

PhD

student in the Department of
Public Administration, Faculty
of Management and
Administration, UNWE, Sofia,
Bulgaria

Corresponding author:

e-mail:

mihail.stavrev@unwe.bg

Published First Online:

24.06.2024

Pages: 137 – 145

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.37075/JOMS
A.2024.1.12](https://doi.org/10.37075/JOMS
A.2024.1.12)

BULGARIAN CIVIL SOCIETY – POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND APATHY

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the contemporary manifestation of civil society in Bulgaria through the prism of political participation and apathy among citizens. For this purpose, the concept of civil society and the need for active political citizens have been examined successively; an analysis of the political participation of Bulgarian citizens was made, through a study of electoral activity, membership in political parties and their participation in the electoral process as advocates; finally, the main reasons for the relatively high levels of political apathy and anomie among Bulgarian society, in relation to the role of political parties, are presented.

KEYWORDS: civil society, political participation, voter turnout, membership in political parties, apathy

JEL: K15, K16, D72

INTRODUCTION

In the last thirty years, there has been a revaluation of a number of values in Bulgarian society, social orientations are also changing, which, however, represents a serious problem for civil society. The democratic changes of the 1990s destroyed old values and laid the foundations for new ones but this process affected the generation that grew up during that period. For some of those born after 1989, it can be said that they are indifferent to legal issues, apathetic to the country's political problems, and the absence of basic orientations and disturbed socialization processes lead to an increased number of deviant manifestations among adolescents. The disturbed process of legal and political socialization of the "children of the transition" has its negative effect on the construction of the Bulgarian civil society (Chuturkova, 2019).

This article aims to analyse the contemporary manifestation of civil society in Bulgaria through the prism of political participation and apathy among citizens. For this purpose, special attention is paid to a brief presentation of the concept of civil society, also to an analysis of the political participation of Bulgarian citizens, studied mainly through electoral activity and membership in political parties, as well as, respectively, to an attempt to derive some of the main reasons for the relatively high levels of political apathy and anomie among Bulgarian society.

1. The concept of civil society

One of the most frequently quoted definitions of the concept of civil society is the one given by Adam Seligman, according to which "civil society is an autonomous, self-regulating public sphere, independent of the state (...) an ethical ideal of social order that, even if not overcomes,

at least harmonizes, the clash between individual interest and the public good"(Tsakova, 2011, pp. 249-250). Hegel defines civil society as a state between the state and the family (that is, a public state that does not coincide with either the public sphere of the state or the private sphere of private life). While Marx contrasts the political state with civil society, understood as the "total material intercourse of individuals" of a society, i.e. the economic system.

In Bulgarian literature, the concept of civil society has been analysed in detail by Vasil Prodanov (2003), Ivka Tsakova (2013, pp. 199-256), Denitsa Gorchilova (2010, pp. 181-208). Regardless of the chosen approach, **civil society** in the modern sense of the word can be seen as having a complex structure containing several main components, including citizens who have certain rights; the family, but only to the extent that its functioning has public consequences and is of public interest, and not to the extent that it is related to individual life and private activity; ethnic, cultural, racial, religious, national communities with which the individual identifies; schools and universities, church organizations, media, cultural industries, analytical units and centres, sociological agencies, etc. and last but not least foundations, associations, organizations, and unions that are to one degree or another relatively independent from the state and do not perform business activities (Prodanov, 2003, pp. 21-23).

Therefore, civil society is a function of the social behaviour of citizens and of their conscious attitude towards the state. The direct connection of citizens with the state is constituted through the existing individual rights and freedoms, and their connection with society - through their real application and the existing guarantees for them. In other words, the functioning of a civil society is impossible without **civic consciousness**. It represents the understanding that members of a society have of their rights and obligations. This, in turn, implies an aspiration to protect and exercise these rights but also the fulfilment of existing obligations. Therefore, civic consciousness is an indicator of the effectiveness of civil society, and political participation can be perceived as a necessary and mandatory element of civic consciousness, because without politically active citizens, the formation of civic consciousness, respectively the creation and functioning of a real civil society, is unthinkable.

2. Electoral activity of citizens as an element of political participation

Civil society is made up of three interconnected elements – institutions, organizations (including political parties) and individuals (citizens and participants in civil society) (Gorchilova, 2010, pp. 203-204). In this regard, the clarification of the political participation of Bulgarian citizens against the background of increasing trends of political apathy is extremely important for the functioning of the Bulgarian civil society. Unfortunately, today, more than 30 years after the transition to democracy, the Bulgarian civil society is still accompanied by numerous deficits.

To a certain extent, the underdevelopment and immaturity of political mediators (especially political parties) (Kanev, 1998, p. 67) and the decline of traditional parties contribute to its unsatisfactory state. However, it is important to point out that similar trends are observed in all modern representative democracies, taking into account a decrease in the potential of political parties to fulfil their role as mediators between citizens and the administrative system, to be both formative and implementing public policies. In view of this, a decrease in voter turnout, low engagement with various forms of political and civil militancy, deteriorating trust in political parties and the main government institutions is beginning to be observed (Marten, 2013).

For the purposes of this article, the concept of *political participation* is defined as a conscious action, individual or collective, that aims to influence the political process... in general and on political decision-making in particular, these are the legitimate activities of private citizens that

aim more or less to influence the selection of management personnel or their actions (Todorov, 2012, pp. 342, 349). Therefore, one of the main measures of political participation is the voter turnout of Bulgarian citizens.

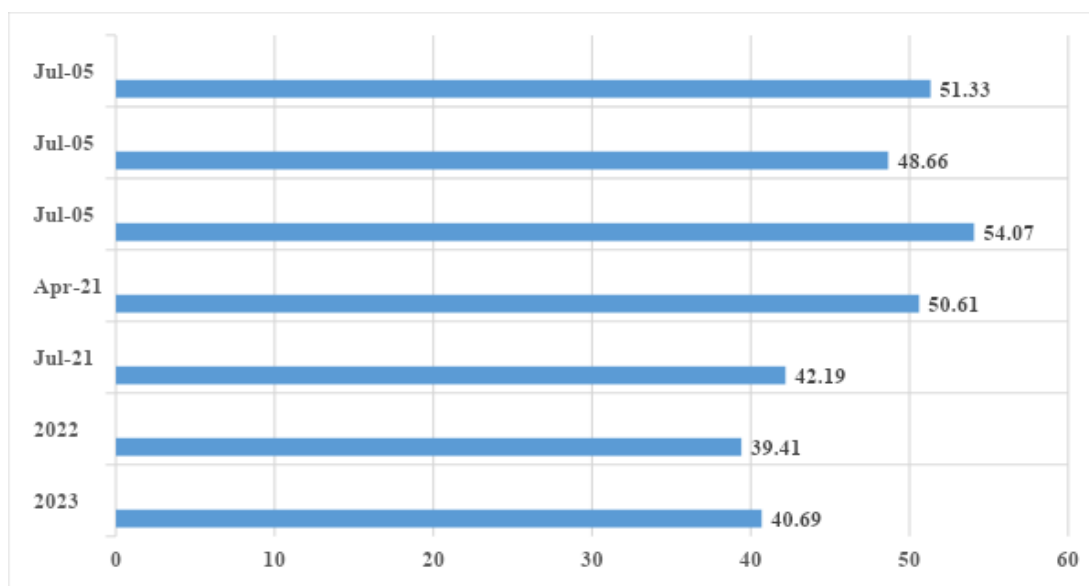
One of the main characteristics of modern political democracy is the holding of free, fair and periodically held elections, through which citizens can choose and be chosen in the governance of the country. In other words, the act of election (which is political in nature) is a delegation of power through which citizens sovereignly express their will to construct electoral bodies (institutions) (Tsenova, 2001, p. 174). The granted active and passive right to vote to citizens, however, does not always mobilize the voter to be active and cast their vote on election day for a particular party.

In this regard, based on the relatively low levels of voter turnout in Bulgaria in recent years, a number of analysts share the view that this is an indicator of an immature civil society in Bulgaria; for citizens who do not understand and do not realize their importance in the political process, and for this reason often abstain from voting; for citizens who distrust political parties and the political system in general.

After the initial euphoria of the opportunity for Bulgarian citizens to freely exercise their choice for political representatives, when there was an extremely high voter turnout, in the years from 1990 to 1997, voter turnout in Bulgaria gradually decreased in the country. This trend is clearly visualized in Figure 1.

It can be seen that voter turnout has dropped sharply in the last two years, which is an important indicator of the real state of civil society in the country. With a more developed civil society, citizens realize their role and importance in the electoral process.

Figure 1. Voter turnout in parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (2013-2023)



Source: The figure is the author's, as it was created using the voter turnout data published on the website of the Central Election Commission, <https://results.cik.bg/>, accessed on 16.04.2023.

Unfortunately, in a number of studies in Bulgaria, a large number of respondents feel excluded from political processes, which subsequently contributes to increasing the distance between citizens and political representatives (political parties). The increase of this distance forms in

citizens a sense of disappointment and alienation from political institutions, growing into a strong mistrust of democratic institutions.

In the latest survey by the Open Society Institute - Sofia and the Center for Liberal Strategies, dedicated to public attitudes towards democracy, the rule of law and basic human rights in 2021-2022, it is revealed that trust in political parties, the National Assembly and the Government is extremely low in the country. The data for 2022 show that only 9% of Bulgarian citizens trust the National Assembly, 11% trust the political parties, and 16% trust the Government (Smilov, 2022, p. 15). Based on these low levels of trust, one cannot expect increased interest in the political process.

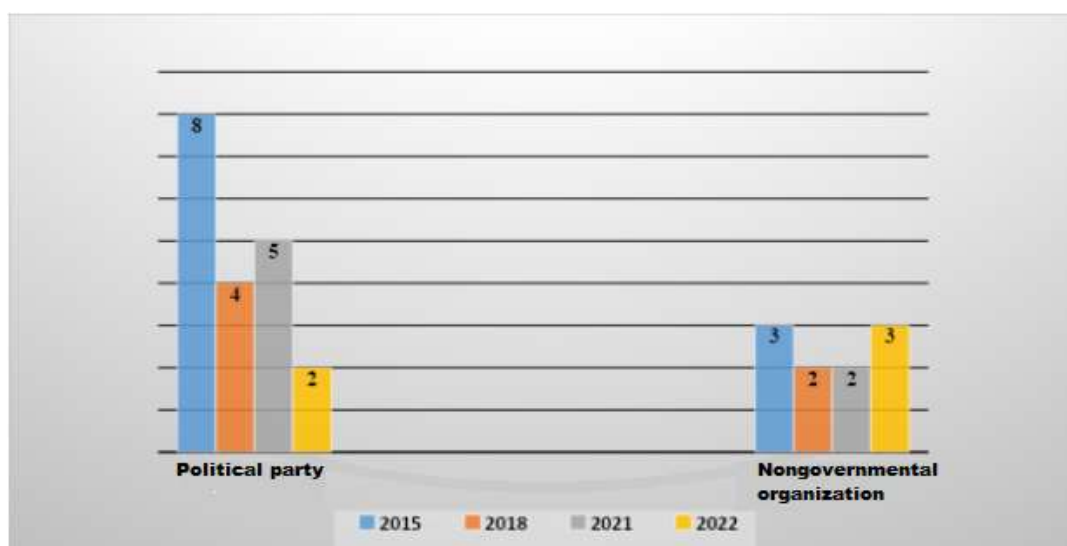
Fatigue from voting and the inability of political parties to motivate voters to vote are also important for the declining voter turnout in the last two years. In this regard, it should be pointed out that some of the political parties in Bulgaria are interested in the low voter turnout, because they rely primarily on their solid electorate and regardless of the level of voter turnout, the final result for them will be similar to that of the previous elections.

3. Political participation through the prism of party membership

Political participation is not only limited to the electoral activity of Bulgarian citizens but to a certain extent it is also measured by citizens' membership in political parties and/or their participation in the electoral process as advocates. The indicated data on low trust in political parties also reflect negatively on the membership in political parties.

The main indicator of the effectiveness of a civil society is the participation of citizens in various organizations, including political parties. Although there is no official data on the number of members of the various parties, from the available data in the research cited above, a tendency towards a decrease in the number of Bulgarian citizens belonging to political parties is clearly evident (see: figure 2).

Figure 2. Share of members of parties and non-governmental organizations by years (in percent)



Source: The table is the author's, as it was created using the data on membership fees published on the website of the Bulgarian National Audit Office, <https://www.bulnao.government.bg/bg/kontrol-partii/otcheti-na-partii/>, Available on 16.04.2023

The answer to the question of what is the cause of the growing distrust of political parties in Bulgaria is not clear-cut, because the reasons are quite diverse. Undoubtedly, in the era of new communications, the emergence of new social networks, etc., a significant part of citizens cannot be attracted to political parties, which leads to the emergence of erosion of political membership. To a certain extent, this is due to the fact that some of the youth in the country fall into a special form of extreme individualism, which is accompanied by a rejection of collective forms of political participation. However, it is important to specify that the refusal to take part in collective forms of political participation is accompanied by a small increase in the percentage of Bulgarian citizens who take part in protest actions.

Another reason for the decline in political party membership is related to the way voters vote. In contrast to the 20th century, in the 21st century, the solid electorate of political parties is gradually decreasing, and the mobilization of a significant percentage of voters is defined by the term "skipping". These are voters who often choose to vote for different political parties in different elections. Although there is no official data on the number of members of the various political parties in Bulgaria, to a certain extent some of them can be judged from the official data from the Bulgarian National Audit Office regarding the funds received by the political parties from paid membership fees.

Table 1. Membership fees of political parties, in thousands BGN (2015 – 2021)

Year Political Party	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party)	1451	1028	1139	938	1145	1193	1169
GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria)	281	104	110	161	568	483	1053
MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms)	509	563	498	493	472	184	466
Revival	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: The table is the author's, as it was created using the data on membership fees published on the website of the Bulgarian National Audit Office, <https://www.bulnao.government.bg/bg/kontrol-partii/otcheti-na-partii/>, accessed on 16.04.2023.

It is clear from the data in the table that during the analysed period the membership of the main political parties in Bulgaria did not change drastically, and the jumps and drops in the collection of membership fees were due to external factors. Thus, the lower collection of membership fees in MRF in 2020 is due to the party's decision to make membership fees voluntary in view of the Covid pandemic, and the sharp increase in membership fees in GERB in 2021 is not due to an increased number party member but it is the result of a purposeful campaign to collect it.

Quite interesting is the case with the membership fee at "Revival" Political Party, which, as with other political parties, in its statute in Art. 40, the obligation of each member to pay their regular membership fees is legally enshrined. However, as can be seen from what was declared to the Court of Auditors for the period 2015-2021, no member of the political party paid membership fees to the organization.

In addition to political party membership, another indicator of political activity is *the number of advocates* in the electoral process. In recent years, the role of advocates in the electoral process has not only not diminished but it has become an increasingly complex and essential part of the overall legitimacy of election results (Pozharliev, 2018, p. 150). Most of the advocates in the country are members of a certain political party or its sympathizers, and this form of their political participation is mostly aimed at supporting the party and protecting its interests in the electoral process.

The role of the advocate is legally enshrined in Art. 101 of the Electoral Code, where it is stated that the candidate lists of parties, coalitions of parties and initiative committees may have advocates who assist them and represent their interests before state bodies, public organizations and election commissions, and one candidate list may be represented by one advocate in one polling station on election day (Electoral Code, 2011). Despite the role of the advocate in the Electoral Code, their presence is often criticized, especially in view of the fact that some political parties pay for the services of the advocate, which for many researchers can be interpreted as a form of a paid vote (Krastev, 2017).

In addition to these unregulated practices of some political parties, there is another problem in the Electoral Code related to the lack of a centralized system for registration of advocates. According to Bulgarian legislation, a registry of advocates by the CEC (Central Electoral Commission) is maintained only for those outside the country (CEC, 2023), which cannot present the real picture of the impact that this form of political participation can have on voter turnout inside the country. In addition, given the fact that only half of the advocates state that they are members or supporters of a political party, this indirectly suggests that a relatively large percentage of them are not motivated to participate in the electoral process in relation to monitoring for compliance with the democratic procedures and practices in the electoral process or protection of a certain party (ideological) basis.

4. Political apathy in the Bulgarian society

The distrust in political institutions, the erosion of membership in political parties, the decline of traditional parties and the emergence of new anti-systemic political formations as well as the corruption and mismanagement all form a political environment characterized by fragmentation and increasing instability, which in turn creates conditions for the expansion of political apathy among citizens. Rejecting the legitimacy of politics, among certain groups of the population in Bulgaria a disengagement from political life is observed which is quite disturbing because a government based on political apathy often leads to the spread of authoritarian and oligarchic practices.

The analysis of political apathy in Bulgarian society must take into account that the levels of disengagement from politics are different depending on the age group. It is an indisputable fact that the older generation in Bulgaria continues to be more politicized than the younger generation, which can clearly be proven by the levels of voter turnout. The latter is relatively higher among the older generation than among the youth group, who not only do not vote but also report very low levels of desire for any political activity whatsoever – including political party membership. According to data from a study by the Gallup International Balkan Sociological Agency regarding the "profile" of those who voted in the parliamentary elections held on 02.04.2023 (Gallup, 2023).

The reasons for the growing apathy among parts of Bulgarian society are numerous but the role of political parties in the political system has a serious impact. As the main channel of communication and connection between citizens and the rulers, political parties are to a certain extent insensitive to the demands of civil society, which results in a crisis of legitimacy – they

are no longer perceived as representatives and expressers of the demands of a large part of Bulgarian citizens. The transformation of a part of the political parties from the representatives of the civil interest into the defenders of the interest of the party caste, the so-called partyocracy, leads to an escalation of mistrust towards them provoked by the impossibility of civil society exerting a significant and real influence on the formation and manner of implementation of various policies by political parties.

Secondly, the transformation of political parties into catch-all parties and the erosion of ideology turns participatory democracy into audience democracy. Political parties do not mobilize their electorate on the basis of ideas and values but use the personalization of politics – focused on their leader. The election campaign is not done through debates between opposition leaders while the communication with potential voters takes place on social networks. Instead of mobilizing public interest and effort to achieve meaningful goals, today's fashionable politicians seek to exploit these goals to draw constant attention to themselves (Marinov, 2002). The spontaneous mobilization of voters by political parties is often based on populist rhetoric and subsequently the false hopes of citizens lead to yet another exodus of voters.

Thirdly, although political parties are pointed out as one of the institutions of civil society, the direct connection with the government of the state predetermines the need for civil control over their activities. Unfortunately, in Bulgaria, political parties are weakly dependent on civil society, which has a sporadic impact on them – primarily during political crises. In practice, there is no permanent civil control, since the social base of the parties is mainly reduced to a small stratum of activists and members who pursue raising their own social status and obtaining certain privileges (Asenov, 2015, p. 141). This impossibility of influence further contributes to the increase of mistrust towards political parties and subsequently results in the strengthening of alienation from politics.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of civil society through the prism of political participation and apathy among Bulgarian society reveals deep problems in its effective functioning. It is an indisputable fact that all the conditions and institutions for a functioning civil society are present. The problem is rooted in the impossibility in a certain part of society to form a civic consciousness, to create a sense of the duty of political participation. Real democracy requires participation of citizens, including participation in the electoral process, membership in political parties, control over the activities of political intermediaries. On the other hand, however, the absence of internal party democracy, partyocracy and oligarchy interference in political parties discourage citizens from political participation. This reveals a vicious circle in Bulgarian society, with political participation starting to be limited to the hard electorates of the political parties, and the protest vote ("I don't support anyone" – over 109,000 votes in the parliamentary elections held on 02.04.2023, according to data of the CEC, posted on their official website <https://results.cik.bg/ns2023/rezultati/index.html>) is a symptom of a society based on mistrust.

REFERENCES

- Asenov, S. (2015). Politicheskite partii i demokratichnata konsolidacia v Bulgaria: problemi i perspektivi // Ot kakvi znanja za politikata se nuzhdayat studentite ot ikonomicheski specialnosti v UNSS (Political parties and democratic consolidation in Bulgaria: problems and perspectives // What kind of knowledge about politics do the students of economics majors in UNWE need). Sofia: UNSS Publishing House, pp. 131-147.
- Bulgarian National Audit Office, <https://www.bulnao.government.bg/bg/kontrol-partii/otcheti-na-partii/>, Accessed on 16th April, 2023.
- CEC. (2023). Rezultati ot izbori (Election results). <https://results.cik.bg/>, Available on 04/16/2023.
- CEC. (2023). Registar na zastapnici izvan stranata na partia ili koalicia pri proizvezhdane na izborite za narodni predstaviteli na 2 april 2023 g. (Register of advocates from outside the country of a party or coalition in the conduct of the elections for people's representatives on 2nd April, 2023). <https://www.cik.bg/bg/ns02.04.2023/registers/zastapnitsi>, Accessed on 16th April, 2023.
- Chuturkova, K. (2019). Faktori, okazvashti vliyanie varhu pravната sotsializatsia na podrastvashtite (Factors influencing the legal socialization of adolescents). Abstract. Sofia: BAS.
- Electoral Code (2011). Pub. Darzhaven Vestnik. no. 9 of January 28, 2011 (Published in State Gazette # 9 of January 28). <https://lex.bg/en/laws/ldoc/2135715515>, Accessed on April 16, 2023.
- Gorchilova, D. (2010). Sravnitelna retrospekcia na kontseptsiiite za grazhdansko obshtestvo // Nauchni trudove na UNSS (Comparative retrospection of the concepts of civil society // Scientific works of UNWE), volume II, pp. 181-208.
- Kanev, D. (1998). Protivorechiyata na grazhdanskoto obshtestvo v Bulgaria i svobodata na lichnostta // Grazhdanskoto obshtestvo i pravata na lichnostta (The Contradictions of Civil Society in Bulgaria and Personal Freedom // Civil Society and Personal Rights) Sofia, pp. 61-68.
- Karasimeonov, G. (2010). Partiinata sistema v Bulgaria (The Party System in Bulgaria). Sofia: GorexPress.
- Krastev, M. (2017). Profesia "Izbori" – partiite kupuvat zakonno glasove za nad 25 mln. lv. (The Profession of "Elections"– parties legally buy votes for over BGN 25 million). Frognews.bg. 9th March 2017. <https://frognews.bg/novini/profesiia-izbori--partiite-kupuvat-zakonno-glasove-nad-25-mln.html>, Accessed on 16th April, 2023.
- Marinov, Al. (2002). Politicheski elit i otchuzhdenie ot politikata (Political elite and alienation from politics), "Dnevnik" newspaper, 27th May, 2002. https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2002/05/27/40606_politicheski_elit_i_otchuzhdenie_ot_politikata, Accessed on 16th April, 2023.
- Marten, P. (2013). Zalezat na upravlenskite partii v Evropa (The sunset of governing parties in Europe). "Culture" Newspaper, no. 42, 13th December, 2013. <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/21646>, Accessed on 16th April, 2023.
- Pozharliev, A., Yordanov, N. (2018). Rolyata na zastapnicite v izbornia protses // Godishnik na Departament "Administracia i upravlentie "(The role of advocates in the electoral process // Yearbook of the Administration and Management Department), Volume 3, NBU, Sofia, pp. 132-152.
- Prodanov, V. (2003). Grazhdanskoto obshtestvo i globalniyat kapitalizam (Civil society and global capitalism), Sofia: Hristo Botev Publishing House.
- Smilov, D. (2022). Demokracia i grazhdansko uchastie, Obshtestveni naglasi kam demokraciyata, varhovenstvoto na pravoto i osnovnite prava na choveka prez 2021-2022 g. (Democracy and civic participation, Public attitudes towards democracy, the rule of law and basic human rights in 2021-2022). Sofia: Open Society Institute. <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/State-of-Democracy-2021-2022.pdf>, Accessed 16th April, 2023.
- Todorov, A. (2012). Elementi na politikata. Traktat varhu politicheskoto (Elements of politics. Treatise on the political). Sofia: NBU.
- Tsakova, I. (2011). Grazhdansko obshtestvo (Civil Society). "Politics" Newspaper. Sofia: University Publishing House "Economy".
- Tsakova, I. (2013). Grazhdanskoto obshtestvo i vaproisut za demokraciyata: politicheska, ikonomicheska i sociokulturna demokratizatsia // Godishnik na UNSS (Civil society and the issue of democracy: political, economic and sociocultural democratization // UNWE Yearbook), Sofia: UNWE, pp. 199-256.

Tsenova, R. (2001). Izbori i izbiratelni sistemi // Politologia (Elections and electoral systems // Politologia).
Sofia:"Economy" Publishing.