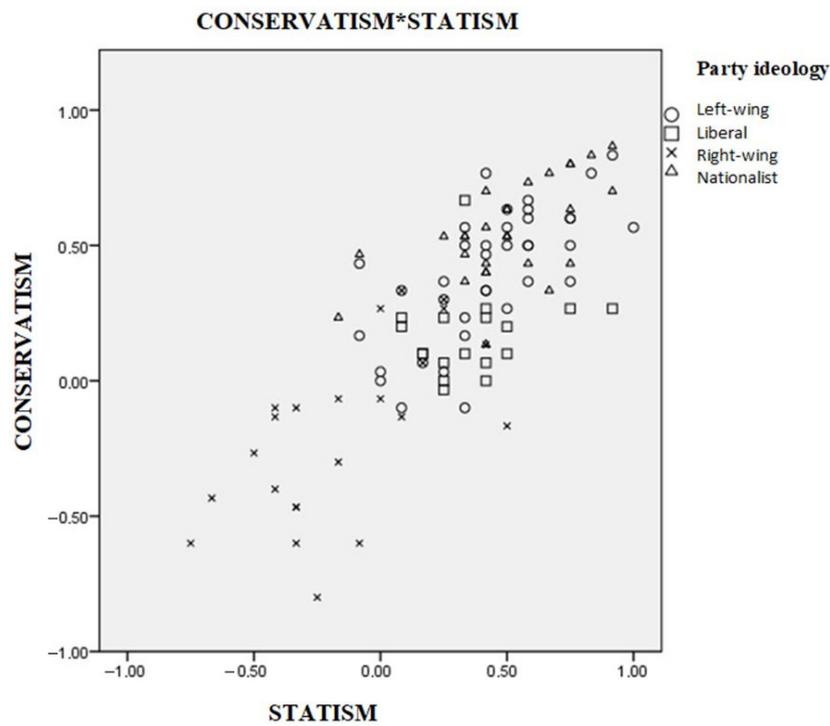


Figure 15. Conservatism \* Statism scatterplot.

### 3.4. Visualization of Respondents' Ideological Orientation

In order to pinpoint the exact location of ideological-political orientation within the ideological continuum both at the individual and at the group level, the political beliefs of each of the research participants are plotted on a scatterplot—a coordinate system composed of the two bipolar dimensions of Social Liberalism–Conservatism and Economic left–right. On the scatterplot, the vast majority of leftists are located in the upper right quadrant of the figure, corresponding to economically left-wing Social Conservatism (Figure 16). Out of

thirty-four left-wing participants, only four are absent from the mentioned sector, and only two of them do not espouse left-wing economic beliefs. Such homogeneity in left-wing party members’ convictions, however, comes with the proviso that Social Conservatism does not traditionally belong in the Western ideological left-wing specter.

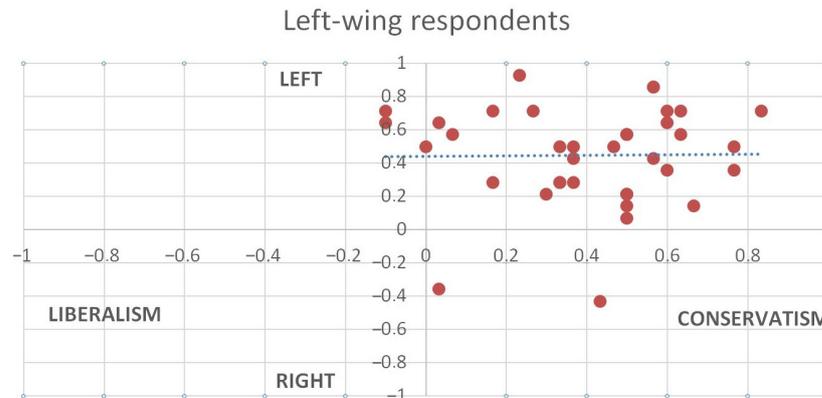


Figure 16. Generalized ideological and political beliefs of left-wing respondents.

Despite sharing the same sector of the coordinate system, nationalist respondents are more traditionalist than left-wingers and predictably score much higher on Conservatism (Figure 17).

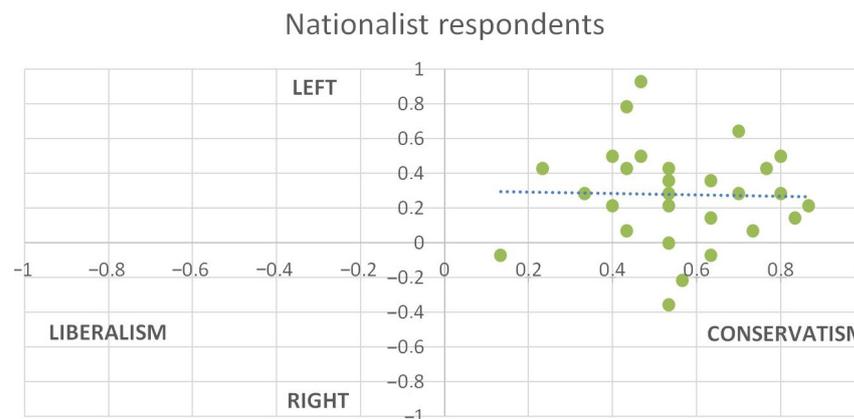


Figure 17. Generalized ideological and political beliefs of nationalist respondents.

Right-wing respondents’ political views in Bulgaria are almost diametrically opposite to those of members of left-wing parties. They are predominantly located in the lower left quadrant, corresponding to right-wing economic and socially liberal orientation (Figure 18). Their attitudes exhibit a lower degree of homogeneity than those of left-wingers, with three members of right-wing parties having more of a left-wing economic orientation and six of them being more conservative than liberal. However, the majority of them are characterized by right-wing Liberalism or libertarianism—an ideologically inconsistent “cocktail” that is largely unconventional for established democracies. For participants on the right, democratic individual rights and freedoms represent a supreme value that should not be violated even in the name of the interest of the majority. It is their firm stance in favor of the primacy of individual rights over the public interest that makes right-wing democrats in Bulgaria much more inclined to show understanding and tolerance toward non-traditional family forms and social phenomena, and that gives them the highest Social Progressivism score among all participating party types.

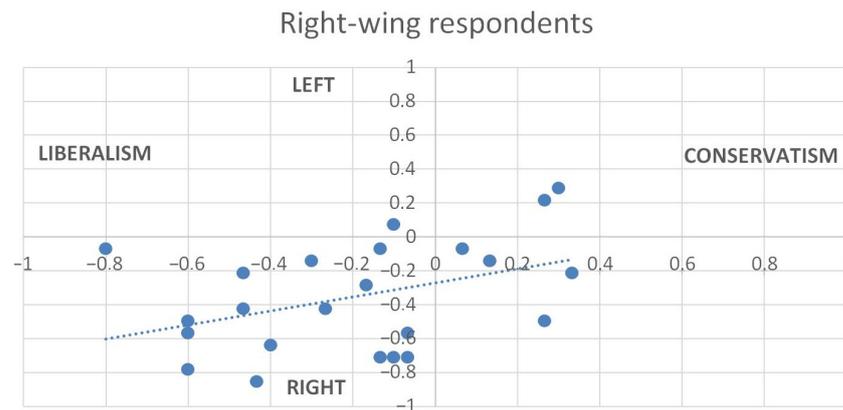


Figure 18. Generalized ideological and political beliefs of right-wing respondents.

The liberals’ peculiar mix of strong traditionalist and statist views, culminating in their respect for Putin, together with their staunch defense of Civil Rights and democracy in Bulgaria, leads to their grouping symmetrically on both sides near the axis dividing Liberalism from Conservatism (Figure 19).

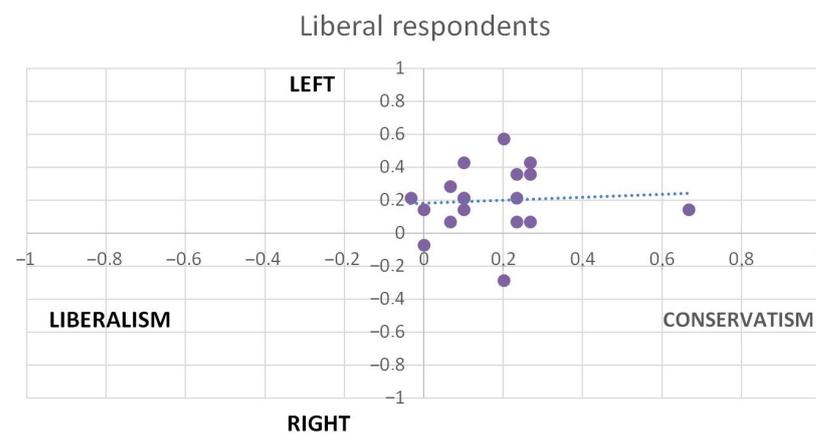


Figure 19. Generalized ideological and political beliefs of liberal respondents.

Of all surveyed respondents in the four party types, the liberals are the only ones that can be defined as centrists. The ideological heterogeneity that characterizes MRF members’ opinions regarding the social sphere makes labels such as Social Liberalism and Social Conservatism inapplicable to them. These participants’ emphatically traditionalist and conservative positions on abortion, same-sex marriage, and same-sex adoption are offset by strong support for liberal ideas such as minority rights, the primacy of individual rights over group interest, and acceptance of immigrants. A possible explanation could be that their liberal attitudes are, to a greater extent, informed by the ethnic origin (Turkish minority) of liberal respondents and the MRF’s *raison d’être* as a political party dedicated to the protection of minority rights than by their authentic individual liberal orientation. This notion is supported by the liberals’ clear approval of Russian president Putin’s rule—another significant, if ironic, finding of the study. Representatives of the liberal MRF party choose to ignore Putin’s record on human rights and freedom of speech, emphasizing the dignity, power, and authority they believe he brings to the presidential institution. This position (in which they share an identical score with the nationalists) is a logical consequence of their relatively high Statism score, as well as their unanimous opinion (on a par with nationalists) in favor of the claims that the defense of national sovereignty is the most important task of the state and that it is the duty of every citizen to honor and support his/her country.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate the existence of a discrepancy between the classical Western political definitions, which associate left-wing ideology with Social Liberalism and right-wing ideology with Social Conservatism, and the reality of the surveyed sample of the political views of members of the Bulgarian political party elite by 2019. The results indicate that the political and ideological beliefs of members of left-wing parties belong to a conservative value complex, integrating traditionalist, statist, and nationalist attitudes regarding the social sphere, while the beliefs of right-wing party members are characterized by socially liberal convictions. Results thus warrant the drawing of a parallel between the Bulgarian conservative value complex and the TAN axis of the GAL-TAN dimension. Findings also highlight Conservatism's wide scope in Bulgaria, including a variety of political values generally aimed at preserving traditional social order. In addition to the political values typical for this ideology in the West, such as Security, Traditionalism, and Nationalism, this study also suggests the relevance of Statism, a political value that reflects a conservative (in the Bulgarian context) aspiration for a strong centralized state that provides free education and healthcare and deals with a "strong hand" with threats to individual and national security. In contrast to modern Western countries, where Statism is accepted as a left-liberal stance, for party members (regardless of whether they explicitly subscribe to it or not), it is an expression of a conservative tendency to preserve the benefits of the welfare state, the planned economy and Security from the time of Socialism, and an attempt to resist the modern tendencies of weakening the national states under the pressure of international capital and supranational structures.

The study indicates the coexistence among party members of two competing main narratives about democracy in the country, distinguished by the extent to which participants "persist" in their democratic beliefs despite widespread disappointment in how the democratic ideal is implemented in our country. The first narrative can be labeled "Will for Democracy." It is characteristic of the right wing and liberals, who declare strong support for democratic principles and tend to blame the rudimentary democratic culture of Bulgarian society for the failures of these principles in Bulgaria. They believe that this shortcoming, in turn, can be resolved not with its opposite but in accordance with the famous maxim, only with "more democracy" within the framework of an evolutionary process in which Bulgarian society will inevitably, despite difficulties, follow the predetermined path to "normal, Western societies".

The competing narrative is that of the left wing and the nationalists. It could be labeled "Mistrust in democracy." The respondents in this group are largely discouraged by the prospects of the Bulgarian state and society, and, putting the blame on democracy, they feel suspicious both regarding its applicability in our country and the sincerity of the Western countries, which are democracy's main defenders. Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which the dissatisfaction with Bulgarian democratic practice after 1989 affects the spread of fundamental suspicion and mistrust of democracy as a form of government, it should be noted that such low approval for democracy is indicative of a systematic failure to address social problems, a failure that may potentially lead to support for alternative models of governance, should they emerge.

One outcome of these findings is the observation of a significant degree of "homogeneity in ideological inconsistency" in Bulgaria, given that both the elite and voters follow the same patterns of inconsistency. This is an important difference from the United States, for example, where ideological inconsistency can be observed among electorates but not among party elites. The results also confirm the usefulness of the study of political values as the expression of basic personal values in the domain of politics (Schwartz 2012; Schwartz et al. 2010) and the indispensability of the clear distinction between political values pertaining to the social and the economic sphere for research on ideo-political orientation in ideological inconsistency-prone states in the CEE region.

By employing the strict distinction between political values pertaining to each of the two spheres, this conceptualization addresses the warnings of a number of researchers

who contend that unidimensional models prove insufficient to capture the diversity of ideological orientations. These caveats are even more relevant for the new democracies of Eastern Europe, where the ideological inconsistency phenomenon is best explained as a consequence of the decades-long one-party Socialist rule that rendered the old socio-demographic divisions obsolete and hindered the development of class-based political attitudes in the region. As a result, when multi-party democracy and pluralism finally replaced the Socialist regimes in those states, individual citizens and social groups could not rely on the long Western political tradition of liberal, conservative, right-wing, or left-wing attitudes and started forming their ideological positions based primarily on their attitudes toward the Socialist ideology that they were familiar with. Thus, in the first years of democracy, the main cleavage in those societies was that between “nostalgic Socialists” and pro-Western democrats. This division is still present in one form or another in CEE states (mainly in the form of a statist vs. free market attitudes divide) and is starting to merge with the traditional Western liberal–conservative divide, manifesting itself more as a values conflict than as a traditional political cleavage (Konstantinov 2022). Such a background makes one-dimensional models imprecise and unreliable tools for measuring CEE citizens’ ideological orientation. Besides, changing realities even in the world’s oldest democracies require updating and improving the models used in these countries to determine and measure political attitudes.

The implications of the Bulgarian party elite’s ideological inconsistency are potentially significant for researchers, as the inconsistency could provide an explanatory perspective for analyzing the determinants of Bulgaria’s hollowing and backsliding of democracy, as well as the peculiarities in voter support for populist and libertarian political parties. At the same time, inconsistent patterns of ideological orientation among the general population have far-reaching influence on public opinion, election results, and public policy in any country, as candidates and decision-makers recognize inconsistency and take it into consideration.

From an alternative perspective, however, the use of the label “ideological inconsistency” itself when referring to ideological orientation in CEE states could be problematized. Further research is needed to investigate whether what the traditional Western ideological perspective labels as inconsistency or ideological anomaly might not be the logical outcome of the historical circumstances and socio-economic context that contributed to shaping political beliefs in the CEE region. The present study’s finding as to the overlap between the ideological patterns of attitudes of party elites and the general electorate in Bulgaria could provide a starting point for future research in this field. As the Western ideological space itself is changing and becoming more diverse, and with non-traditional, heterogeneous, and inconsistent ideological configurations on the rise, CEE states like Bulgaria could provide important clues to the psychological and historical underpinnings of the underlying processes that led to the formation of heterogeneous ideological patterns in individuals and social groups.

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