https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2025-04-07

Philosophy and Contemporary
Философия и съвременност

ARISTOTLE, BENJAMIN CONSTANT AND BULGARIAN DEMOCRACY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT OF BULGARIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRAJECTORY, 1989 – 2021

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Abstract. This article examines the democratic development of Bulgaria during the period 1989 – 2021 through the lens of political philosophy, focusing on the ideas of Aristotle and Benjamin Constant. Applying Aristotle's principles of virtuous political regimes and the importance of a strong middle class, the analysis identifies three major challenges within this historical timeframe: the lack of an enlightened understanding of political rights, the absence of a robust middle class, and an oligarchic model of governance that tends to serve narrow interests rather than the common good. Drawing on Constant's call for moral and civic education to increase political participation, the article argues that non-governmental organizations providing informal education play a crucial role in cultivating competent, virtuous citizens capable of addressing these issues. It concludes that the widespread development of civic competencies, driven by NGO-led informal education, is essential for strengthening Bulgarian democracy by expanding the middle class, promoting media literacy, and fostering an informed understanding of positive liberty and political rights.

Keywords: Aristotle; Benjamin Constant; Bulgaria; Democracy; Politics; Political Philosophy

Introduction

When it comes to discussing modern liberal democracies, the theoretical and political significance of thinkers from Antiquity is often neglected. Yet, even thousands of years after their works were written, these thinkers are extremely useful in explaining certain socio-political events. One of those thinkers is the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived in the fourth century B.C. His legacy can be found in a wide range of fields, including "logic, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, ethics, political theory, aesthetics, and rhetoric" (Shields 2008, n.p). Although this article discusses the democratic characteristics of Bulgaria, its empirical scope is deliberately limited to the period between 1989 and 2021. This timeframe reflects

the availability of coherent datasets and allows for a consistent comparison across international indices and scholarly assessments. The aim is therefore not to provide a real-time evaluation of Bulgaria in 2024 – 2025, but to examine the country's democratic trajectory over a defined historical period.

Aristotle's views on political regimes, transitions, relationships between individuals, and the mechanisms through which regimes are preserved are relevant in explaining several of the developments in Bulgaria over the past three decades. From 1944 to 1989, Bulgaria was a socialist country with a totalitarian government that sought to spread collectivistic values across society (Crampton 2007, p. 180). After facing unprecedented challenges, in 1989 the regime fell, and what followed was a transition period to a liberal democracy with a market economy. Genuine transition, however, happened only on the micro (individual) level. No effective transition occurred on a macro (state) level in terms of Aristotle's classification of governments. On paper, Bulgaria switched from a totalitarian regime to a democratic one, but, just as before, the government continued to serve the interests of a small political elite.

Aristotle's discussion of the problems of societies in transition remains relevant in the modern Bulgarian context. The lack of a middle class with an enlightened understanding of their political rights, not to mention the oligarchic model by which the country is governed, has constituted the Bulgarian state's major problems since 1989. Aristotle and other political thinkers would argue that the solution to this is education. These days, however, education is not solely the responsibility of the state. Indeed, formal education, which is provided by the state, is only one part of the equation toward a proper democratic state; informal education is of paramount importance for finding a solution to Bulgaria's problems. Before commencing this, however, it is necessary to consider the foundations of political philosophy, since these enable us to carry out further normative prescriptions.

Aristotle's Political Foundation

Aristotle explored the different forms of government and was not only concerned with what the best form of government was, but also wrote about inferior systems. For Aristotle, the organization of people into states with governments was a key component of their achieving happiness or satisfaction in life, which was something that all philosophers of the agora shared. For him, political association is the supreme form of associations and its ultimate aim is happiness (*Politics* 1252a1 – 7).

It is clear then that a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of crime and for the sake of exchange. These are all conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is a community of well-being in families and aggregations of families, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. (*Politics* 1252b27 – 30).

At the core of any political regime is the distribution of power between entities based on what the regime views as fair and equal (*Politics* 1289a10 – 15).

His classification of those political arrangements depends on how big the governing authority is: one individual, a small group, or the community as a whole. According to Aristotle, there are six general ways in which societies could be governed; three of these forms are "true forms" of government, and three of them are "defective and perverted forms." When a state, which is not corrupt, is governed by one ruler, it is a monarchy. A small governing body makes up an aristocracy, and a government by the masses is a polity (*Politics* 1279a26 – 33).

By not being "corrupt," Aristotle means that those governing bodies rule for the community, not for themselves—"the true forms of government, therefore, are those in which the one, or the few, or the many, govern with a view to the common interest" (*Politics* 1279a17–21). Aristotle also describes the corrupt political regimes – "governments which rule with a view to the private interest, whether to the one, or the few, or of the many, are perversions" (*Politics* 1279b4 – 10). The corrupt political regime of monarchy is tyranny, the one of aristocracy is oligarchy, and the one of polity is democracy (*Politics* 1279b10 – 15).

Tyranny is a kind of monarchy which has in view the interest of the monarch only; oligarchy has in view the interest of the wealthy; democracy, of the needy: none of them the common good of all. (*Politics* 1279b15 – 20).

During Antiquity, city-states were smaller than modern ones. This meant that, in democracies, the many could rule directly by participating in open councils. This is what, in our modern context, we would call direct democracy. According to Aristotle, oligarchies and democracies are the most common forms of government, with one real difference between them: "poverty and wealth." He argues that when the rich rule, this would be described as oligarchy, and when the poor rule, it would be a democracy: "Wherever men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is an oligarchy, and where the poor rule, that is a democracy" (*Politics* 1279b22 – 33). It is intriguing to note that democracy, for Aristotle, is an inferior form of government since the majority exclusively seeks their own goals.

Democracies produce polarized societies, containing rich people and poor people and not much in between (what we would today call the "middle class"). Democratic systems put on a pedestal equality to such an excessive extent that people "ostracize and banish from the city for a time those who seem to predominate too much through their wealth, or the number of their friends, or through any other political influence" (*Politics* 1284b22 – 27). The best form of government, in his view, is a polity: a regime in which everyone participates in political decision-making, aiming for the benefit of the whole community (not only for the small governing community).

Now this clearly raises the question: how do we determine the interest of the whole community and make sure that the quality of the people in power is

reasonable? Regardless of the fact that Aristotle did not specifically define what the "common interest" is (and that this concept also evolved tremendously over the centuries), we can get a glimpse of what he intended to outline. Aristotle foreshadowed these ideals by linking the middle class to virtue itself. Thus, a proper form of government always strives to cultivate a happy middle class by constantly adapting the laws so that they reflect the needs of the middle class.

The happy life is the life according to unimpeded virtue, and that virtue is a mean (average), then the life which is in a mean, and in a mean attainable by everyone, must be the best. Thus it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered, in which the middle class is large, and larger if possible than both the other classes (rich and poor). (*Politics* 1295b35 – 1296a7).

A larger middle class, according to Aristotle, produces more stable states that strive to achieve the common good. In order to explain the importance of the middle class for society, we must examine Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean.

Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

According to Aristotle, the ultimate goal of human existence is happiness. The Greek word for happiness is eudaimonia. This term is best translated as "well-being." To Aristotle, a state of well-being must be maintained throughout a person's whole existence: "One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a18 – 20). Therefore, well-being is not a momentary feeling that people experience at a particular point due to a pleasant stimulus. Well-being is, in fact, something continuous and long-lasting. To Aristotle, there is only one way to achieve this desirable state, which is through habitual virtuous actions. A person who acts virtuously in a consistent manner is a virtuous person. Virtue is a means towards an end; it is a tool that every human being can employ to live a happy life. Aristotle proceeds to explain what a virtuous action is and how to distinguish it from the wide variety of bad choices that one could make.

He argues that people have to make choices all the time, and they always have a number of alternatives when it comes to their conduct. Although there are many possible choices, there are two which are extremely wrong – "defect and excess" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a12 – 14). Between these two extremes, there are many other choices, but most of such choices are not virtuous. Aristotle believes that in each case there is only one virtuous action: "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b36 – 1107a2). He underlines that this mean is relative, not universal. Therefore, a decision that is virtuous for one person might not be such for another. Since virtue does not have a generic value, it is relative to the life, habits, and goals of the individual who chooses and acts. Acting virtuously, therefore, entails that

people have the freedom and opportunity to do so. Furthermore, Aristotle argues that people need experience in order to make the right choice; the more experience we have, the more self-knowledge we have. Knowing ourselves allows us to make virtuous decisions. Once a person has enough experience and, therefore, enough self-knowledge, they are able to live a happy life.

Aristotle also thought that people might make mistakes along the way, but this is not a problem. He assumed that people learn through experience, and this will help them make a proper choice the next time they face similar circumstances. As we can now see, Aristotle's ethical and political theory is in accordance with the prescriptions of the doctrine of the mean. The middle class is an important part of Aristotle's political theory, much as the doctrine of the mean leads to virtuous behavior when we apply it to ethical behavior and the achievement of happiness. It was crucial to lay the groundwork for the forms of government and the doctrine of the mean so as to explain the political transition in Bulgaria through Aristotle's theory.

Aristotle: Political Transitions

Aristotle claims that switches between regimes happen through revolutions, in which the previously subdued class goes against the previously superior class and challenges their governing authority (*Politics* 1301a25 – 30). He also assumes that change of regimes is most likely to happen when a state is ruled as an oligarchy, which would make way to democracy. This is reasonable since it essentially represents a conflict between the large working class and the small circle of the rich and powerful elite. The conflict occurs because the political elite, who are unequal in regard to property and power, "conceive themselves to be unequal wholly" (*Politics* 1301a3 – 7).

There are significant parallels that could be drawn between his theory and the overturn of the Bulgarian communist regime in 1989. The Bulgarian communist state was similar to what Aristotle described as an oligarchy because power was concentrated in a small circle of people called the *nomenklatura* (the communist elite) (Pollack et al. 2004, p. 175). The *nomenklatura* dominated socio-economic life in Bulgaria: they took the most important public offices and constituted the educated party cadres, who had considerably more wealth and power compared to the broader population. Due to a large number of reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, the regime fell after an intra-party coup was carried out on 10 November 1989 (Crampton 2007, p. 398). Theoretically, Aristotle would describe the new form of government that emerged as a polity.

Positive and Negative Liberty

In his masterpiece, The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns, Benjamin Constant paints a two-dimensional picture of people's rights and

freedoms: he sees human liberty as consisting of negative and positive liberty. The former is a "liberty from" – i.e., freedom from interference by institutions, the state, and other individuals (Constant 1819, p. 3). This is a freedom that protects individuals from intrusions by the state and other people in their personal lives. This liberty is a very modern concept that did not exist in ancient times, when most free men were defined by having political or positive liberty. This is the liberty to rule oneself, to contribute to the definition and scope of the legislation, and to take part in political decisions (Constant 1819, p. 8).

Going back to the political transition that happened in Bulgaria, the state became a representative democracy, and every citizen was given the right to participate in political affairs. In fact, however, the political status quo remained, and certain political actors who were influential before the collapse of the regime continued to shape the political and economic landscape during the early years of the transition. Some of them transferred their political power into economic power, and others took part in building the institutions, parties, and ideas of democratic Bulgaria. Therefore, no actual transition happened on a macro (state) level. There was only a transition on a micro (individual) level.

During the communist regime, it was essential for everyone to establish as many connections (*vruzki*) as possible, so that they could fulfill their daily tasks more efficiently (Brunnbauer 2008, p. 49). It is a misconception that this was an abuse of power; this was merely how the system worked. Without such close connections, few things were possible. Therefore, people learned that they were not by themselves and that everyone was interdependent in the socialist system. After 10 November 1989, this notion of interdependence changed. Bulgarian citizens became free; people grew more individualistic and realized that they no longer needed *vruzki* to accomplish everyday tasks. Pursuing one's own interests independently became the *telos* of the modern Bulgarian citizen. Most studies examining the cultural dimensions of individualism, as developed by Hofstede (1980), indicate that Bulgaria is a moderately individualistic country as of 2020.[1] These insights are confirmed by a study carried out in 2010 that describes the Bulgarian state as "predominantly individualistic" (Karabelova 2011, p. 295). This essential discrepancy between the transition on a micro level and the perpetuated political status quo on a macro level is at the core of the problems that are going to be discussed.

Is Bulgaria a Proper Democracy? Problems with the Political Regime (1989 – 2021)

According to Article 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, the state is defined as a republic with parliamentary government, in which all state power derives from the people and no political party or ideology may usurp the functions of the state.[2] This means that essentially everybody is given the opportunity to

participate in political affairs. In other words, the Constitution of Bulgaria allows for positive liberty to exist. Aristotle would classify this regime as a polity. Regardless of this fact, for the purposes of the article, the term "democracy" will be used to refer to the constitutional status of Bulgaria. To start with the analysis of the modern Bulgarian state, one must consider the criteria according to which a country is classified as a proper democracy. The American political scientist and philosopher Robert Dahl sets five criteria that define political regimes as properly democratic.

First, political equality is necessary for a properly functioning democracy (Dahl 1989, p. 109). Articles 6 and 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria provide citizens with the formal legal framework to vote, run for political office, and raise issues of concern. Since this criterion concerns the *formal distribution* of political rights, it may be regarded as fulfilled in the Bulgarian case. The second criterion, effective participation, requires that citizens not only possess political rights but also have meaningful opportunities to express their views and influence collective decisions (Dahl 1989, p. 109). In principle, the Bulgarian state provides the institutional conditions for electoral participation: elections are not carried out under coercion, the logistical infrastructure allows citizens to exercise their right to vote, and mechanisms exist through which individuals may publicly raise political issues. When it comes to the electoral process, Freedom House – which evaluates "national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process" – assigns Bulgaria a relatively high score of 5.50 out of 7.00 in its *Nations in Transit 2020* assessment.[3]

The third criterion is control of the agenda (Dahl 1989, p. 113). Dahl asks whether a state is legally free to determine which matters become subjects of legislation without interference from external actors. In other words, the political agenda must originate within the community itself. This applies even in representative democracies, since the electorate delegates its political rights to representatives through elections. Bulgaria is an independent state, and its political agenda is set by members of the community, namely, the representatives in parliament, rather than by any external political actor.

The fourth criterion, according to Dahl, is inclusion. A proper democracy must be as inclusive as possible. When determining which members of the demos are to be included, everyone must be taken into account – this is the principle of equal consideration. Moreover, if any group is to be excluded, it must be demonstrated that the members of this group are incapable of understanding what is good or bad for themselves; this is the burden-of-proof principle (Dahl 1989, pp. 112 – 113). According to Article 42 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, all citizens possess political rights except minors (those under 18) and individuals who have been legally deprived of such rights by a court sentence. For the purposes of this

analysis, these exclusions are treated as justified, and thus Bulgaria satisfies this criterion as well.

The last criterion for a proper democracy is an enlightened understanding of people's political rights (Dahl 1989, pp. 112 – 113). Citizens require proper education and, most importantly, access to reliable information. Such information enables members of the demos to make informed decisions and participate meaningfully in political affairs. Free and independent media are essential in this process, and the wider the range of accessible sources, the better. In a proper democracy, individuals are able to consult diverse media outlets and determine for themselves which perspectives to adopt. This essential element of democratic life appears to be deficient in Bulgaria, where many media companies are affiliated with particular political actors rather than operating independently.

According to Freedom House, "journalists face threats and pressure from private owners or public media management" and "many outlets are dependent on financial contributions from the state (through advertising), putting pressure on them for government-friendly coverage."[4] Indeed, Bulgaria's score for media freedom declined from 3 to 2 "due to sustained pressure by the government and pro-government investors on independent media."[2] According to the Press Freedom Index, Bulgaria ranked 111th out of 180 countries in 2020.[2] This is the first highly problematic issue that must be outlined. According to an index measuring the freedom of Bulgarian media, the Independent Media rating declined from 3.75 to 3.50, which also decreased the overall democracy score from 4.61 to 4.54.[5]

Another problem with the modern Bulgarian state in the studied period is the lack of a strong middle class. We already discussed why a strong middle class is necessary for the stability of any proper political regime. Now we will use our theoretical framework and apply it to the Bulgarian state. In the case of political affairs, Aristotle acknowledged that it is not only crucial to know what the best regime is, but also what factors contribute to regime survival: "For one should study not only the best regime but also the regime that is the best possible" (Politics 1288b21 – 22). What contributes toward the survival of the regime is the proportion of people who belong to the middle class, as they occupy the desired mean between the rich and the poor and help maintain balance in the state (Politics 1295b1 – 7). Aristotle argues that for a stable political community, the middle class must outnumber the other two classes. However, this is not the case in Bulgaria. According to research by Eurostat, 46.9% of the population belongs to the middle class, and 43.4% are considered poor.[6]

The importance of the middle class is self-evident, but it has to be explicitly specified: there is a link between economic stability and democratic stability. At the core of any proper democracy is a social and economic contract between citizens, who consent to pay taxes, and a government that offers its services in exchange – this is the well-known social contract that thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke,

and Jean-Jacques Rousseau outlined. The state safeguards the security and welfare of the nation by providing public goods. Examples of such goods are education, security, infrastructure, etc. Essentially, anything that threatens the middle class's economic power threatens democracy, because it creates the conditions for non-compliance with the social contract. The required balance in society is not present, and that is the second problem that Bulgaria faces and has to deal with.

The final problem with Bulgarian democracy is that it is only a formal democracy. There are many contemporary political philosophers and political scientists who hold the opinion that positive liberty was not granted to the Bulgarian *demos* de facto. After the fall of communism, two major parties emerged: the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the United Democratic Forces (UDF) (Zankina 2019, p. 239). Although the structures of the communist-era *nomenklatura* were formally dismantled, many individuals with prior connections to the old regime continued to exert political and economic influence during the early years of the transition. Likewise, a number of the prominent dissidents of the late 1980s entered public office during the 1990s and early 2000s, shaping the initial trajectory of democratic institutions. Through this process, segments of both former *nomenklatura* networks and opposition elites converted their political influence into economic power, and there has been limited entry of new, socially diverse actors – particularly from the middle class – into the political arena.

Aristotle would classify a regime in which there is a small circle of wealthy people at the top of the political hierarchy as an oligarchy. Empirically speaking, Freedom House characterizes the year 2020 by "eroded trust in institutions," restrictions of political competition, deepening antidemocratic tendencies, and attacks by politicians and government officials against civil society organizations.[7] Thus, it could be argued that a proper transition happened only formally and that Bulgaria has not reached the desired state of liberal democratic order, but instead remains a semi-consolidated democracy.

A relevant example that illustrates this point is the Oresharski government. From 2013 to 2014, the Bulgarian government was headed by Plamen Oresharski.[8] Oresharski's leadership was highly controversial in terms of financial, internal, and foreign policy.[9] Leading political scientists such as Kalin Yanakiev and Anton Todorov from Sofia University describe this period as the least transparent one in the democratic history of Bulgaria, serving the interests of a small circle of people whom they referred to as "contemporary oligarchs." Although the political system was supposed to serve the polity (the citizens), it benefited only a small political group close to the prime minister.

Those three problems that have been outlined have disastrous consequences for a correctly functioning democracy. First of all, they lead to the loss of the public's interest in political life. Since 1989, there has been a trend in Bulgaria in

which fewer and fewer people are involved in political parties. For example, the Bulgarian Socialist Party had nearly 1 million party members in 1989, whereas by 2016 it had only 130,000 members.[10] Some might argue that this large number was caused by the dominance of the socialist regime in Bulgaria; however, in 1989 the United Democratic Forces (UDF) also had more than 1 million members, while by 2018 the number was around 40,000 people, and the two biggest parties in Bulgaria – BSP and GERB – had approximately 100,000 and 94,000 members, respectively. Moreover, during the period under examination Bulgaria had one of the lowest electoral turnouts in Europe (around 50–60%). Indeed, turnout declined from 51.1% to 48.7% in the parliamentary elections held during that earlier period.[11]

According to research by the Centre for Social Practices, most Bulgarians do not know the difference between politics, policy, and party.[12] Not only are people becoming disinterested in exercising their political rights and participating in political affairs, but these problems often result in people leaving the country. For example, the year before Plamen Oresharski took office (2013), 9,517 Bulgarian citizens left the country. The following year, the number jumped to nearly 20,000, and in his final year in office, over 30,000 Bulgarians left the country.[13]

Solution: Political Realm and Positive Liberty

Unlike his teacher Plato, who believed that each social class in a given society should receive different forms of education, Aristotle supported an educational system in which everyone has access to the same quality of education (Keyt & Miller 2009, p. 548). He writes: "Since the end for the whole city is a single end, it is evident that education too must be one and the same for all" (*Politics* 1337a21 – 24). As a proponent of virtue ethics, he argued that education is not only a tool for establishing a sense of community but also enables the virtuous development of the people living in a society. This, in his view, leads to a more stable political regime and contributes to its preservation. In Bulgaria, compulsory education for everyone was introduced in the interwar period by the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) government and was maintained both during the communist regime and the post-communist era (Crampton 2007, p. 162).

Other political thinkers, such as Benjamin Constant, foreshadow the idea that individual liberties can become so appealing that people neglect their political liberties (Constant 1819, p. 9). He concludes with a call for the institutions of the state to carry out moral and civic education that would eventually increase civic participation. Constant argues that the state must focus on "public affairs, call [people] to contribute by their votes to the exercise of power, grant them a right of control and supervision by expressing their opinions; and, by forming them through practice for these elevated functions, give them both the desire and the right to discharge these" (Constant 1819, p. 14).

What Aristotle and Constant propose, however, has a significant disadvantage: they focus too much on the role of the state when it comes to education. It is commonly accepted that education consists of both formal and informal components (Gadularov 2006, p. 12). Formal education is provided by the state, whereas informal education is provided by non-state actors. In Bulgaria, those non-state actors include non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since 1989, more than 15,000 non-profit organizations have been established, and in the years leading up to 2017 between 800 and 900 organizations were being created annually.[14] More than 80% of Bulgarian citizens are affiliated with or affected by an NGO, and their activities are diverse.

Bulgarian non-governmental organizations are active in the fields of sport, culture, health, political and human rights, humanitarian causes, minority rights, and public policy. They all promote activism, along with civic and political participation. The fundamental goal that most of them have is to improve aspects of people's lives that are not directly addressed by the state itself (Kabakchieva & Hristova 2012, p. 24). During the period under consideration, there were large organizations such as the Bulgarian National Youth Forum, which worked to strengthen civil society, promote media literacy, provide forms of informal learning, support volunteering, and propose policies to legislators while engaging and empowering young people in these processes.

Non-profit organizations are a means to an end (informal education). Informal education is different from formal education because its aim is not only to give people knowledge, but to make them competent. There are three parts that build up competencies in informal education (Gadularov 2006, p. 68). The first part is the knowledge itself. By "knowledge," this refers to the theoretical or practical information gained through experience or learning the subject. The second part consists of the skills and abilities that people gain in the process of learning. For example, it is one thing to know that fake news exists, but it is quite another to have the ability to identify a piece of fake news and disregard it (e.g., critical thinking, understanding bias, research skills, etc.). The third – and perhaps the most fundamental – aspect is the attitude.

Non-governmental organizations do an extraordinary job of cultivating attitudes through their activities. For instance, once a person knows what fake news is and can reliably identify it, they will not simply disregard it but will take action to prevent its spread. This is why competent people are the future of democratic states. Competence enables individuals to enter the job market and join the middle class, as such individuals are highly valued by employers; it also fosters self-awareness and a strong disposition toward political participation. Ultimately, it allows citizens to act more intellectually virtuously and to make sound decisions both for themselves and for the wider community.

In summary, education is the most fundamental tool for creating a virtuous society, and while it is commonly delegated to the authority of the state, there

are numerous benefits when more non-governmental actors take part in it. Proper education that embodies democratic principles would be able to solve the problems that have been outlined. The more competent Bulgarian citizens become, the more valued they will be on the job market, which will gradually and consistently grow the middle class. Moreover, by having a proper skill set, Bulgarian citizens will be able to identify different types of media and their respective levels of independence; these skills will help them understand the messages that media outlets communicate and allow them to interpret them critically. In less than a generation, this could address even the third problem, namely the oligarchic model by which the country is governed. A truly democratic Bulgaria would be governed by citizens who serve the well-being of society at large.

Conclusion

In this article, the state of the Bulgarian political system between 1989 and 2021 has been examined by referring to political philosophy and empirical evidence. To justify the evaluative position taken, it was established that ethics is the foundation of political philosophy. This enabled the formulation of judgments, the articulation of constructive purposes for the use of public power, and the outlining of solutions to the identified problems. Much of the analysis is based on the principles of virtue ethics as outlined by Aristotle. Although Aristotle lived thousands of years ago, his political thought remains relevant, and this article has argued that Aristotelian political theory can be applied to modern democratic states, including the case of Bulgaria.

For nearly half a century, Bulgaria was ruled by a communist government. Regardless of the fact that communist ideology implies the existence of a classless society, significant social stratification existed. Arguably, two broad classes could be identified: the rich and powerful class (*nomenklatura*) and the weak, impoverished class. Applying Aristotelian terms, the system resembled an oligarchy, as the political elite ruled in its own interest with little consideration for the working population. Due to a number of factors, the regime fell and Bulgaria became a polity (representative democracy) on paper. However, no fully substantive political transition occurred, in part because individuals and networks linked to the former elite continued to exert influence during the early years of the democratic period.

This article established a model and applied it to evaluate Bulgaria's democratic development over the period 1989 – 2021, rather than its present-day condition, using the framework of the American political scientist and philosopher Robert Dahl. The lack of a middle class, the lack of an enlightened understanding of political rights, and the oligarchic model by which the country was governed have become major problems since 1989. Changes occurred primarily on an individual level. People became more aware of their autonomy

and lost interest in political participation. There was a gradual increase in negative liberty and little change in terms of positive liberty. As a result, many people left the country, voter turnout decreased, and the Independent Media rating declined. Aristotle also believed in the equality and educability of all people. However, formal education is not enough, since it is dependent on the state and its major aim is to provide people with knowledge. A proper democracy needs not only knowledgeable people but also competent ones – individuals who have both knowledge and ability, and who wish to change what they do not like and be involved in socio-political events at all levels. This role can be fulfilled by the non-governmental sector.

NOTES

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